Herbert Brenon is a name that may be unfamiliar to many of our members. Today he is rarely mentioned, and one finds but fleeting mention of his films in the standard reference books. Yet he was not only one of the top directors of the twenties, but was also somewhat of a pioneer in a much-earlier period. This program affords a welcome glimpse of two very typical Brenon films of the mid-twenties, and it offers, in addition, good examples of the work of two of the top feminine stars of the era — Gila Hagel and Clara Bow.

The Director

Irish born (January 13th, 1880) Herbert Brenon came to America at an early age, and formed his first association with show business by working in vaudeville houses, and from there progressing to motion picture exhibition. Coming to New York in 1909, he was given a chance to direct by Carl Laemmle, then of the Universal Company. Brenon's rise to comparative fame was rapid. Reputedly, it was Brenon who made the first four-reelers — and whilst it is always dangerous to be dogmatic about any kind of "firsts" in motion picture history, there does seem to be justification in this case. In any case, it is a matter of record that he went to England to make "Tunnocks", and that it was the first film made in England by an American company. Told to make a three-reeler of the classic, and limited to a budget of $4,000 per reel (or a dollar a foot!), Brenon took matters into his own hands, expanded the film to four reels, and spent some $10,000 on the project. In order to cut costs wherever possible, he played one of the important character roles (June of York) himself, as well as writing and directing, and even put his wife to work in the film. Under the name Helen Downing, it was her first and last movie role. The English rights alone brought in $10,000, and Brenon's extravagance was thus justified. In his early years as a director, he maintained this reputation for profitable extravagance. In "Daughter of the Gods" for example, an Annette Kellerman vehicle made for Fox in 1926, he even diverted a river and changed part of the geographical face of Barcaldine! (Brenon was depicted, after a fashion, in the recent Metro musical "Neptune's Daughter"). However, the movie sequences were so grossly inaccurate — such as having the Kellerman films shot as little more than quickies in Hollywood, when actually they were gigantic films shot in Barcaldine — that they were of little interest and less value.

Brenon really hit his stride in the twenties with a wide range of hits, covering straight drama ("Scarfell and Son"), action-spectacle ("Beau Coots") and others, but came to be regarded primarily as a "sentimental" director. His comedies, whimsies and little romances were all characterized by a quality that has almost totally disappeared from contemporary cinema — the quality of charm. To someone who has not seen either film, it would be impossible to describe the captivating spirit of his "Peter Pan", or the incredible beauty and sensitivity of "A Kiss for Cinderella". (Unfortunately, these films are not available to us for screening.) Brenon remained a top money-making director until the end of the twenties, and then, like so many of his contemporaries (particularly Mal St. Clair, Monte Hall, James Cruze and to a lesser degree, William K. Howard) was never quite able to adjust to talkies. His early talkie period is perhaps the least interesting phase of his career — "Beau Ideal", "Transgressions", "Case of Sergeant Grincha", "Silver Twist" (this latter one of several films produced, though not directed, for Paramount) — were all interesting, but little more. In 1935, Brenon left for England, to embark on a series of films for E.I.P. and Associated British, films which he directed and often wrote too — "The Dominant Sex", "Yellow Sands" and others. One of this group — "The Housemaster" — in something of a minor classic, and rivals with the best that Brenon has made. His last film, alas, was never made, but hisname is not the competently made but unremarkable melodrama "The Flying Squad", made in England in 1940.

The Films

"Dancing Mothers"

Released on March 1st, 1926. A Paramount Picture produced by the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, and presented by Adolph Zukor and Jesse L. Lasky.

Produced and Directed by HERBERT BRENNON. Scenario by Forrest Haley, from the original stage play by Edmund Goulding and Edgar Selwyn. Censors: J. Roy Hunt.

The Cast: Ethel Westcourt (ALICE JONES); Jeryy Naughton (CONWAY THAMES); Kittee Westcourt (CLAIRE DON); Kenneth Cobb (DOUGLAS KELLY); Mrs. Munson (HERBERT CUMMINGS); Iris (ELIZA LAMON); Hugh Westcourt (HEROLD GRIFFITH).

"Dancing Mothers" has interest today not only as a Brenon film, and as a Clara Bow vehicle, but as one of the few available subjects dealing with the flapper twenties and the fabulous flapper age. Metro's "Our Dancing Daughters" said just about the last word on the genre,
and was undoubtedly the best. Brennan's "DANCING MOTHERS", which preceded it by 24 years, was far from being the least. If it tends to be more static than is usual with Brennan, it is because it is quite unusually faithful to the stage original, which had been a tremendous hit in the mid-twenties. (The original play had been co-authored by Edmund Goulding, later a prominent writer-director in Hollywood.) The film—which has something of a Sixties type plot, without (deliberately) her sharp edge—wastefully aims at a fictional picture of a sentimentate era, and it does it without resorting to high-powered sex or sensationalism. In fact, the film was sold primarily as a comedy which piled gentle fun into the times, rather than exploiting them. (A typical catchline from one of Paramount's posters reads: "Hey! Hey! Charleton Babies! Raked Paramounts! Dancing Mothers! Jeez! Jeez! Jeez!")

Glen By's film performance is quite remarkable, and indicates once again Brennan's talent for working with young players (Nancy Brian, Betty Brennan and Annette Lovy were others who worked particularly well under his direction). Forest Mesley (secretary), one of the top screenwriters of the period, had earlier scripted Valentina's "Menace Beaumarchais", and had gone to Europe with Gloria Swanson to work on her "Island San-San-Jones". Stacey Hunt, the cameraman, had worked with Brennan earlier on "A Kiss for Cinderella" which contains some of the most imaginative camera work that the twenties produced. Gloria such as that are soon forgotten—until last year, that was the stock cameraman on all the First World warers at EMI! Members with good

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that "DANCING MOTHERS" was merely one of many gems to emerge from Paramount in 1926. Harold Lloyd, Victor Fleming, Irving Millhouse, Clarence Badger, Norman Taurog, Eddie Sutherland, Allan Dwan, Lewis Milestone, James Cruze, Joseph Harnedy, D.W. Griffith and Gregory La Cava were all hard at work on one or more films for the studio. Flaherty seemed to be centered, above all else, on those wonderful sophisticated comedies that seem now to be gone forever. In 1926, from Paramount alone, came Brennan's "DANCING MOTHERS", "A KISS FOR CINDERELLA" and "THE SOUL AND MIND HALE"; Murnau Bell's "THE KID OF MAHL STREET", Gregory La Cava's "BREATHE HAILEY" and Hal St. Clair's "THE GRAND DUCHESS AND THE HINTER"; "WORLD OF THE WRENDS" and "THE SEVEN CICERONIANS."

"THE SPANISH DANCER"

Reelease November 4th., 1923. A Paramount Picture produced by the Famous Players-Lasky Cooperation

Produced and Directed by HERBERT BRENNAN. Scenario by Jane Mathai and Eudora Maria Mox from the original play "Don Caesar de Bazam" by M. J. de Puyrnoer and R. F. M. de Puyrnoer.

Starring POLO NEGGI, with ANTONIO MONCER as Don Caesar, and WALLACE BREGG, RUTH WILLIAMS, ADOLPHO BONINI, CARSEN HOODY, ROBERT AGERS.

Quite opposed in period, locale, action, and treatment to "Dancing Mothers", this second Brennan film is an elaborate melodrama of the "Caveman" school. One of Paramount's "specials" for the year, it afforded Brennan ample opportunity to be lavish in his accustomed grand manner—expensive settings and costumes, expensive reconstructions of early Spanish castles. The film was selected by Paramount as the first of four to test a new sales policy, and opened concurrently at the Rivoli in New York, and Paramount's Radio in Los Angeles. An immediate hit in both situations, the film proceeded to roll up grosses and the Rivoli proudly recorded 9,020 paid admissions on the opening day, a Sunday. The press, as often happens, were divided. There were no "in-between" opinions. A few critics liked it not at all. But most were cordial and enthusiastic, and all agreed that it was Neggi's best American vehicle to date, and that visually the film was a delight. The New York Globe remarked "Feda in more histrionics than ever...", while the comment of the N.Y. Telegraph was "Gorgeous in the selectest sense of the word...", from first to last, vibrant with life. In a long picture, but never a dull one." The N.Y. World: "There seems to be more of the dash of the old European Pola Neggi in "The Spanish Dancer" than in any cinema she has made since Hollywood got hold of her." The Evening World was even more outspoken concerning Pola's "improvement", stating that she was "A thousand percent better than in "The Cheat" and "Bella Donna". "In "The Spanish Dancer", it went on, "one finds the old glancing glorious gorgeous Pola Neggi, and one finds a good deal more. Will undoubtedly make millions of dollars!"

"The Spanish Dancer" was Neggi's third American film, and generally acknowledged the most successful of the trio. So successful in fact, that she immediately made another film with Breann, "Shadows of Tarzan", which was released some three months later.

[EDITORS' NOTE: FIRST MEMORIAL PICTM SOCIETY]

Charles Turner (Hon. Chairman); Robert G. Youngson (Program Secretary); William Kenly (Musical Secretary); Warren H. Weinberg; Warren Rothenburger; William E. Eversden (Prog. notes)

At our next meeting, we hope to screen JOSEF BAKICHOW in "RAISEST", directed by Richard Boleslawski and Henry King, from an original screenplay by Erich von Stroheim.