

THE
THEODORE HUFF
MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Tuesday May 15th
Marine Room, Capitol Hotel,
8th Avenue & 51st St., NYC

1936



NEXT SHOW: June 19th:
Viola Dana in "THAT CERTAIN
THING" (Frank Capra, 1928);
Jackie Coogan in "PECK'S
BAD BOY" (Sam Wood, 1921)
An extra show in June will
be announced in the next
program notes.



THE FILM CAREER OF
Henry B. Walthall 1909
1936

Henry B. Walthall, born in the South on March 16, 1878, was both one of the finest - and one of the most neglected - of silent stars. Having studied law in Alabama, he came to New York and entered the theatrical profession instead, achieving considerable distinction, and appearing for several seasons with Henry Miller and Margaret Anglin.

When D.W. Griffith persuaded Walthall to enter films in 1909, the actor devoted himself wholeheartedly to the new medium, making occasional returns to the theatre (especially in his later periods of filmic ill-fortune) but concentrating on the screen. He adjusted himself to the movie set rather than the theatre stage with remarkable ease; there were a few moments early on (his over-done death scene in "Broken Ways", for example) when stock-company acting, rather than movie acting, predominated - but they were infrequent moments, and under Griffith's guidance soon disappeared entirely.

Walthall's acting was memorable, particularly in those early years when there was so much near-pantomime on the screen, for its restraint and sensitive under-playing - and it was an underplaying that was far more genuine and sincerely conceived than the phoney "naturalness" and nauseous pseudo-sincerity of the current chi-chi crop exemplified by Glenn Ford, the late James Dean, and, to a lesser degree, Brando.

Walthall's performance in "The Birth of a Nation" remains one of the great performances of the screen. The tragedy is that after its release, Walthall left the Griffith company to strike up on his own. His career, which would undoubtedly have developed along the spectacular lines of those of Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh, came to a sudden standstill, and he wasted a decade in interesting but minor films quite unworthy of him. Towards the end of the twenties he made a number of important films for MGM, "The Scarlet Letter", "The Barrier" and others, but his prime was past, and the break came too late to be of real use.

With the coming of sound, Walthall suddenly found himself very much in demand. As with John Barrymore, one of his greatest assets was his voice - rich, moving, beautifully modulated.

He played supporting roles in major productions (Gloria Swanson's loyal friend in "The Trespasser") and leads in minor quickies ("Murder in the Museum", and the interesting "Police Court" in which he played an old-time movie-star trying to make a comeback with the aid of director King Baggott). One of his most interesting roles was in Griffith's "Abraham Lincoln", wherein he gave a very moving performance as Robert E. Lee's aide during "the last gray days of the Confederacy". As the thirties wore on, Walthall began to receive more and more choice roles - one of the leads in "Dante's Inferno" for example - and in 1936, the year of his death, his activity was at an all-time high.

Our program tonight, though of course it contains many gaps, does provide a unique opportunity to trace the career of this wonderful actor, from his first films to his last, and we hope that it will provide a long-overdue tribute to one of the finest players the screen has ever known.

We had hoped to have Mr. Wallace W. Walthall, Henry's brother, to introduce tonight's show. Unfortunately he had to leave New York on Sunday to fill an engagement in Dallas, Texas, to appear with "The Birth of a Nation". Wallace Walthall looks like Henry, talks like him, and is a warm, courtly Southern gentleman very much in the mould of the Little Colonel himself. We do hope that he can visit us on another occasion. Mr. John Griggs, radio, tv and stage actor, and a long-time admirer of Henry B., will introduce the program in his stead.

All of tonight's films are drawn from the private collections of John Griggs, Paul Killiam, George Mitchell and William K. Everson, and thus contain many items not otherwise available. We are especially grateful to Mr. Griggs for the loan of some of the choicest morsels.

Program, in order of screening:

- 1909: "The Lonedale Operator" - an extract from Griffith's classic one-reeler, notable for its brilliant cross-cutting, it is included as a sample of Walthall's early bit playing; he is one of the villains who menaces lovely Blanche Sweet.
- 1911: "Change of Spirit" - one-reel - Griffith and Blanche Sweet again. Henry is starred as a courtly Raffles-type thief reformed by love.
- 1915: "The Birth of a Nation" - we are sure that all of our members have seen this (with "Intolerance", surely the greatest of all films) many times - and that if they haven't, they will not be so tactless as to admit it! Although familiar, it has to be on any Walthall program, as it certainly represented the performance of his career. Our short extract begins with Lee's surrender, and follows through to the moving scene of Walthall's homecoming. Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh are both seen in the extract.
- 1915: "The Raven" - extracts. Directed by Charles Brabin, "The Raven" was a strange and uneven film. Much of it was dull and stodgy; some of it was pure poetry. Although Walthall was fine as Edgar Allan Poe, the film was too indifferent to make much impression. We are showing scenes from the purely dramatic side of the film, as well as the interesting and macabre episode where Poe, in terms of imaginative dream imagery, writes the poem of the title.
- 1915: "GHOSTS" - directed by George Nicholls, under the supervision of D.W. Griffith, starring Henry B. Walthall, with Mary Alden, Nigel de Brulier, Thomas Jefferson, and Erich von Stroheim and Monte Blue as extras.

A remarkable and powerful (and decidedly non-stagey) adaptation of the Ibsen classic, "Ghosts" is an unusual film indeed for 1915 - and gives Walthall a field-day in the roles of mad father and son. How far Griffith's supervision extends is not certain, although certainly it seems to have extended to the casting, for most of the rôles are filled by familiar old Griffithians. Watch for Stroheim ruthlessly stealing a scene in an extra role; playing an unimportant clerk, he scribbles, calculates, erases and re-figures, until all one's attention is diverted to the militaristic clerk! Monte Blue likewise appears as an extra. Our print is a fine reduction from the original negative, crystal clear, and perfect throughout -- the only flaw being one or two missing scenes due to the deterioration of the negative.

For the most part, only short fragments of scenes are missing, and titles have been inserted to prevent jump-cuts. Only one complete scene is missing - Walthall's failure to paint the portrait. Less than six minutes is missing in all, and this is certainly the most complete print in existence.

- intermission -

- 1917 - An unidentified Essayan drama, filmed in Chicago with interesting location work there. Mary Charleson, Walthall's wife, appears in this extract with him.
- 1918 - "Confession" - one reel from a fine feature that we shall be showing in its entirety shortly. A plot that parallels Hitchcock's "I Confess" with a Northwestern backwoods locale.
- 1919 - "Boomerang" - extract - Walthall, with the aid of Nigel de Brulier and Maryland Mome (!!) smashes the meat-trust. Slow, but off-beat. Directed by Bertram Bracker, who also directed "Confession".
- 1925 - "The Girl Who Wouldn't Work" - stark drama - Walthall shoots a girl in Lionel Barrymore's bed, believing her to be his daughter, Marguerite de la Motte - only to find that he has killed Lilyan Tashman in error.
- 1926 - "The Light in the Window" - more parental tribulations - this time Walthall suspects his daughter of working in a bordello! A one-reel condensation of a quite powerful independent quickie..
- 1926 - "The Scarlet Letter" - MGM - dir: Victor Seastrom; camera: Hendrik Sartov. We have issued detailed notes on this film on our two previous screenings, so we will not add to them here. A classic film with Lillian Gish's finest performance, it re-united her with Walthall for only the second time since "The Birth of a Nation". Our lengthy extract consists of Walthall's one big sequence two-thirds of the way through the film. Lars Hanson and Karl Dane are also included in the extract.
- 1936 - "The Mine with the Iron Door" - Columbia. Directed by David Howard, more at home with fast-action westerns, "Mine..." was a slow-moving but pleasingly old-fashioned melodrama that came to vigorous life whenever Walthall appeared on the screen. He added stature and importance to what otherwise would have been a very routine "B". That fine old face, lined by the years and by personal worries, is still handsome and impressive; and that mellow, moving Southern voice, used with authority and the backing of years of stage experience, remind us how tragic was the waste of this great talent. "The Mine with the Iron Door" was one of Henry B's last pictures; it was not one of his more notable films, but his performance, as always, was of his best, quite overshadowing the efforts of stars Richard Arlen and Cecilia Parker.

Program Notes and enquiries: William K. Everson, Manhattan Towers Hotel,
2166 Broadway, New York City 24, NY

Art work and secretary - Dorothy Lovell, 10 W.84th Street, New York City

Erratum: a typing error above referred to our 1917 extract as an "Essayan" drama; this of course should read Essanay!