THE GOLDEN AGE OF COMEDY

Today's screen comedy is, for the most part, sadly lacking in two essential ingredients - charm and inventiveness. Contemporary Hollywood humor is, generally speaking, a matter of satiric knockabout, unfunny buffoonery, and the slick, wisecracking "dialogue" comedy in which a totally undeserving hero somehow overcomes all obstacles. Gone forever it seems, is the polished sophistication of Lubitsch, the gentle charm of "A Kiss for Cinderella", and the wondrous fancy and ingenuity of the old-time slapstick. Any initiative that has been retained in American screen humor seems to have been diverted to the better cartoon films.

Under such prevailing conditions, this unique compilation of silent screen comedies from the twenties - the "Golden Age" of American Comedy (and, for that matter, of all American cinema) - comes upon us like a real breath of fresh air today. If anything, they are more funny now than they were a quarter of a century ago. Then they were merely good examples of a tremendously successful species; today, minus any competition of a like stature from current cinema, tinged with nostalgia perhaps but as fresh as they ever were, they emerge as little gems from a wonderful period. With the exception of the Harold Lloyd piece, all of these films are extremely rare and we are very pleased to be able to present them.

"SAFETY FIRST" (1923): This one real condemnation of probably the most famous of all the comedies Harold Lloyd made for Hal Roach, while naturally unable to "build" gags as they were built in the full feature, nevertheless retains most of the comedy highlights. The famous sequence of Lloyd climbing the building (which occupied almost half of the footage of the original) is naturally given the most prominence, and is still as thrilling, well done and funny as it ever was. Other players shown in this shortened version are Mildred Davis, Noah Young (the policeman) and Bill Sturte (the human fly).

"FIRE FIGHTERS": Fox's answer to Roach's popular "Our Gang" comedies, this is one of a series imaginatively titled "Our Kids". The make-up of the gang is almost identical, as are their exploits, a fact-pace little film which really captures the spirit of adventurous fantasy of the world of children. (Production date is uncertain, but is assumed to be from the late twenties).

"AT THE RINGSIDE" (1921): Produced by the Rolin Film Company (Hal Roach); Directed by James Parrott. This rarely seen Snub Pollard comedy is unique in being quite recognizably patterned on two earlier Chaplin comedies, "The Champion" and "Easy Street". It even uses the well-known "Easy Street" set! But if there is a resemblance impolit and setting, there is certainly no similarity of style or mood. Pollard's comedy is essentially of the old fast-moving Keystone school, with inventive, fantastic slapstick entirely surpassing the strong note of pithy over-present with Chaplin.

"HOBOKEN TO HOLLYWOOD" (1927): Produced by Mack Sennett; directed by Del Lord, with Billy Bevan, Vernon Dent, Leonore Suvarsa.

No comedy "festival" would be complete without a Mack Sennett, and this is one of his best and most typical. Recalling those days of the twenties when the chore was to cross-country trips by car, with their attendant flavor of primitive adventure, "Hoboken to Hollywood" satirizes not only the trend itself, but the many notion pictures that the craze inspired - "By a Playful Tail", "California Straight ahead" (abom by this society last year) and numerous others. Parodically delightful in this short is Bevan's casual, happy cadism and vindictive destruction - quite the opposite of the later (and equally delightful) mathematically planned malice of Laurel and Hardy in their dealings with James Finlayson.

NOTES CONTINUED OVERLEAF.
"THE WHITE HELL OF PITZ PALT" (Germany, 1929)

Produced by F.M. Sokal Film. Directed by G.W. Pabst and Dr. Arnold Fanck
Script by Fanck and Ladislav Vajda
Photography: Sepp Allgeier, Richard Angst and Hans Schneeburger
Released in the U.S.A. in 1930, in Universal, in sound and silent versions. (Our print: silent)

The Cast:
Dr. Johannes Kraft (GIUSTAV DIEBEL) Maria (LENI RIEFENSTAHL) Hans (ERNST PETRESKA)
Christian, a guide (3. SPRING) The Aviator (ERNST UDET)

The most famous of the German group - or cult - of idealistic mountaineering films, "The White Hell of Pitz Palu" has been unseen in New York for many years. It was the ninth film of G.W. Pabst, and immediately preceded his "Die Dreigroschenoper", "L'Atlante" and "Kreuzfahreradventure". However, inasmuch as its dramatic content is deliberately subdued in favor of the superbly composed and photographed mountaineering footage, and the slick melodramatic thrill of Udts' wonderful flying stunts, presumably the bulk of the credit for the film's success must go to Fanck, who handles most of this outdoor material.

Commenting on this collaboration in his book "From Caligari to Hitler", Siegfried Kracauer remarked: "Fanck made this cinematically fascinating film with the aid of G.W. Pabst, who probably did his best to cut down emotional verbiage. However, sentimentality was inseparable from that variety of idealism."

Fanck of course had been responsible for several fine mountaineering films prior to "White Hell", including "The Holy Mountain", and he made several others following it: "The White Hell", "The Blue Lion" and "The Blue Light", and others. Commercially - and personally - particularly in the United States - "The White Hell of Pitz Palu" was the most successful of them all. Its popularity induced Carl Laemmle to instigate a whole series of co-production deals with German studios for mountaineering adventures, based on novels. Writing in the Universal release, (and active production participation) of such films as "The Rebel" and "The Crowned Battalion" (both with Luis Trenker, and "S.O.S. Iceberg" which reunited Fanck with Leni Riefenstahl and Ernst Udet.

There is little studio work in "The White Hell of Pitz Palu"; the few sets were designed by Erwin Pettenkofer, who earlier had made "Morgan". Most of the film was shot, in extreme cold and under great hardship, during a five-months location shoot to the 12,000 foot high Pitz Palt, situated in the Hercules Group in the Alps.

Members who have never seen the film may be puzzled if certain sections seem surprisingly familiar. There are two possible explanations for this. In the forties, Universal used much of the footage as stock for various "B" films and serials. And secondly, many subsequent mountaineering films quite faithfully copied certain sequences; i.e., the famous scenes of the night searches with their flaming torches were duplicated with remarkable fidelity in the American "High Conquest", the British "The Glass Mountain", and in other films.

Writing on the film in the London "Times" of July 2, 1930, James Agate praised: "... this wildly terrifying and astonishing film to the skies. He referred to "... the immense grandeur and beauty, the awesome power of nature preserved without the imbecility of human speech", praised the "...genuinely horrifying food-dropping scene" and called it "...the most gripping film I have ever seen through". He concluded by remarking: "I was able to sit through it only by gripping spectators on either side of me, to the surprise of one and the annoyance of the other."

What of the talents that produced "White Hall"? Pabst, having finished one film since the war ("The Trial") makes lengthy preparations for "Dynamo", and was replaced by another director at the last moment. Currently is he in Venice, staging an operatic festival. His version of "Aida" seems to lack nothing in grandeur and spectacle, the stage being decorated with 4 elephants, 4 camels, 10 horses, one cow, 1500 people, 2000 Riviera palms and a 55-foot Egyptian statue! Also included on Pabst's schedule for the festival are versions of "Il Trovatore" and "La Finta garner Del Destino". All Verona is currently wondering whether he will go ahead with his plan to modernize Act 3 of the latter with the introduction of armoured cars and tanks - a plan that he was forcibly prevented from putting into operation last year! Riefenstahl is inactive; Gustav Diebel died a year ago; Udet committed suicide, Vajda, for many years associated with Pabst and Lubitsch as a writer (both in Europe and here in America, where he also turned out Broadway plays in the early thirties) is currently directing in England. One of his most recent: "The Woman With No Name", retitled "Her Paralyzed Door" for U.S.A. consumption.

Incidentally, "The White Hell of Pitz Palu" was made in Italy in 1931, with Hans Albers in the lead, Diebel as a director, and the original footage. A dubbed-English version of this remake has been lying in the vaults of Lux Film Distributors in New York for over a year, awaiting a U.S. release.
A MESSAGE TO OUR MEMBERS

We'd like first of all to thank those of our members who filled in the form we supplied asking for suggestions for future programmes. Not all members submitted a return, but a great many did — and from those returns we have been able to estimate our audience requirements, and to plan our future programmes accordingly.

In addition to the titles we listed, many members listed requirements of their own. The titles ranged from "Strange Interlude," "Tobis' Delight" and "The Devil is a Woman" to "Cimarron", "So Big" and "The Canary Murder Case". Most of the films we'd love to show — some we'd sell our souls to show — and almost all of them are completely unavailable to us. Even a first-class commercial theatre with an unlimited bankroll would be unable to obtain most of the films suggested in this way! However, these "additional" lists by members were very few, and most expressed extremely keen interest in the titles that we had listed.

Members were asked to list ten titles in order of preference. Our system was this: the film in first place was awarded 10 points, the film in second place nine, and so on down the line, with the film in tenth place thus receiving 1 point. A few members did not list films in order of preference, in which case an average of five points was allotted to each film.

The results were a surprise, and generally gratifying. Members obviously have a strong interest in films rarely (if ever) shown by the Museum of Modern Art — and in some of the lesser known films (i.e., "Salvation Hunters"). We are reprinting here a complete account of the voting results: the films are listed in order of preference, with the figure in brackets after the title denoting the number of votes.

CREED (97); THE IRON HORSE (93); BEAU BRIDGEL (86); INTOLERANCE (79); THE JOYCESS STREET (76); TRUTH OF THE WIND (63); THE DANCING POOL (60); DESTINY (60); SALVATION HUNTERS (58); ISN'T LIFE WONDERFUL (55); THE MOLLIGOBILE (52); SHERLOCK JR. (51); FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE (49); MOTHER (47); SINGAPORE (44); STELLA DALLAS (43); FRAGMENT OF AN EMPIRE (41); THE PRESIDENT VARIANCES (40); WARNING SHADOWS (39); METROPOLIS (35); ARSENAL (36); NOSFERATU (25); EXCUSE MY DUST (23); THE LATE MATHEM PASCAL (20)

Errata: two films were omitted from the above list:

CRIMANS OF THE STORM (11th place — 51 votes)
WILD AND WOOLLY/TILL THE CLOUDS ROLL BY (12th place — 49 votes)

Guided by members' wishes, as expressed in this poll, we have booked the three winning films to inaugurate our Fall season of films. Thus we will play CREED on Sept. 2nd, THE IRON HORSE on Sept. 16th, and BEAU BRIDGEL on September 30th. This is a particularly fine trio of films, and there is no reason why others should not follow.

However, continuance of this policy of playing the fine films requested by members depends ENTIRELY on membership response to these initial screenings. The booking of these films means that our expenses will automatically be DOUBLED: we must have a good turn-out for each and every screening or they will be economically impossible to maintain. We rely on our members to turn out in force for the films they have requested, to recruit new members if possible, and to bring guests. Whatever happens, we intend to see that the Film Society maintains its operations — but if sufficient support isn't forthcoming, we shall have to revert to playing films from cheaper sources, and those kindly donated by our own members. This would not mean playing shoddy material — everything we have played in the past has, we feel, been WORTH playing — but it would, certainly, cut us off from such rare gems as "The Joyce Street", "Isn't Life Wonderful" and others, all of which we are most anxious to play.

In other words, it's up to you! Thanks for your support in the past, and let's hope that together we can make this new season of great films a really great one.

Sincerely,

[Signatures]

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(Committee)