

THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Newsletter and Program Notes for March, 1957

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We're on the move again -- and would ask you to make special note of the changed date and venue of our first March program - the John Barrymore show. We had some union intervention at our February show at the Manhattan Towers, and while it didn't develop into anything serious, it is quite apparent that due to an agreement between the projectionists' union and hotels in general, we can expect possible trouble and complications any time we screen in a regular hotel. Especially since the union quite obviously has a member among our members, and is thus appraised of our every move.

Consequently we have arranged to show many of our programs at the Adelphi Hall on 5th Avenue. This is where we held our marathon Saturday session last year, and it proved very satisfactory from all viewpoints. Most important, there is plenty of elbow-room. The Adelphi Hall is at 74 5th Avenue, situated between 14th Street and the 5th Avenue Cinema. Although further downtown than usual for us, it is easily reached by various busses and subways.

Our show itself will dictate whether we screen at the Adelphi, or at 57th Street. We'll be retaining the latter location for shows that we know have limited drawing power, and where the comparatively small turnout can be comfortably seated. We don't in this way want to imply that our 57th St. shows will be inferior to the others, but experience has shown us which films separate the men from the boys insofar as real interest in old films are concerned. Quite personally I feel that "Smouldering Fires" and "Sporting Life" are much better pictures than Chaplin's "Circus", but quite obviously they don't draw as well. So from here on in, please double-check your notes to make sure that you are not disappointed by turning up at the wrong hall on the wrong date.

A number of people expressed disappointment that the Western cycle had been so often postponed. In a way this was gratifying, as we didn't know that there was such interest in it. However, any postponements have always been for the very good reason that other films have arrived which have been available only temporarily, and to have played the westerns in their stead would have meant losing them entirely. However, we're glad to announce that our Western cycle will definitely take place next month. There will be at least three, and possibly four shows spread throughout April. We are not setting dates at this point as we want to wait and get further details of the Museum's French cycle, so that we can avoid the too-obvious clashes and play Bill Hart and Fred Thompson (erratum: Thomson!) on days when the Museum's offerings are comparatively routine - if there are any such days. In all probability, we will also switch back the starting time to 8.0 p.m., giving members time to catch the Museum shows first. However, more of that in our April notes, which will go out at the end of this month.

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PROGRAM ONE In Room 10-D of the Adelphi Hall, 74 5th Avenue, at 7.30 p.m. on FRIDAY MARCH 22nd.

LINDBERGH'S FLIGHT (one reel)

We have been saving this fascinating reel until now, for comparison with Billy Wilder's "Spirit of St. Louis". It is a well-edited reel put together after the flight itself, and containing not only fine footage of Lindbergh's departure, arrival in Paris and England, and the parades in his honor in Washington and New York, but also several rare and grim shots of previous cross-Atlantic attempts, all of them doomed to failure. Two crashes are caught by the camera. The newsreel camera photography is of an unusually high order, and has a genuinely creative and dramatic quality quite absent from contemporary newsreel coverage. The shots in NY harbour look as though they were shot by Joe August under John Ford's direction! The reel is a toned original, and a joy to behold.

GE COMMERCIAL

We're not in the habit of plugging manufacturer's wares, but this little item is a strange oddity of far more interest to the film addict than to the housewife. Made around 1934 by Warner Brothers, it presents such old friends as Warren William, Preston Foster, Ruth Donnelly, Walter Miller and Dick Powell. Joan Blondell is introduced, of course, lounging seductively in bed, but perhaps the hit of the show is a pert Betty Davis extolling the wonders of a washing machine in real Betty Furness style!

VACATIONING IN THE PACIFIC WITH JOHN BARRYMORE (one reel, 1925)

Another oddity, this quite pleasing subject has no real merit, but does contain some good and hitherto not widely seen material of Barrymore on a mid-twenties vacation. Particularly amusing are the cut-in studio shots - obviously posed, carefully lit, designed to show off the famous profile, and not matching up at all with the original footage.

HEAD BRUNEL (one reel extract; Warners, 1924) Directed by Harry Beaumont; with John Barrymore, Mary Astor, Alec B. Francis.

When we showed the complete 10-reel version of this film some four years ago, it aroused no great enthusiasm, and it is indeed a rather stodgy and unimaginative, if handsomely mounted, film. It was of course a big success in its day, and, good film or not, was vastly preferable to MGM's recent remake. Barrymore was great however, and his final mad-house scene not only one of the best things he has ever done on the screen, but also particularly typical of his love for the bizarre. It is this sequence - the last reel of the picture - that we are showing. First-rate in its own right, it also makes an interesting comparison with the smooth and less nightmarish playing of the versatile Barrymore some eight years later in our feature, "STATE'S ATTORNEY".

STATE'S ATTORNEY (RKO, 1932, 8 reels) Directed by George Archainbaud; written by Gene Fowler and Rowland Brown from a story by Louis Stevens; edited by Charles Kimball and William Hamilton; cameraman - Leo Tover; recording engineer - George Ellis.

Starring JOHN BARRYMORE with Jill Esmond, Helen Twelvetrees, William Boyd, Mary Duncan, Oscar Apfel, Raoul Roulien, Ralph Ince, Frederick Burton, Ethel Sutherland, Leon Waycoff (Ams), C. Henry Gordon, Nat Pendleton, Lloyd Ingraham.

It is frequently astonishing how basically similar films from the same year fare so differently with the passing of the years. Barrymore's "Counsellor at Law", made the same year, likewise based on a stage play, but directed by William Tyler, remains a much more vital, and certainly more cinematic, piece of work than does "State's Attorney", which frankly has many of the faults of the early talkies. It smacks more of the theatre than the screen, and looks somewhat older than its mere 25 years.

But forget all that. It's Barrymore material at its best - almost hand-tailored for him by his friend Gene Fowler. Based on the story of the famous lawyer Fallon (also well played by Warren William in "The Mouthpiece", and by George Brent and Edward G. Robinson in subsequent remakes) it gives Barrymore full rein for deliberate theatrics (as in the several dynamic court-room episodes), for wry comedy (a delightful drunken scene for example) and for those moments of almost unbearably affecting pathos which nobody could do as well as Barrymore. (The sequence wherein Barrymore, with genuine remorse, tells his mistress that he has just married, is a beautifully acted episode). In every gesture and in every scene, Barrymore is just great, completely transcending the somewhat dated aspect of the rest of the film. Perhaps his completely undated performance merely serves to emphasize the somewhat old-hat film-making methods of the rest of the film.

Not that the non-Barrymore aspect of the film is dull. The dialogue sizzles with lines and situations that would never pass muster today. Ralph Ince, C. Henry Gordon and William Boyd make a formidable trio of underworld hoods. The gangster era and prohibition lend their own delightful flavor to the proceedings. And of course Helen Twelvetrees remains as appealing as always. Perhaps the film's gravest fault is in its direction by George Archainbaud, a man who is just fine on melodrama ("The Lost Squadron") and action (he made some of the best Hopalong Cassidy westerns, as well as films like "The Kansan", and such earlier silent melos as Selznick's "Handcuffs or Kisses") but who seems a little non-plussed when dealing with non-action material.

In any event, "STATE'S ATTORNEY" is something to see, and this is its first NY showing in many years. The print is a brand new one, but presumably the original negative had deteriorated, since this print is obviously made from a new negative which in turn was made from a print rather than a fine grain. Accordingly, it is a little soft, and probably below the standards required for tv. Thus, while we're not using this as a "come-on", it seems very possible that "STATE'S ATTORNEY" will not be shown on television.

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Additional notes on John Barrymore will be circulated at the screening, and back issues of FILMS IN REVIEW (Dec. 1952) containing Spencer Berger's fine article on Barrymore, together with a superbly illustrated index to his films, will be on sale.  
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PROGRAM TWO Tuesday March 26th., 7.30 p.m., at 400 West 57th Street.

"JUSTICE" - episode 10 of "OFFICER 444" (1925, 2 reels)

The moment you have all been anxiously awaiting for the past ten months. Officer 444, with the none too effective assistance of August Vollmer (in person) finally unmask the sinister "Frog". Your last chance to get your bets down as to his identity!

FORTY-FIVE UNITS OF DRAMA PRO TOGRAPH

We have extolled the virtues of the Griffith produced (or supervised) Biographs on many an occasion, so we won't elaborate here on the patterns of cutting, and the restrained acting, that characterised so many of these films. These three great little chase pictures, all quite different in their way, but all based on techniques evolved by Griffith, speak frequently for themselves.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY (1911) Dir: Griffith; starring Wilfrid Lucas.

An interesting gangster melodrama with a slightly bizarre twist; the killer masquerading as an old woman a la "The Unholy Three". Neatly done, and with a really exciting chase finish, shot in and around Fox Lee.

THE SLITCHTOWER (1912) Director: Tony O'Sullivan; camera: Billy Bitzer. With Henry B. Walthall, Claire McDowell, Johnny Tarsy (Tommy, the boy); Lionel Barrymore, Charles West, Jack Dillon.

This is one of the best of the films made by a Griffith protege, Tony O'Sullivan, who also acted in many of the Biographs. (Some of his films, such as "The Telephone Girl and the Lady", were a little untidy, if exciting; but this one is beautifully conceived and photographed, and shows a remarkable fidelity to the teachings of D.W.).

THE LESSER EVIL (1912) Dir: Griffith; with Blanche Sweet, Mae Marsh, Edwin August, Alfred Paget, Charles West.

Smugglers, and a well cut chase at sea; this is a fast moving little melodrama with some strong plot elements. Although otherwise complete, the print is lacking titles, and thus the meaning of the title is not readily apparent unless explained here. The crooked captain, basically a decent fellow (and allowed to escape scot free) has only one bullet left when the crew mutinies. Shall he use it on Blanche, and save her from a dreadful fate -- or shall he use it on himself? He decides to do the noble thing, and use it on Blanche. Luckily, the coastguard arrive in time. Apart from one slip in continuity - following a lengthy sea chase, the captain manages to swim ashore in a matter of moments - "The Lesser Evil" is a darned good, and beautifully photographed, thriller. Mae Marsh is little more than an extra in early scenes.

"SPORTING LIFE" (A Universal Jewel, 1925; 7 reels) Directed by MAURICE TOURNEUR based on the Drury Lane success by Seymour Hicks and Cecil Raleigh; adaptation & scenario by Curtis Benton; camera - Arthur Todd; edited by Byron Robinson; titles by Walter Anthony; art direction - L.E. Kuter and E.F. Shoaley.

With BERT LYTELL, MARION NIXON

George Siegmann (Limhouse Dan); Cyril Chadwick, Charles Delaney, Paulette Goddard, Oliver Eckhard, Ted (Kid) Lewis; and Myrna Loy and Arthur Lake as extras.

It is discoveries like this that make life worth living in the Cinemascope age - a beautiful toned original print, absolutely complete (except for a five second jump in a fight scene), and a perfect example of the real style and production value that went into pictures quite unjustly forgotten. Based on an English stage success, it has the leisurely and civilized tempo of the English, but handles its melodrama - particularly the fights and the Limhouse rooftop chase - in roaring style. The sets are great and lavish in the extreme. When Tourneur wanted to spend money, he spent it. One cannot help wondering what effort went into the simple shot of doves flying past the young lovers, outside a cottage set, at just the right moment. Too, the Derby climax - though padded with newsreel footage - is staged on a very large scale. Wanting to suggest that his players were there, and not just playing to newsreel scenes, Tourneur obtained a London bus, literally hundreds of extras, dressed them all in the latest English fashions, and obtained a truly spectacular shot -- just for about ten seconds! Although the subject doesn't offer the same opportunities for pictorial design as did another Tourneur that we ran recently, "Lorna Doone", there's no doubt about the fact that it is a Tourneur production in every sense of the word. The compositions are right out of his top drawer! (Tourneur had also made the subject earlier, for Paramount in 1918, so evidently had a real fondness for it). The Hollywood reconstruction of English atmosphere is remarkably good, the California hills excepted, and the characters have a real English theatrical turn-of-the-century flavor to them. Bert Lytell, about whom a title tells us "He always played it square" is fine, while Cyril Chadwick ("The Iron Horse", "Peter Pan", "Happiness") and Siegmann make a great pair of heavies. The opening musical numbers are a delight, Myrna Loy is readily visible in the crowds, and altogether we're most enthused about this re-discovery.

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