

THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Programs for May 1957 at the Adelphi Hall, 74 5th Avenue (at 14th Street), New York City  
Room 10-D at 7:30 p.m.

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This month we have largely reverted to sound films - but only temporarily. And apart from "Transatlantic Tunnel", planned for the near future, there are NO other sound films on our horizon. In any event, we're happy to say that the newest of our sound films in May is still nearly a quarter-of-a-century old!

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Program One: May 21st. A PROGRAM OF MYSTERY AND MELODRAMA

"HER AWAKENING" (Majestic, 1914) Directed by Christy Cabanne; supervised by D.W. Griffith; starring WALLACE REID and BLANCHE SWEET, with Josephine Crowell, Ralph Lewis, Andre Beranger, Al Fillson, Howard Gaye, Mrs Marconi.

Having left Biograph, Griffith was paid \$1000 a week by the Mutual-Reliance-Majestic-Fine Arts combine to supervise the one, two and three reels of this type. Despite the fact that Griffith was also turning out full-length features ("The Escape", "Home Sweet Home", "The Avenging Conscience") and was preparing for "The Birth of a Nation", he seemed to devote sufficient time to the shorts-program so that each film bore the signs of his influence, if not his outright participation. "Her Awakening" is a well-done little melodrama of a crooked guardian attempting to steal an heiress' inheritance; the plot stretches coincidence a little too far perhaps, but otherwise it is a neatly constructed film. Cabanne seemed to do his only really interesting work under Griffith, later becoming merely a competent hack director of everything from "Annapolis" to "The Dummy's Hand".

"THE MISER'S HEART" (Biograph, 1911) Directed by D.W. Griffith, with Eddie Dillon, Wilfrid Lucas, Charles Miles, and Robert Harron and Donald Crisp as extras.

Although fairly late at 1911, "The Miser's Heart" is a delightful throw-back to "The Adventures of Dollie" and the really early Griffith subjects - heartily unsubtle in both its melodramatics and its sentiment, it is a strange follow-up to such sophisticated films as "A Corner in Wheat" of two years earlier. Probably D.W. was just having fun with this one -- but at the same time not forgetting to pile up the suspense with all the cross-cutting devices at his command. The climax, which we won't spoil by revealing here, is a real corker.

"A WOMAN OF NERVE" (Reliance, 1915) Directed by Joseph Belmont; supervised by Griffith. Starring Howard Gaye and Olga Gray, with Fred Kohler as Two Fingered Mike.

"Nerve, the quality which enables a man to bet into a pat hand with a pair of tens, and a woman to go through fire with a smile".

This rather whimsical opening title suggests a light-hearted mood, which however is dispelled as soon as Fred Kohler, his missing two fingers exploited as much here by Joseph Belmont as they were by Ford in "The Iron Horse", puts in his sinister appearance. The film, more than a little reminiscent of "The Lonely Villa", is a taut little thriller with a pronounced stress on closeups. The many exterior shots of suburban Hollywood and Los Angeles lend added interest, and it's always pleasant to watch the polished work of Olga Gray. Incidentally, the last scene or two of the film are missing - presumably a clinch fadeout between husband and wife - but otherwise it is all there.

"SOUL OF THE DEAST" (excerpt only) Thomas H. Ince-Metro release 1923; directed by John Griffin Gray; starring COLLEN LANDIS, ADGE BELLAMY, IRAM BERRY.

This Ince production is not the horror film its title might suggest, but an all-out backwoods and circus melodrama. Our sequence runs for about half-a-reel, and is one of

the action highlights. Enhancing its appeal, even though it does mean running it at sound speed, is the use of the old agitato "Storm and War", used as background music in many an early sound western and thriller, not to mention serials. A word of explanation for the brief opening and closing scenes featuring Mae Busch, Luana Walters and Lirnie Adams. In the early thirties, an independent producer acquired a great deal of silent Ince stock footage from "Soul of the Beast", "Typhoon", "Barbara Fritchie", "The Busher" and other films, and from them made a little epic called "Secrets of Hollywood", in which top-line Hollywood star (!) Mae Busch took a young would-be starlet (Luana Walters) in tow. Every so often somebody would rush up to Miss Busch with a batch of stills for her "collection", and as she looked at them, they dissolved into lengthy sequences from the old Ince pictures. It was all great fun - especially the "guest" appearance of "one of Hollywood's top male stars, Wally Wales" (!!) - to say nothing of equally notable guest appearances by producer George M. Murrisk and character player Lafe McKee. It is from "Secrets of Hollywood" that this "Soul of the Beast" excerpt was made.

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I N T E R M I S S I O N  
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"THE BAT WHISPERS"

--starring--

CHESTER MORRIS, UMA  
MERKEL and GUSTAV  
VON SEYFFERTITZ

(United Artists, 1931) A Roland West Production  
Based on the stage play by Mary Roberts Rinehart and  
Avery Hopwood, as produced by Wagenhals and Kemper;  
photographed by Ray June; settings designed and  
executed by Paul Roe Crawley; production assistants:  
Roger H. Mann, Ned Herbert Mann, Charles H. Smith,  
Helen Hallett; edited by James Smith; in charge of  
sound: J.T. Reed; Sound technician: O.E. Lagerstrom;  
WRITTEN, PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY ROLAND WEST.

The Cast (in order of appearance): Police Lieut. (Chance Ward); Mr. Bell (Richard Tucker);  
Butler (Wilson Bengt); Police Captain (DeWitt Jennings); Sergeant (Sidney D'Albrook);  
Man in the Black Mask (S.E. Jennings); Cornelia Van Gorder (Grayce Hampton); Lizzie Allen  
(Maude Eburne); The Caretaker (Spencer Charters); Dale Van Gorder (Uma Merkel); Brook  
(William Bakewell); Dr. Vanreus (Gustav von Seyffertitz); Detective Anderson (Chester  
Morris); Richard Fleming (Hugh Huntley); Detective Jones (Charles Don Clark);  
The Unknown (Ben Bard);

Frankly we were quite overwhelmed when we ran this a few days ago. Expecting good, stylish  
fun in the "The Cat and the Canary" tradition, we were absolutely bowled over by the  
marvellous stuff in this film. This is one of the most fascinating and interesting  
"re-discovered gems" we've ever played.

Roland West's first version of "The Bat", made as a silent, was a huge success. This  
early talkie remake was a flop. Today it is easy to see why. In an era when movies were  
expected to talk and do nothing else, and when transplanted stageplays were all the  
vogue (especially at UA and RKO) this one broke all the rules. It remained determinedly  
a movie rather than a talkie; despite its stage origins (apparent only once or twice),  
it tells its story visually, in the best tradition of the silent greats. As such in  
1931 it probably seemed terribly old-fashioned. Today, ironically, it seems wonderfully  
fresh and invigorating -- oh, for some of the style and imagination of this film in some  
of today's films!

As an "old-school - old-house thriller" it has some plot familiarities of course, and  
more than casual resemblances to "The Cat and the Canary", "The 13th Guest" (which  
copied one whole sequence from it) "The Old Dark House" and others. But even the cliches  
seem fresh here, and West deliberately kids (without ridiculing) certain elements of  
the plot which seemed a little corny to him.

What makes the film so great is its tremendous, stylistic, visuals; great moving camera

shots, ingenious miniatures, strikingly dramatic compositions, fantastic - and effective - angles. A remarkable bank-robbery scene is done in an almost impressionistic manner, shot at a distorted high angle, reminiscent of Fritz Lang in his golden period. (A black, gloved hand snuffing out a candle is a happy plagiarism from "Metropolis" too). In fact, pictorially the film is often reminiscent of both Lang and Maurice Tourneur, but rarely lazily imitative. Some of the pictorial effects -- the great bat's shadow melting into nothing for example - are among the most striking images the screen has created, bar none.

Roland West was obviously a dynamic film-maker, and it is surprising that he is so little remembered today. He was obviously held in high regard at the time, for all of his relatively few films had the billing "A Roland West Production" before either title or star. Born in 1887, he was an actor, playwright, producer and director. His films were always one-man shows, although he surrounded himself with the best technicians available. Ray June was a top-notch cameraman, as this film so evidently shows, and the editor of "The Bat Whispers", James Smith, was also Griffith's favorite editor. After years as a juvenile actor, West produced short dramatic and comedy skits for the Loew's circuit. With Joseph Schenk he produced and directed their first picture, "Lost Souls", became a production executive temporarily, and then switched back to making films, with time out for producing "The Unknown Purple" on the legitimate stage. His handful of films include "The Monster" (a Lon Chaney horror vehicle, with a good sense of fun), "The Dove" and "Deluxe Annie" (both Norma Talmadge vehicles), "The Bat", and three Chester Morris melodramas - "Alibi", "The Bat Whispers" and "The Corsair". West's pictures were never easy to follow - his plots always seemed to be complicated and to abound in unexplained motives and characters. This is true of "The Bat Whispers", and especially so of "The Corsair" in which he turned a drama of gangsterism and bootlegging into something nearly resembling a Greek tragedy.

Not the least of West's accomplishments was his rare good taste in selecting the lovely Jewel Carmen, one of the most graceful of all the old Griffith Girls from Triangle, as his bride.

"The Bat Whispers" is still presented occasionally on stage under its original title, and is an old reliable at summer stock theatres. Zasu Pitts played well in a recent version.

Good as "The Cat and the Canary" and "The Old Dark House" were, we think this one has them beaten by a mile. Even if you don't agree however, we think you'll go away confirmed Roland West admirers.

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Program Two May 28

WILLIAM WYLER AT UNIVERSAL

Two Films from the Early 30's.

At a later date, we plan to screen one of Wyler's best silents for Universal, "Shakedown". Tonight's program, consisting of "THE GOOD FAIRY" and "TOM BROWN OF CULVER", made between 1932 and 1934, provides a good cross-section of the highly competent work he was turning out in the early sound era. While not necessarily his best films of that period, they do provide an interesting illustration of both his capabilities - and his limitations. His best Universal films, "Counsellor at Law" and "Hall's Heroes", were probably also his best from any period, and far superior to the stodgy, pretentious and overblown films that lured him in over his head - from "Wuthering Heights" to "The Best Years of Our Lives". How many of the really good directors of the early thirties - William Wellman, Howard Hawks, Ervyn Layton, Archie Mayo - emulated Wyler by following him into "prestige" pictures that were far less interesting than their early, peppy, punchy and truly cinematic pictures. Perhaps only William Keighley - a lesser director admittedly - really stayed within his own orbit, and wisely so. His "Street With No Name" of a few years ago was very pleasantly akin to his earlier Cagney opus, "G-Men".

"TOM BROWN OF CULVER" (Universal, 1932) 8 reels; directed by William Wyler, photographed by Charles Stumar, screenplay by George Green and Tom Buckingham, additional dialogue by Clarence Marks.

The Players: Tom Brown, H.B. Warner, Richard Cromwell, Slim Summerville, Ben Alexander, Sidney Toler, Russell Hopton, Andy Devine, Willard Robertson, Norman Phillips Jr., Tyrone Power, Kit Main, Dick Winslow, Matty Roubert, Kit Guard, Betty Blythe, Lew Kelly, Eugene Palette.

"Tom Brown of Culver" is a prime example of Wyler building a great deal out of very little. The plot is slim and not even markedly eventful, but in Wyler's hands it becomes fast-paced, dramatic, and surprisingly moving at times. Thanks to sharp editing, imaginative camera composition, and frequent utilisation of the moving camera, a rather static story is kept constantly on the move. Certainly this is one of the better early Wyler talkies, and a better film than its 1939 remake, "Spirit of Culver", which starred Jackie Cooper, Freddie Bartholomew and Tim Holt. Itself quite a good film, it was a reel longer than this version, and added a melodramatic motor-cycle chase through a storm for its climax. Its basic inferiority to this version was in the scenery-chewing playing of Henry Hull; H.B. Warner's quieter performance here is a great deal more poignant. Warner, who acts with his sensitive hands almost as much as with his face, adds tremendous power and depth to this Wyler film. Incidentally, there seems to be almost a conspiracy to keep Tyrone Power, in an early bit role, off the screen! In the background in many scenes, he always seems to be just off-screen or behind someone else's head! However, he does have one good scene - and dialogue - mid-way through the film.

"THE GOOD FAIRY" (Universal, produced 1934, released 1935) Presented by Carl Laemmle, produced by Henry Henningson, directed by Wyler, script by Preston Sturges from a play by Ferenc Molnar; camera - Norbert Brodine; edited by Daniel Mandell. 10 reels.

The Players: Margaret Sullivan, Herbert Marshall, Reginald Owen, Frank Morgan, Alan Hale, Beulah Bondi, Cesar Romero, Eric Blore, Al Bridges, George Davis, June Clayworth.

For such a sumptuous and large-scale production, and one with such talent in front of and behind the camera, "The Good Fairy" is rather a disappointment. Part of the blame can attach to the manner of its making: its script behind schedule, the film was written as it went along, Sturges handing Wyler a few pages of script, and then bounding back to a hideaway to write more! This undoubtedly accounts for some of the uneven quality, and especially the excess amount of time devoted, in the middle portions of the film, to

Frank Morgan's buffoonery. However, one cannot blame Sturges entirely, for the film is a little on the stodgy side, lacking the wit and sparkle that a Lubitsch could have extracted from the same script as it stood. Nevertheless, it has some very enjoyable things in it, especially the earlier scenes at the orphanage, and the priceless moments in a gigantic movie theatre. Disappointing or not, Sturges is still a more interesting writer than Molnar, and its main drawback seems to have been that Wyler just was not a comedy director. (Even the delightful "Roman Holiday" scored more on its charm, and its playing, than on comedy content). However, "The Good Fairy" is lush, lavish, and full of polished performances from Herbert Marshall, Margaret Sullivan and other old friends from the thirties, and we think you'll agree it's well worth this revival today.

A WILLIAM WYLER INDEX, outlining Wyler's career, and giving full credits and other details on all of his films, has been compiled and published by one of our members, Charles Shibuk. These will be on sale at the screening, price 75¢ to society members. Those of you unable to attend who would like a copy of this index, which contains fine research material, should contact Mr. Shibuk at 2084 Bronx Park East, Bronx 62, New York.

Program Notes & Enquiries: Bill Iverson, Manhattan Towers, 2166 Broadway, New York City  
Committee of the film society: Bill Iverson, Edward Corey, Dorothy Lovell, Charles Shibuk.

ERICH VON STROHEIM: It is sad indeed to note the passing of Erich von Stroheim, one of the last great rearguards of the silent cinema, who is left of the old school? Perhaps only Carl Th. Dreyer in a creative sense, although Vidor, Ford, Rene Clair, Lang, Von Sternberg and of course Chaplin, in an active sense, are happily still with us.