

THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Newsletter and Program Notes for August, 1966

There has been a very slight re-shuffling in our Chaplin program, as you will see from our notes. The discovery of some fascinating Billy West material which just had to be included in the program meant that something else had to go - and "The Man on the Box" was the most expendable item. This has therefore been put into a second August program.

Because our average attendances now warrant it, and because we have built up such a large backlog of films, we are now reverting to our original format of two shows per month. One show will always be held on the third Tuesday; the other show cannot be guaranteed for a fixed date at this time. But of course there will always be ample notification of both shows through the mail. We are also planning another really long session - and will make sure that it doesn't conflict with any of the Museum's current juicy, and briefly exhibited, programs.

The response to our questionnaire in the last notes was such to indicate that there was an audience for almost all of the films on the list. Most in demand was "THE KISS" with Greta Garbo, and so that will be the first to roll - next month in fact. Double-billed with it will be "ARE PARENTS PEOPLE?" with Betty Bronson, last shown by this society some 2 1/2 years ago. Since it was around that time that we last showed "The Kiss", we assume that it will be of interest to the same new segment of our members who have joined us since that time. So, on one bill, the two loveliest ladies of the silent screen - BRONSON and GARBO. If Darryl F. and Dore S. could offer personalities like that today - and in focus - the current boxoffice climate might be a little healthier!

Other upcoming items include Paul Czinner's "Nju" with Jannings, Veidt and Bergner, "Red Raiders" with Ken Maynard, "Romola" with the Gish Sisters, and a special Griffith-Ince civil war program. We're also negotiating for a really grand item we discovered recently - "The Still Alarm" - one of the very best of the old fire-fighting thrillers, jam-packed with real technique and movie-making know-how, and printed in four or five different tints! When we ran this in the wee hours of the morning in a Hollywood hotel, even Seymour Stern was moved to wild excitement - and this was after a two hour session of the best of Griffith!

The mystery of the femme fatale in "The Mothering Heart" is now solved -- and since the solution came from the enterprising George Pratt of Eastman House, we owe that institution an abject apology for suggesting that they didn't know. (Four years ago they didn't -- but then four years ago Mr. Pratt hadn't joined them! However, we should have re-checked!) Here is a part of Mr. Pratt's lengthy report: "As Viola Barry she played in stock on the West Coast... eloped with Jack Conway, then making Bison Films.... she was the daughter of J. Stitt Wilson, "prominent Socialist and candidate for governor" who in 1913 was Mayor of Los Angeles.... Viola appeared in Nestor westerns in 1912, Conway also working for that company.... in 1913 appeared in some Biograph films ("A Frightful Plunder" etc.) and in "The Mothering Heart" was billed as "Miss Pierce" before confessing to Viola Barry.... also appeared that year opposite Hobart Bosworth in "The Sea Wolf" ... in 1914 with Keystone, to L-Ko around 1915, back to Keystone in 1916-7. During her Keystone period she used the name Peggy Pearce....." Many thanks, Eastman House!

Program for Tuesday August 21, Capitol Hotel, Eighth Avenue & 51st Street, in the Marine Room at 7.30.

CHARLIE CHAPLIN - with a passing glance at his brother and his imitators.

"SYD'S BACKWARD WAYS" (formerly titled "Gussie's Backward Ways") A Mack Sennett-Keystone comedy, starring Syd Chaplin with Phyllis Allen.

While in later years Syd Chaplin played comedy roles which were influenced not at all by Charlie (see next week's "The Man on the Box" which, if anything, veers more in the direction of Lloyd) in his early Keystones, every attempt was made to cash in on the antics of his more famous brother.

"Syd's Backward Ways" isn't an especially memorable comedy - nor is it helped by some rather sloppy editing perpetrated by Tower Pictures, a reissue outfit - but it does have some very amusing moments. The best of them - Syd's flirtations, his antics with his cane, and his efforts to steal a drink from the formidable "heroine" - are quite obviously patterned after Charlie.

"HIS DAY OUT" (King-Bee, 1917) 2 reels. Starring Billy West, with Leatrice Joy, Babe (Oliver) Hardy and Billy Quirk.

Most successful screen comedians have been plagued by imitators. In recent years a couple named Petrillo and Mitchell seemed to think that Martin and Lewis were worth imitating. In the late twenties Snub Pollard and another rotund comedian patently imitated Laurel and Hardy in a series of really low-grade and unfunny comedies. And most imitated of all of course was Chaplin. Billy West was the most successful of these. Not only did he manage to look exactly like Chaplin, but he duplicated his mannerisms and slapstick routines down to the smallest detail. Of course, he could not present the pathos of Chaplin or his more creative subtle comedy, and thus his career was comparatively brief. Nevertheless his films are tremendously interesting to the historian, and "His Day Out" in particular could easily fool the uninitiated into thinking it a typical early Chaplin Keystone. The film does have some very lively slapstick, a pleasant performance by Leatrice Joy, and a gloriously unrestrained study in effeminacy by the past master of that art, Billy Quirk. How wonderfully uninhibited the silents were - you could poke fun at religion, sex, race, politics, disease - everything under the sun. Everyone laughed at everyone else, and nobody was offended. What a far healthier climate than today's, when nobody dare risk a gag that might offend a minority group. Today only majority groups are fair game - and they are usually too dull to be funny.

"A DOG'S LIFE" (First National, 1918) 3 reels. Written, directed by, and starring Chaplin; assistant: Chuck Riesner; photographed by Rollie Totheroh; With Edna Purviance, and Tom Wilson (the cop); Syd Chaplin (food wagon owner); Albert Austin (crook); Henry Bergman (bum, and fat lady); Chuck Riesner (clerk and drummer); Billy White (cafe owner), James T. Kelley (bum).

In his biography of Chaplin, Theodore Huff writes: "Chaplin's opening First National film, "A Dog's Life" was ... his first real masterpiece. The techniques he had been experimenting with, and perfecting, were now applied with complete mastery.... it is a prototype of his great features "The Gold Rush" and "City Lights". The treatment is realistic, caricature is sparing. In fact (it) is conceived and played almost as straight drama ... the gags and comedy routines are classic curiously enough, its (perfectly logical) happy ending - along with the omission of the cane - keeps it from being the most typical of Chaplin's pictures".

Original prints of the First National Chaplins are quite hard to come by. Our print is a reversal - i.e., a step above a dupe, but considerably below the quality of an original. On the whole it is far more acceptable than most prints of this subject that we have seen, and is quite complete save for a fragment of one sequence. Chaplin invites Edna to join him in a dance, and steps on some gum. The end of this scene is there, but not the beginning.

Incidentally, several scenes from this film were used by King Vidor in "Cynara", a 1932 Goldwyn screened at the Museum recently.

"FLUTTERING HEARTS" (Hal Roach, 1927 - excerpt only)

If Chaplin is one of the most imitated of comedians, he is also one of the most plagiarized. Wallace Beery's "Behind the Front" used several gags lifted from "Shoulder Arms"; Langdon re-worked that film's sniper gag in his "Boobs in the Wood". Possibly the one Chaplin gag that has been copied the most - from Lloyd and Hardy - is the classic "puppet" scene from "A Dog's Life". We thought it a good idea to show one of these "borrowings" right after the sequence itself; hence this

very funny scene from a Charlie Chase comedy (also featuring Oliver Hardy and Eugene Pallette) in which the routine is varied a little, and elongated, but is still essentially the same.

- intermission -

"SHOULDER ARMS" (3 reels; First National, 1918) Written, directed by and starring Chaplin; photographed by Rollie Totheroh; with Edna Purviance, and Syd Chaplin (American sergeant, and the Kaiser); Henry Bergman (German officer and American bartender); Albert Austin (American officer, German soldier); Tom Wilson (sergeant in camp); Jack Wilson (Crown Prince)

Although "Shoulder Arms" is listed as a three-reeler, it actually runs over 3000 feet and thus is technically a four-reeler. (Chaplin initially shot it as a four-reeler, but cut it down to three. To be quite accurate, "A Dog's Life" is a little over 2½ reels; "Shoulder Arms" a little over 3. We mention this to prevent the unequal lengths of the two "three-reelers" giving rise to speculations on missing footage in the shorter of the two!)

"Shoulder Arms" is quite the most complete print of this subject that we have ever seen. The last print that we ran (some three years ago) was pieced together from a number of other prints, and thus was not only variable in quality but also questionable as to completeness. This print is a good quality dupe made from a recently re-discovered 35mm original. All that is missing (for obvious reasons) is the main title, and the duping is of a high standard, with constant clarity throughout.

Again quoting from Theodore Huff: "Shoulder Arms" won phenomenal popularity in 1918-19 and during frequent revivals in the twenties. Until "The Gold Rush", it was generally considered Chaplin's masterwork. And even then many connoisseurs preferred the older film because of its faster pace and more compact humour..... "Shoulder Arms" is an unusual mixture of realism and fantasy, flavored with Chaplin's characteristic touches of slapstick, satire, irony and pathos... its touches of slapstick and burlesque merely relieve the utter realism of the approach... it is Everyman at war, and in the words of Jean Cocteau, "it moves like a turmoil". (It) influenced many other films. The mad l scene, with its genuine pathos, was borrowed direct in "The Big Parade" of 1925. Technically too, the picture was an advance over Chaplin's previous work... there are advances in cutting, double exposure by split screen, iris effects, etc."

Note: At the end of the program we will be adding a 25 minute short. Since we promised the owner not to divulge its title in advance, we are bound by that - but we think you'll find it interesting. It's silent, of course. Due to the addition of this film (screening at approx. 9.50) we have held over episode three of our serial for our second August show).

PROGRAM TWO: Tuesday August 28th., Marine Room, Capitol Hotel, 7.30 p.m.

"THE MAN ON THE BOX" (Warner Brothers, 1925) Directed by Charles Reisner; scenario by Charles Logue from a story by Harold McGrath; camera - Nick Barrows, 70 mins. Starring SYD CHAPLIN with Alice Calhoun, Helene Costello, Theodore Lorch, E.J. Ratcliffe, Charles Reisner and David Butler.

"The Man on the Box" provides an interesting contrast with the Syd Chaplin of "Syd's Backward Ways", "A Dog's Life" and "Shoulder Arms" in our previous show. Now established as a comedian in his own right, his material is no longer designed to oash in on the antics of Charlie -- although since Syd's "Charlie's Aunt" was so successful, a female impersonation skit is worked for perhaps a little more than it is worth. Perhaps that criticism can apply to the whole film, which goes on for rather too long considering the very slight material involved. But while there are slow stretches, there are also

several extremely amusing sequences. The chase involving the horse-cab in the early reels is an expertly done bit of slapstick, and Syd's impromptu imitation of Teddy Roosevelt is delightful. Director Charles (Chuck) Reisner, (also well in evidence in our earlier show this month) has given himself a meaty comedy role, and another director - David Butler - is seen in a minor part. Incidentally, ALL prints of "The Man on the Box" seem to be in flawless condition, the explanation being (we assume) that it is an odd little item which collectors are content to run just once or twice. Our print, certainly, is a beautiful toned original in perfect condition.

"TRAPPED" - episode 3 - OFFICER 444: After the hectic opening chapters, the warfare between Officer 444 and the minions of the Frog and the Vulture seems to have settled down to a more leisurely pace. But the complications remain as involved as ever!

"THE NIGHT CRY" (Warner Brothers, 1926) Director: Herman Raymaker; scenario by Walter Morosco and Joe Klein from a story by Ewart Adams; photographed by Edwin du Par. Starring RINTY TIN TIN vs. BALDY the Condor, with Johnny Harron, June Marlowe, Gayne Whitman, Bob Kortman, Mary Louise Miller.

"The Night Cry" is the third Rinty feature we have played in the past two years, and from Rinty's point of view, it is easily the best. While others may have had more production value, none have been more tailored to Rinty himself. The canine wonder really acts in this one; there is none of the hesitancy of his performance in "Where the North Begins" wherein he continually looked at the camera for direction) in "The Night Cry". He knows exactly what to do, and pulls all the stops out in doing it. Possibly he even hems it up a little in his one big emotional scene, but in any event he makes all his competitors (Dynamite, Peter the Great, Strongheart, Napoleon Bonaparte and the others) look like rank amateurs. Even apart from Rinty, the film is a delight. Directed by old Sennetonian Herman Raymaker, it keeps on the go throughout, aided by some lovely camerawork from Edwin DuPar, until it reaches an astonishing climax that is literally borrowed from "Rescued from an Eagle's Nest"! And the excitement-generating cross-cutting in this climax literally has to be seen to be believed; never was the famous "Griffith influence" more in evidence. The film is a real example of the triumph of cinematic mind over matter; the plot was old-hat in 1909 - the treatment is fresh and inventive even today. Only in the poor matching-up of studio sets to actual exteriors, and in the rather clumsy special effects, is there any real sign of the primitive. Today these weaknesses, if anything, add to the jolly spirit of the whole. None of the human actors have much of a chance, but Johnny Harron (Bob's brother) makes a good hero, and old Ince villain Bob Kortman (now a janitor at the Screen Directors' Guild) switches to the right side of the law as the sheriff. Again, the print - a toned original - is a joy to behold.

Backing up our own enthusiasm, "Motion Picture Magazine" of July 1926 reported: "Rinty Tin Tin's very best picture - and that's saying a lot". The trade paper "Film Daily" also raved: "This is the dog picture of them all. Rinty better than ever in a picture that screams boxoffice from start to finish. Should be a cleanup.... Never has this dog's intelligence been tried to the extent that it is here. A remarkable animal picture.... built of mellow hokum, but it's the best, most sure-fire boxoffice hokum that has come to light in many a day. Story carries an unmistakable punch and unwinds amid an atmosphere of suspense and thrills that doesn't merely skim the surface. It gets down deep and the reaction of the audience was a genuine nervous tension which, through actual observation, brought about a physical uneasiness on the part of the spectators. Better put on an extra force to handle the crowds!"

As a postscript, we'd like to say that Baldy - a really vicious looking Condor - gives a pretty good performance too. But it's Rinty's film all the way!

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OUR NEXT PROGRAM - Tuesday September 18:
PETTY BRONSON in "ARE PARFETS PEOPLE?" (1925) with Florence Vidor,
Adolph Menjou, Lawrence Gray, Andre Beranger. Dir: Mal St. Clair
GRITA GARBO, Lew Ayres, Conrad Nagel in "THE KISS" (1929) Dir: Jacques Feyder

Our second September show (probably "Romola") will be announced on the notes for the above.