TODAY'S PROGRAM:

"POLISHING UP" (John Bunny)
"HISTORY BROUGHT TO LIFE" (one reel of spectacle)
"THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA" (a 30 minute condensation)

"A SHIP COMES IN" - First New York screening in many years of a notable film by William K. Howard

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENTS

We'd like to explain why we deviated from our announced program for this evening - a double-bill consisting of "CAIN AND ARTEM" and "A SHIP COMES IN".

We had been anxious to play these two films together since both are from the same year (1928), and both are forgotten works of great directors. However, when we had our first trial run of the program, we realised what an impractical show it was. For one thing, it gave us a total of 15 reels -- and at silent speed, plus an intermission, that would have meant a program of some four hours' duration.

More importantly, both films are on the heavy side. Playing them together would be a disservice not only to you, but to the films themselves. Certainly after one, the spectator cannot be in too responsive a mood to the other. The films are too good to be subjected to that handicap, and thus it seemed wiser to break them up into two separate programs.

Thus "CAIN AND ARTEM" is being shown as an extra program in October, and will in no way affect our regular October showing on the 18th. Be sure to note that "CAIN AND ARTEM" is being screened on a Wednesday; program notes will be circulated well in advance, in the usual way.

Finally, in response to requests and suggestions from many of our members, we are switching our starting time - for the Fall and Winter at least - to 7.30 P.M. This is effective as of our coming show on the 20th.

"POLISHING UP" Vitaphone, 1924. Directed by George D. Baker, written by James Oliver Curwood. 14 minutes.

The Cast:
John, the husband (JOHN BUNNY); Flora, his wife (FLORA FINCH); De Reynolds (William Humphrey); Maude Elaine (Phyllis Gray); Belle St. Claire (Emily Hayes); Bellboy (Paul Kelly)

The Vitaphone comedies of John Bunny are much rarer today than the Bennett's of the same period, and this print - in first-class condition incidentally - is a real find. The film is a charming little comedy of marital misunderstandings - something like the two-reelers that Leon Errol turned out on mass at Rko Radio, but without their suggestive nastiness. Bunny himself is at his lovable best, and the whole film has a pleasing, friendly air to it all. Interestingly enough, it was written by that old reliable of Western adventures, James Oliver Curwood - and (recognisably) in a small juvenile part is the still-active Paul Kelly.

"HISTORY BROUGHT TO LIFE" (Paramount, 1946) 10 minutes.

We don't need to be too concerned with the "message" of this film, which purports to show, via an unbelievably benevolent Cecil B. DeMille, how realism and accuracy (1) are the keynotes of the movies' attempts to recreate history. What footage from "Sitting Pretty" is doing in such a subject is a mute point, but the film loses offer wonderfully spectacular highlights from such films as "The Ten Commandments", "The Last Days of Pompeii", "Mutiny on the Bounty", "Wells Fargo", "Wilson", "The Great Waltz", "Abe Lincoln in Illinois", "Conquest", "Cleopatra"
"The Crusades", "Edison the Man" and several others. Strange how Hollywood used this film, and others like it, to prove that "Movies Are Better Than Ever" - and then filled them with old footage which seemed to belies their point! Incidentally, DeMille somewhat churlishly overlooks Griffith in favor of plugging his own pictures. The only Griffith footage in the entire film is a quick flash from his last production, "One Million B.C.".

"THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA" (1925) A Universal Super Jewel, presented by Carl Laemmle and directed by Rupert Julian. Starring Lon Chaney with Mary Philbin, Norman Kerry, Cesar Gravina, Arthur Edmund Carewe, Gibson Gowland. 30 minutes.

It's strange that one of the most famous films of all-time should be so completely unavailable today; apart from occasional screenings at the George Eastman House in Rochester, the film is never shown, and few prints seem to be in existence.

This film is of course a considerably condensed version of the original. It is a series of highlights, arranged without much continuity, but in correct sequence. The beginning is there, and the end - and a good deal of the excitement in between. This version also contains the fine original main title, which comes into focus from a blurred mass of vapors - a favorite trick of Universal, who used the device in "The Old Dark House" and other horror films. Included in this print are such great scenes as the Phantom's kidnapping of the girl via the underground chambers of the Opera House, his unmasking (a classic scene of terror, used by Universal fairly recently in a projection room sequence of "The Hollywood Story"), his appearance at the Grand Ball, the various "death chambers" into which an unwitting hero falls, and the final chase through the streets of Paris (past the old Notre Dame set incidentally!) ending with the death of the Phantom.

From the scenes of horror and gigantic spectacle featured in this condensation, one may well form an overly-favorable impression of the film proper, which actually left much to be desired. It was grand entertainment certainly, as anything with that plot, and budget, would be automatically. But somehow it missed fire, and had many dull moments. Rupert Julian was a very uneven director, and with Tod Browning at the helm, "The Phantom" might really have been a film classic as well as a boxoffice classic. However, the faults of the whole are not apparent in these exciting and enjoyable thirty minutes of extracts.


A WILLIAM K. HOWARD PRODUCTION.

D SIGNED BY WILLIAM K. HOWARD

The Cast: Peter Pleznik (RUDOLPH SCHILLERKRAFT); Mama Pleznik (LOUISE DRESSER); Judge Gresham (Robert Edeson); Dan (Lucien Littlefield); Gregor (Louis Natheaux); Eric Pleznik (Milton Holmes); Martha (Linda Landi); Evelyn Mills and Virginia Davis (Katinka); Sokol (Fritz Feld)

1928... The top attractions on Broadway in July, all playing concurrently, were WINGS, THE TRAIL OF 1918, TEMPEST, THE END OF ST. PETERSBURG, THE MAN WHO LAUGHS, UNCLE TOM'S CABIN and THE RED DANCE. Nobody thought very much about this astounding array of great pictures. For one thing it was pretty common to have such a concentration of top pictures in those days. For another thing, the trade was in an uproar over the coming of sound. "A Ship Comes In", reviewed by The Film Daily on July 1 of 1928, was rather lost amidst pages of advertisements devoted to the new sound films. First National were promising a minimum of 31 sound pictures for the new season. Mack Sennett had taken out
full page ads to plug his new sound comedies; Paramount, Universal and all the other companies were splurging on big ads for coming sound films, and reissues of silents with music and effects. Good old FBO had a double-page spread warning exhibitors: "DON'T BE PANICED BY SOUND -- THE SHOW MUST GO ON!"

The good reviews that "A SHIP COMES IN" collected didn't seem to do much good. "Film Daily" reported: "A fine human interest story, expert direction, and superb work by Schildkraut and Dresser .... a very sincere and realistic story of an immigrant family, it is told without bunk and flag-wagging and therefore is one of the strongest patriotic pictures ever screened ... the family life of the immigrant was never better portrayed on the screen". On its boxoffice potential, the Daily commented: "A natural for the Fourth, will click any time with intelligent audiences". From Motion Picture News: "Gripping human emotion, splendid acting .... There is a wealth of pathos in its scenes, enough to moisten the eyes of most any fan .... the story is wonderfully moving in its climax, and wonderful too in the acting".

Presumably the good reviews didn't result in good bookings. A few weeks later the trade papers carried big double-page ads for the film, not, as is usual, crowing over broken records, but almost literally begging exhibitors to book it. The banner line on the ad was: EVERY FIRST-RUN THEATRE SHOULD SCREEN THIS PICTURE!" The ad went on to call the film "A soul-stirring drama of powerful appeal", commented on "the genius of William K. Howard" and reminded exhibitors of the money-makers that Howard had made in the past. Then it went into this little spiel: "Pathos steps out with one of the big surprises of the year ... an inspiring production comparable only to the greatest masterpieces of the screen. The same dynamic human elements that were responsible for the irresistible appeal of such pictures as Herbert Brenon's "Sorrel and Son", F.W. Murnau's "Sunrise", Frank Borzage's "Seventh Heaven" and Charlie Chaplin's "A Woman of Paris", are combined to a superlative degree in "A Ship Comes In".

Needless to say, the film isn't THAT good. It isn't a great film -- but does have fine moments. It's especially interesting today as one of the few silent films available that were made by William K. Howard. Howard, one of the most under-rated directors of them all, had made twenty films prior to this, including his masterpiece "White Gold". "A Ship Comes In" was his last film for DeMille, and he was just on the threshold of his "Golden Period" at Fox and Metro -- a period that ranged from 1926 through to 1935. It was in this period that Howard established his mastery of melodrama, built up a skilled retinue of selected cameramen, art directors and editors, and made the Edmund Lowe-Bill Howard star/director team mean as much as Wayne and Ford did in later years.

But this was ahead. In 1928, after seven years as a director, Howard had made a name for himself primarily as an action director -- one or two comedies, and the classic "White Gold" excepted. If "A Ship Comes In" isn't Howard at his best, it's because it isn't the sort of material that he liked best, or knew best. Not that the film needs any apologies, but it should be established here that this is second-drawer Howard.

"A SHIP COMES IN" is a carefully made film. The sets are good, the lighting meticulous. It takes its time, and builds up a genuinely convincing impression of the difficulties of an immigrant family in this country. (Howard's parents were themselves Irish immigrants incidentally). A plot motivation that lands Schildkraut in gaol is possibly a trifle contrived -- but otherwise the film is honest, restrained, and free from false sentiment.

The plot contains a minor element of melodrama in that Russian radicals (among them Fritz Feld) are planning a terrorist bombing. In these scenes, Howard's not yet fully exploited talent for melodrama comes to roaring life, and some of these scenes of menace in shadowy basements could hardly have been improved upon by Fritz Lang in his prime.

Other scenes have a tremendous power and real sense of visual beauty in composition; the touching sequence of the mother's farewell to her boy leaving for war -- played largely off-screen -- is a beautiful episode that bears comparison with Waltz Hall's homecoming in "The Birth of a Nation", and some of the best moments of "The Big Parade". One can blame the fact that this scene is never quoted by the historians on to the fact that the film was so completely lost in the sound shuffle.
Howard uses the moving camera with care and discrimination — in a period when the camera was beginning to run amok, it moves here only when there is a logical reason for it to do so. (The cameraman, Lucien Andriot, also photographed "The Southerner" and other distinguished films). Too, the film provides interesting glimpses of the montage and fast cutting that were later, in more polished form, to become such a trade-mark of Howard's. Twice, there is interesting and tense cross-cutting between clocks — a device of which Howard seemed very fond, and one that he used to the last, in films like "Klondyke Fury" (Monogram, 1912).

There are several other touches of visual imagination which it would be unfair to reveal here. Another interesting, and quite unusual aspect of the production, are the subtitles by John Krafft — written, but not condescendingly, in the idiom of the immigrant-hero.

"A SHIP COMES IN" is a rare and interesting film, well worthy of a revival today. This is the first New York screening in many, many years — and to the best of our knowledge, no prints exist in New York at all. Our print, which is in very good condition, was discovered gathering dust in a vault in Springfield, Mass. — a fate to which it must return tomorrow, unless we are successful in our attempts to purchase it.

LITERATURE relevent to tonight's program will be on sale at the screening:

Back numbers of "FILMS IN REVIEW" at 50¢ each:
December 1953 — LON CHANEY — a long and authoritative article on the actor by George Mitchell, with a complete, hitherto unpublished, index to his films and many fine stills.

May, 1954 — WILLIAM K. HOWARD — an article on the director, and a complete Index to his films.

THOUGHTS IN PASSING: Our last show was VERY well attended and reduced the national debt quite considerably. More serial material is being unearthed for showing next Spring. We still have left a few copies of George Geltzer's fine index to the silent serial, which we'll be happy to send free of charge to any member who doesn't have a copy. Currently we (meaning the Messers. Geltzer and Everson) are working on a follow-up Index to the Sound Serial to complete the project.

Our reporting of financial woes in our last notes brought forth some very generous gestures. One member sent in a five-dollar bill "to help out" and others at the serial screening kindly contributed an extra dollar. Their thoughtfulness is much appreciated — especially since it stresses that members don't want to see the society go under. We'd like to go on record as saying now that we don't intend — ever — to solicit funds from our members. When we complain of being "in the red" it is only to bring to the attention of members that by their failure to attend they are making it difficult to keep the society on a self-supporting basis. Even if we lost constantly, we'd be prepared to subsidize the society permanently. We like running it, and we think it performs a useful function. So there is no danger of financial set-backs closing us down. But we do think that a society of this type could — and should — support itself. We think it will from now on, and are putting our temporary set-backs down to Summer vacations and bad weather. If attendance at our last show is any criterion, it should be plainer sailing from here on in. At this time it is not practical (for good reasons other than financial ones) to return to a definite two-a-month policy — but we intend (as we are doing in October) to put in extra shows whenever possible. The day of the second show may vary, depending upon availability of quarters, but we will try to have as many extra shows as possible. One delightful item unearthed for a near-future screening is 1929's "The Sophomore" with Lew Ayres!

Committee of the Society: Dorothy Lovell, Dick Krafft, Edward Connor, Wm. K. Everson
Program Notes & Enquiries: W.K., Everson, Manhattan Towers Hotel, 2166 Broadway NYC

ERRATUM: In case members are wondering whether the whimsical Ed Connor has taken over the program notes, we'd like to point out that the reference on page one to James Oliver Curwood was purely a typing error.