The New THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Sound Series, Program Two

Program for Tuesday, July 26, 1955.


Previous articles and program notes have said that all there is to be said about the art of Laurel and Hardy; we need add no more. In this little opus the two comedians have a grand time as a couple of extremely inept carpenters on a housing project. Amid the general mayhem and casual sadism, Mr. Hardy has his knuckles painfully trapped in an obstinate window, the seat of his trousers removed by a plane wielded by the enthusiastic Laurel, and submits to having a paint brush glued to his face — and agonizingly scraped off! The film ends of course in a welter of wholesale destruction.

"MOVIES ARE ADVENTURE" Universal, 1919. One reel.

Lest anyone think that by our playing of these industry public-relations shorts we are (a) accepting advertising from the trade, or (b) under the delusion that these are documentaries of worth, we hasten to go on record now that such is not the case. As documentaries, they are infantile and superficial. But, to film societies especially, the footage is of great interest. In this particular issue, you will see highlights from "King Kong", "The Trail of '98", the original "The Sheik", "Tars of the Apes", "Stagecoach", "The Hurricane", Douglas Fairbanks' "The Three Musketeers", "Safety Last" and the land-rush from "Cimarron". Cast as the "average moviegoer" around whom the short revolves is Edmund Cobb, now somewhat plump and seedy, but recognizably the same Ed Cobb who starred in our silent western, "The Wolf's Trail", last week.


Except for the much later film from M-G-M, "The Barkleys of Broadway", "The Story of Vernon & Irene Castle" was the last of the celebrated Astaire-Rogers musicals, and one of the least popular. This latter is easily understandable in that the film, deliberately and quite inevitably, is cast in a mould quite different from the carefree romantic comedies that had made the team so popular. For those who are followers of vintage Astaire-Rogers (and I am not one of them, finding their films too condescending and lacking in real warmth) this may not always deliver the goods. Perhaps in an attempt to play it safe, the film starts out, somewhat falteringly, in the old bantering style of light-hearted fun. Here unfortunately it is a mistake. It holds up the development and retards but few of the expected dance numbers in the first half of the film, though it does contain a great deal of pleasing nostalgia.

The film really gets into its stride in the second half and in some finely staged musical numbers recreates the Castles' introduction of the tango, the fox-trot, the Maxixe and other dances. Museum of Modern Art regulars will be interested in comparing the "Too Much Mustard" number with the actual footage of the Castles, doing that same number, in the Museum's dance program. (Rko's version seems to have been shot after a very careful study of that footage incidentally.) The film also takes in the merchandising (hats, candies, cigars) that the Castles promoted, their effect on current fashion, and a brief, fascinating sequence in Hollywood showing Rogers, as Irene Castle, filming the serial "Patria" — with Roy D'Arcy appearing in a few scenes with her. As usual, these Hollywood scenes are pretty hectic and none too reliable — certainly the Mitchell camera seems to be in use somewhat ahead of its time, and right alongside one of the old Pathé hand-cameras too!

The closing reels feature some quite elaborately staged war scenes, and repeats that glorious old clitch so beloved of Hollywood showing the rapacious reception which France gives to the news of America's entry into the war — a reception that, in this case, understandably leads the stars to the conclusion that the war is over! Followed by an outdated propaganda shot of a grim doughboy advancing in front of the stars and stripes, it is typical of the sort of shot that used to arouse walls of anguish — or gales of laughter — in European audiences. Fortunately, it is now a thing of the past.

How accurate the film is we cannot say. Irene Castle advised both on the plot and on the gowns, but still the film packs in every cliché in the book. But if it's hoke, it's good hokiness, poke out with all the zing out, and backed by a strong cast, huge sets, and all the lush glitter of Rko's peak period. Sixteen years after it was made, it is still good solid entertainment — and at times, good cinema too. In view of the recent Rko purchase by It interests, and the fact that the "Top Hat" & "Follow the Fleet" reissues failed, dissuading, one assumes, further Rogers-Astaire reissues, this may well be the last showing of a complete print until the film is old enough to be handled by the Museum.