THE SILENT SERIAL

1912 - 1930

HELEN HOLMES in "THE PAY TRAIN" from "THE HAZARDS OF HELEN"

PEARL WHITE in two complete episodes from "THE PERILS OF PAULINE"

HERBERT RAUVINSON in "THE FLAME FIGHTERS" : TIM McCoy and ALLENE RAY in "THE INDIANS ARE COMING" with Francis Ford and Edmund Cobb

Extracts from "THE FATAL RING" and "PEARL OF THE ARMY" (Pearl White); "THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE" and "THE TERRIBLE PEOPLE" (Walter Miller-Allene Ray); "THE THIRD DEE" (Eileen Percy); "THE IRON CLAN" (Shelden Lewis); "THE FIRE DETECTIVE" (Hugh Allan); "WHITE EAGLE", "THE TIGER'S TRAIL" and "TIGER QUEEN" (Ruth Roland); "QUEEN OF THE NORTHWOODS" (Walter Miller-Blyllyn Claire); "THE RETURN OF THE RIDDLE RIBERS" (William Desmond); "THE FAST EXPRESS" (William Dieterc); "THE SHIELDING SHADOW" (Ralph Kallard).

Two-and-a-half hours of thrills and action! SEE PEARL WHITE IN THE RACE AGAINST DEATH! SEE HELEN HOLMES OUTWIT THE TRAIN ROBBER'S THRILL TO THE ATTACK OF THE GIANT OCTOPUS! WHO IS "THE PROFESSOR" ??????

SERIAL LITERATURE AVAILABLE

As one of the film society's research projects, George Galtzer has compiled a monumental index to the silent serial. This is the first time that such a complete list has been published, and includes such information as production company, release date, stars, director, writers and other similar data. The size of this index makes bulk mailing to members a financial impossibility, but it will be distributed free of charge at the screening itself. Members who are out of town or unable to attend the screenings, but who would nevertheless like a copy of this valuable reference list, should contact Wm. K. Everson and one will be mailed to them. In view of the cost involved, the limited number of copies available, and the anticipated demand for copies from other societies, we would ask our members not to take more than one copy each at the screening. Thankyou.

Also available at the showing, at 35¢ each, will be back numbers of "FILMS IN REVIEW" containing the articles PEARL WHITE IN ITHACA (Prof. Walter Stainton), SERIALS WITH SOUND (Wm. K. Everson) and the current issue featuring the article THE SERIAL LOVERS - WALTER MILLER & ALLENE RAY (Edward Connor). "Films in Review" also has scheduled, for the near future, an article dealing with the history of the silent serial.

Any attempt to cram a history of the silent serial film into one show - or into one set of program notes - must inevitably result in compressions and conclusions. We make no apologies for the gaps, since they cannot be helped. The history of the serial film deserves a book to itself, and one day, no doubt, it will get one. As for our film program tonight - it does show, quite definitely, the beginnings and the end of the silent film.
serial. Unfortunately, the serial’s peak period - the early and mid-twenties - is somewhat sparsely represented. So much of the material from this wonderful interim period is just not available today, and we must settle for tantalizing extracts from many of the best serials.

Serials were comparatively late in arriving on the filmic scene, making their appearance at approximately the same time as long feature films. Short westerns, and later the "series" films, had preceded the serials in audience acceptance and popularity. But once the chapter-plays did arrive, they were there to stay. Serials are still made by Columbia and Republic, although they are now regarded as being of such negligible importance that neither time, money nor imagination is poured into them, and the end results are but pale shadows of former glories.

The "series" films - groups of short adventures, complete in themselves, but featuring melodramatic action and continuing characters, soon gave pride of place to the serials proper, which were introduced in 1913 primarily to tie-up with newspaper serials. Two-reels to an episode, and a climax of sheer mayhem - these were the staple requirements of the serials which soon earned the nickname of "cliff-hangers.

Initially at least, there was no set standard as regards length - the adventures rambled along until either the writers' imaginations failed, or the audience's interest began to wane. In later years, 10, 12, 13 or 15 episodes came to be regarded as standard - with episodes one often a three, four or even five reelers to get the thing off to a good start!

Action first and foremost was a key requirement - but these early serials were also strong on plot values. Involved mysteries, a romantic element and one or more "mystery" characters, the identities of which were not revealed until the final episode, were also "musts" for any self-respecting serials. (It was the playing down of these elements, and the elimination of exciting stunt-work in favor of the phoney thrills obtained more easily by back projection and other "hidden villains" as "The Professor", glimpsed briefly in an extract from "The Terrible People" in tonight's program, Universal tended more to straight action and adventure - "Tarzan the Mighty", "Tarzan the Tiger" and the really spectacular western serials with historical backgrounds - "Wimmers of the West", "In the Days of Buffalo Bill", "The Oregon Trail" and so on through to "The Indians Are Coming", likewise featured in tonight's program.

Pathé and Universal were undoubtedly the producers of the best serials. Pathe had a particular penchant for involved mysteries, and their stars - Pearl White, Ruth Roland, Charles Hutchison, Allan Fay and Walter Miller - found themselves matched by such delightfully sinister "hidden villains" as "The Professor", glimpsed briefly in an extract from "The Terrible People" in tonight's program, Universal tended more to straight action and adventure - "Tarzan the Mighty", "Tarzan the Tiger" and the really spectacular western serials with historical backgrounds - "Wimmers of the West", "In the Days of Buffalo Bill", "The Oregon Trail" and so on through to "The Indians Are Coming", likewise featured in tonight's program.

The serials proved a valuable training ground for many top talents - actors (Betty Compson, Constance Bennett, Charlie Chase, Warner Chalm, Laura La Plante etc., and in the sound period, Jennifer Jones, George Montgomery, Bruce Bennett and others), writers, directors and cameramen. Initially of course serials were considered of such prime importance - and seen worthy of such important playing time, that they attracted many established star names - Francis X. Bushman, Henry B. Walthall and others. Ironically, many of these players, Bushman and Walthall among them, in the (for them) less rosy days of talking films, were reduced to playing minor roles in the by then lowly serial films. Many players in early serials soon afterwards graduated to director status - John Ford, James Cruze, Frank Lloyd, Hobart Henley, Edward Sloman, Henry King and Irving Cummings - while established serial directors in turn were promoted to more imposing offerings - George B. Seitz, James W. Horne and W.S. Van Dyke among them. Still further serial directors happily remained in that little niche permanently - Spencer Gordon Bennet, Columbia's stock serial director, has been making cliff-hangers ever since he hit Hollywood in the late twenties, taking time out occasionally for "E" westerns and thrillers which likewise call for slick production methods and a preponderance of action.

Of far more importance to the silent serials than to their sound descendants, were the established "teams" of popular players. These were headed by Francis Ford & Grace Cunard (1911-16), Ben Wilson & Reva Gerber (1921-1926), William Duncan and Edith Johnson (1913-1922) and of course Walter Miller and Allen Fay (1928-1929). The "Serial Queen" was also primarily a tradition of the silent serial, although there were one or two noteworthy attempts to restore her to favor in the sound era - most notably by Republic in the early forties. And the pot themes of the silent serial - the fire-fighting adventure and the circus mystery - received but scant attention from the talking cliff-hangers.

Almost certainly 1919 was the peak year of the serial film. Approximately 60 were made, with the mystery-thriller proving the most prolific - and the most popular.

As we remarked earlier, a few pages of notes are hardly sufficient to do justice to a colorful and now largely forgotten phase of movie history. To provide a somewhat more complete picture of the over-all field, we strongly recommend that you read these notes in conjunction with the literature referred to on page 10.

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1913: "THE PAY TRAIN" from "THE HAZARDS OF HELEN" starring HELEN HOLMES with Leo Maloney. Directed by J.P. McGowan.

This little gem is a remarkably advanced example of the "series" film. "The Hazards of Helen" was a railroad series, allegedly based on authentic railroad cases, and each episode was a complete adventure in itself. J.P. McGowan, who directed, occasionally strayed away to westerns, but railroad serials were, and always remained, his meat - right through to such talkie serials as John Wayne's "The Hurricane Express". "The Pay Train" moves along quickly, keeps the camera on the move, and provides some neat cross-cutting in its climax. Too, it makes effective use of increasingly large close-ups to heighten dramatic effect.


Because of its title and star, "Perils" has somehow acquired an undeserved reputation as the greatest and most exciting of serials. (The title was used by Paramount in 1910 for an advertisement that masqueraded as Pearl's biography.) Although important as a milestone in serial-making, and vastly entertaining today, it is quite a crude serial and lacking in much know-how concerning basic film techniques, as an immediate comparison with "The Pay Train" will prove. In its climax there is a certain amount of cross-cutting, and the climatic situation itself is given a reasonably careful build-up, but for the rest it lacks pace and construction. Nor is it helped by a set of titles that look as though they were written by a Greek immigrant within thirty minutes of leaving the ship. The use of the word "immortal" for "immortal" at one point results in a real howler, and almost all of the titles are thoroughly illiterate. However, Pearl White, later a writer and director, whose most recent writing chores "The Phoenix City Story" will be in view at the State in a few weeks), do seem to have had a high percentage of talent in the making of the film. The spirit of good fun and almanac, off-the-cuff shooting, manages to communicate itself to the audience, and a good time is had by all. "Perils" was a rambling serial, that switched from the Wild West to Paris, from pirates to gypsies, and back again. Episode three seems to bring the western section of the story to a close, and the climactic thrill is resolved within the episode. We shall also be screening a later episode from the same serial in which Pearl is beset by quite different dangers. Added pleasures in episode three are the use of New Jersey's Palisades to simulate the Rocking, and a group of Indians who just won't play dead and are persistently popping their heads up to see what is going on.


1929: This material has been garnered from a number of sources, principally a Pathe short entitled "Dirty Work at the Crossroads", and a number of Universal and Pathe trailers. Although the material at hand was thus annoyingly brief, in view of the source, every scene was an action highlight! Thus, as well as a parade of the top serial stars - including Ruth Roland, Walter Miller, William Desmond and Eileen Percy - the film is also a non-ending succession of such old friends as the transfer via rope ladder from train to plane, run-away carriages, pits in the floor, attacks by an octopus, and so on ad infinitum! You'll see William Duncan making a leap from horse to train without a double, Ruth Roland swinging across a precipice on a high wire, and Ralph Bellard being swallowed up by an octopus - just as his son Bruce was in the Republic sound serial "Drums of Fu Manchu"!

An interesting composite of ten years of serial making, the film stresses the care, polish and very real production values with which the serials of the twenties were so liberally endowed.


The "Flame Fighter" is an excellent example of the high-grade serials being turned out by independent companies. (Bayart became Monogram in 1931, and of course grew up into the present allied Artists). The film has plenty of the necessary action, with a strong build-up to a frenzied climax each week. In between it features logical plot and character development, some first-class camera work, and a pleasing romantic element. "The Flame Fighter" was probably considered quite routine in 1925; today it seems unusually carefully made, and quite superior to almost any independent serial of the sound era.

Herbert Readlinsch, by this time on the way out as a silent romantic hero, retained a considerable following in serials. He also appeared prominently in such sound serials as "Blades of Scotland Yard" and "SOS Coastguard". He died about a year ago, only a few hours after finishing work in probably the cheapest film he had ever appeared in - an independent quickie titled "The Hidden Face". Although the star of the film, his name appeared nowhere on the ads when it was released several months after his death.
1930:

Westerns are pretty much the same whether in feature or serial form, and thus as a serial "The Indians Are Coming" is perhaps the least exciting item on the program. However, it is important and interesting in other ways. It was both the last silent and the first talking serial, being released in two versions. Evidently trying to re-build the serial in adult favor, Universal really spent money on the production, developed a pleasing little love story between McCoy and Ray, and, to cash in on the novelty of sound, included a number of lengthy dialogue sequences (of which course, in our silent version, tend to make the whole thing a little protracted). Too, tending down the melodramatics, some episodes ended on a note of straight drama rather than violent action - i.e., episode two finishes with the hero being arrested unjustly and thus parted from the girl he loved! There is no stunting in the way of extras, the production work is first-rate throughout, and there is an unusually elaborate utilisation of the moving camera. Some of the trucking shots must be among the longest on record. Many of the battle scenes are on an astonishingly large-scale, although there is of course considerable utilisation of stock footage - most notably from Universal's spectacular "The Vanishing Frontier". The final skirmish in episode twelve actually consists for the most part of Custer's Last Stand from "The Vanishing Frontier". Tim McCoy in his usual urban and occasionally hummy self, and Francis Ford, formerly a serial director and now getting along in years, still manages, despite his years, to pitch into the action with gusto. He died in harness a couple of years ago, his last appearance being in a Guy Madison western, writer Ford Beebe, soon assumed, with Ray Taylor and Lewis D. Collins (both now dead) a leading directorial status at Universal on westerns and serials, and currently produces, writes and directs all the "Bomba" Films. Henry MacRae of course, was Universal's pride and joy when it came to westerns and serials, and members will doubtless recall that it was MacRae who directed "Wild Blood", which opened our season last January.

We will be running the first episode of "The Indians Are Coming" in this program, and will place episodes 2,3,4 and 12 in later programs. The prints incidentally are in fine shape, and are tinted originals.

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FINANCIAL REPORT: We're sorry to have to record that our optimism last month, and our pleasure at being at last "in the black", were somewhat premature. Our last two shows have placed us quite solidly in the red again! This doesn't dismay us unduly, since the same thing happened, almost to the day, last year. With so many members out of town, and the oppressive heat on hand to torture the hardy souls who remain, a slackening in attendance is not surprising. Certainly we have no intention of shutting-up shop until prosperity returns, but in order to at least cut our losses in half, it has been thought wisest to eliminate our "Second Unit" at least for the time being. Thus there will be no sound show in August. Our next show will thus be our regular silent program in September (see front page) and at that time we will make an announcement about the resumption of additional shows.

To conclude with some good news - we have enough good silent films on hand now to fill our schedule until early 1937 - and this is without taking into account the many interesting surprises that are bound to crop up en route. OLD FILMS ARE BETTER THAN NEW - AND THERE ARE GETTING TO BE MORE OF THEM!

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IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

With these notes we are circulating an announcement from the Museum of Modern Art about a forthcoming Thursday night series. We don't have to tell you that this is excellent value for money, and the chance to see MAN'S GENESIS, BLOOD AND SAND, A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT, SAFETY LAST and the others is something a lot of us have been waiting and hoping for.

What the Museum's circular doesn't mention - and we feel that this is quite important - is that the proceeds from this series will be devoted to the Film Preservation Fund for the purpose of transferring important prints from nitrate stock (highly combustible, and by now in danger of decay) to the new triacetate stock - which has an estimated life of at least two hundred years. This is obviously a most important work, and one to be encouraged. The new series provides a practical - and rewarding - way of assisting in that work.