"NEVER WEAKEN" (Hal Roach, 1921; 30 min; written by Roach and Sam Taylor)

As we go to press with these notes, the print of "Never Weaken" has not yet come to hand, so we cannot attempt a serious re-examination. We do recall it as being one of the very best of Harold Lloyd's fine two-reelers for Roach - crammed with the sort of slapstick mixed with thrills that was Lloyd's forte, and with more of the magnificent building-climbing nonsense that made "High and Dizzy" and "Safety Last" so enjoyable. Recent viewings of these films tend to confirm that Lloyd's best work never really dates, so we're quite sure that "Never Weaken" will stand up to the fondest memories of it.

"THE ROAD TO YESTERDAY" (Cecil B. DeMille-JDC, 1925; 10 reels)

Directed by Cecil B. DeMille; photographed by Peverell Marley; adapted by Joannie Mackehose and Beulah Marie Dix from the stage play by Beulah Marie Dix and J. G. Sutherland; art direction by Anton S. Grot, Mitchell Leisen and Paul Itke; assistant director, Frank Urson; edited by Anna Bauchhein.

The Casts: Kenneth Naulton (Joseph Schildkraut); Malena Paulson (Jetta Goudal); Beth Tyrall (Vera Reynolds); Jack Norland (William Boyd); Dolly Poole (Julia Faye); Adriaa Troupkins (Casson Ferguson); Aunt Harris (Tyrell (Frizzle Prigerson); Hugh Armstrong (Clarence Burton); Anna Niven (Josephine Norman); Matt Egan (Charles Mact); with Chester Morris as an extra in the party scene in reel four, and Junior Ogilvie.

"THE ROAD TO YESTERDAY" is very much of an "exclusive" for this society. The film, DeMille's first personal production after he left Paramount (following disposition of "The Sea"

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Disorderments) to form his own unit, has not been shown in New York in many years. Apart from this print - a brand new one recently struck off from the original negatives - the only other existing print is one held by John Hampton's Silent Movie Theatre in Hollywood.

The rarity of the film makes it very much of an "item"; we cannot - and do not - pretend that it is a re-discovered masterpiece. But it is certainly an oddity, and an interesting example of DeMille's independent work, and thus well worthy of a re-viewing today.
DeBille's own publicity at the time understandably pulled no punches. The press book advised exhibitors that the film was "...marked an epochal advance in motion picture achievement ... a triumph of screen art". Strangely enough though, the trade press almost duplicated these phrases - although perhaps we should not be so naive as to say "strangely enough", as it was probably even easier to buy the trade press than it is now. In any event, the Motion Picture World reported: "DeBille exceeds his best records in production and direction he has never done better ... has every quality of greatness." The Motion Picture News agreed: "Hit to the most artistically, commercially, boxoffice-wise a fine picture, a great picture, a credit to DeBille, and a golden thing for Fox and the exhibitors who will play it." And "Motion Picture Daily" went even further: "The greatest boxoffice picture ever made ... (everything) so much bigger and better than ever before ... the religious theme in the picture, while dangerous material, will not serve to lessen its popularity."

Perhaps if we were smart, we'd let these reviews serve as our sole notes, and just stand back and wait the crowds! However, one is so completely at a loss to reconcile these reviews with this picture that it isn't possible.

It's so fashionable among high-brow critics to assail DeBille as a poor director that we hesitate to do so for fear of bracketing ourselves with that crowd. However, fashionable or not, it is true. DeBille has never made a really good picture, nor is his showmanship always justified as a substitute for craftsmanship. (Boxoffice is not necessarily the answer.) Shred publicity has generated the falsehood that, if nothing else, DeBille is surefire commercially, but several of his biggest hits, "King of Kings" among them, lost money. "Road to Yesterday" is especially valuable in assessing Delillo's true worth as a director - here he is on his own, dependent on his own resources and his own money. Thus he plays it safe, keeps a tight eye on the budget, keeps the spectacle under control, and relies solely on talent rather than shot to put it all over. The results speak for themselves - the direction of "Road to Yesterday" of 1925 is quite inferior to the direction of Griffith and even of those more than a decade earlier.

It's really difficult to know how to take this story - based on what was, in 1925, already a twenty-year-old play on a "Brigade Murpy" theme of reincarnation. It starts off in deadly seriousness, with DeBille's accustomed mixture of sex and religion. Then, mid-way, a train wreck transports all the principals back to a prior existence. Literally before the smoke has cleared, the mood changes to bungling comedy - something of a cross between Fairbanks and "The Roys from Syracuse". From the tik-tak, and then are some beauties in this section (this written in the style that our love shall be bitter as heathen", or "You art apter to hurt than heal") seems to be written very much with the tongue in cheek. Then, suddenly, it is quite serious again, and finishes (as did "The Volga Boatman") on a glorious conglomeration of sex and brutality - Jetta Goudal being burned at the stake, withering very sincerely in the flames, but somehow managing to avoid even being singed in her clothes, and William Boyd being whipped to death in Vera Reynolds' bedroom prior to a forced marriage with Schildkrut's Religion, which has been completely forgotten for seven reels, suddenly put in a re-appearance in real 10! All of which is good fun, but none of which is good cinema.

The criticism was unanimous in looking at the train wreck, hailing it as the greatest thrill ever screened. This again is hard to stomach, as quite well done that it is, it isn't a patch on the wreck in 1925's "The Juggernaut", and is actually fairly crudely done for a film as late as 1925. Certainly, if the criticism had gone back only 2 years to DeBille's own "10 Commandments", they would have found greater screen thrills - and if they had gone back to "Intolerance", "The Birth of a Nation" and "Way Down East" they'd probably have collapsed from the excitement of it all.

Of course, the film does have many good things. A duel between Boyd and Schildkrut is exceptionally well done; so is the aftermath of the train wreck. The photography by Howell is fine, and there are some beautiful Grand Canyon exteriors (plus one hideously obvious studio replica); the fashion and decor are always interesting, and the acting, by Boyd especially, generally good. (Charles West, by the way, had played his same role in the stage version years earlier). The last two reels are exciting and vigorous stuff, and a couple of sets are quite elaborate in the best DeBille manner. Apparently DeBille didn't mind spending real money on his castle sets, as he knew he'd use them again. (They turn up in "The Volga Boatman" and many others).

DeBille's publicity stunt included the usual pre-screenings for the clergy, a tie-up with insurance companies, and the use of such catchphrases as "DID YOU LIVE 300 YEARS AND WHAT EFFECT HAS YOUR PAST HAD ON YOUR PRESENT LOVES AND HATRED?", and "HEROES ENDURED - WHEN INJURIES RULED AND FEARS WERE BURIED AT THE STAKE AS WITCHES?"

As you may have guessed by now, "ROAD TO YESTERDAY" is not a great film - but it is an interesting and unusual one, and we think you'll find it worth while. This, at any rate, will be the only chance to see it in New York.

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