THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program Notes for June, 1957: meetings at 7:30 at the Adelphi Hall, 74 Fifth Avenue (at 14th Street), New York City.

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This month we're trying something of an experiment by coupling typical, slick, "popular" items of the '30's, with the less-slick but equally interesting features of the 1915-16 period. While these films (this month, from Selig and Edison) have a particularly strong appeal to the really devoted FOOFs (a FOOF is a Friend of Old Films, and we have quite a strong hard core of them in our membership), we nevertheless feel that they deserve to be shown again, just as much as the more polished productions of the '30's -- or even the more polished productions of their own period. At any rate, we hope that these combinations of "Old and New" in the silent period prove popular. If so, we will repeat the formula on other occasions, with Helen Gardner's "Cleopatra" next in line.

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Program One. Tuesday June 18th., in Room 10-D.

"A MESSAGE TO GARCIA" (Edison, 1916, 5 reels) Director: Richard Ridgely, with Mabel Truax, Robert Connors, Herbert Prior, Robert Keggereis, Bradley Sutton, Edwin Cooper, Charles Sutton (as Garcia), Paul Everest, Helen Strickland, Olive Wright and Fay Fairchild (as "Butcher" Keyner, the Spanish Governor-General of Cuba).

Before the American-Spanish war, Cuba struggled for freedom from Spanish rule, insurrectionists under the leadership of Garcia fighting in guerilla fashion. When the blowing up of the Maine decided President McKinley to send aid to Cuba, it was necessary to get word through to Garcia's forces of United States participation in the struggle. Around this colorful chapter in American history, Elbert Hubbard wrote a short tome -- "A Message to Garcia" -- which ranks as one of the most widely read -- and published -- pieces of literature in world history. (Statistics show that with the Bible in first place, "A Message to Garcia" is in something like 5th place, beating Messrs. Dickens and Shakespeare hands down! However, statistics of this sort are somewhat meaningless -- somebody's Cook Book is in fourth place, and, thanks to the paper-back market of recent years, Mickey Spillane is very prominently represented -- though a little further down the list of the top dozen.) Two worthwhile filmic versions of the story have been made, the last by Fox in the early thirties, with Wallace Beery, John Boles and Barbara Stanwyck. The Edison Company, like Biograph and Selig, were geared for making shorts rather than features, and their long films, though enjoyable and competent, were usually not too remarkable. (For example, "A Message to Garcia" is a very second-best to the film that Griffith was making at Triangle at the same period, films like "Martyrs of the Alamo" and other historical subjects). Nevertheless, "A Message to Garcia" is a neatly put together film, largely photographed on location in Cuba. As in most Edison films, the photography and the lighting are of a very high order technically, if not creatively. Too, it is quite an elaborate production, although lacking in really spectacular action. (The sinking of the Maine is done via a miniature). The story covers a lot of ground, historically and dramatically, and it's a fast-paced little picture. Certainly it is very much of a rarity -- as are most Edison features -- and we think you'll agree that it is well worthy of revival by this society.
"THE KING ON MAIN STREET" (Paramount, 1925) Produced, directed and adapted by MONTA BELL. Original length: 6 reels (this print edited to 5 reels); from "The King", adapted by Leo Litwrchstein from the play by G.A. de Caillavet, Robert de Flers and Emmanuel Arène. Sets by Douglas Z. Loty; photographed by James Wong Howe.


Reviewing "The King on Main Street" on November 1, 1925, the "Film Daily" advised exhibitors: "Yes, yes, by all means ... sure-fire boxoffice values ... Menjou fans will eat this up ... don't worry about this one ... it is mighty fine entertainment, and they will like it!"

The Film Daily was right. The film was a great success, particularly in the small towns where the idea of a European king with democratic ideas, coming to an American small-town, was very sympathetically received. The film is a strange mixture of "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter" and "The Student Prince", with neither element really dominating the other. A smooth and sophisticated comedy, with quite a few surprises, some wonderful vamping by Greta Nissen, and some equally wonderful less torrid romancing by petite and charming Bessie Love, "The King on Main Street" is still a stylish and highly enjoyable film. Originally, the end of the film was printed in Technicolor -- our print has no such finery, but it is still a first-class original toned print.

Monta Bell, who directed, achieved his best results in slight but sophisticated films of this genre, although Malcolm St. Clair and Herbert Brenon were probably more talented. Bell did not specialise, and handled -- competently -- anything he was given. Among his better silents are "Torrent", Garbo's first American film. His talkies include "The Bellamy Trial" with Betty Bronson & Beatrice Joy, "Men in White" and "West Point of the Air". So far as we are aware, his last film was "China's Little Devils" for Monogram in 1945.

Program Two June 25th., in Room 10-C.

"SWEET ALYSSUM" (Selig, 1916, 5 reels) Directed by Colin Campbell, from a story by Charles Major; scenario by Gilson Willets; starring LYNNE POTTER, with Kathryin Williams, Edith Johnson, Wheeler Oakman, Baby Frazer, Lafayette McKee, Frank Clark, Harry Lonsdale.

"Sweet Alyssum" is very typical of the features put out by the Selig Polyscope Company. Rather behind the times, it has the sort of story - a combination of melodrama and tear-jerking - that had become familiar through the one and two reelers of Biograph, Reliance, Majestic, and other companies some years earlier. One can readily understand why so many of the pioneer companies died out before 1920, completely unable to keep pace with the changing industry, or to match the product of competitor companies. None of which is to say that "Sweet Alyssum" is a bad film. Today, it has enjoyable nostalgic values as well as considerable interest as a part of film history that is usually neglected by the film societies. But there is no denying that for 1916, it was pretty tame and familiar stuff. For a while, the mere fact that a film was a feature would be enough to sell it, but that state of affairs was not to last for long, and Colonel Selig's peak period was just about over, when this film was released in December of 1915.
"Orchids and Ermine" (First National, 1927) 5 reels; Produced and directed by Alfred Santell; presented by John McCormick; photographed by George J. Folsey, A.C.C., story and scenario by Carey Wilson; Comedy construction: Mervyn LeRoy.

Starring Colleen Moore, with Jack Mulhall, Sam Hardy, Gwen Lee, Fred Kelsey and Mickey Rooney.

Although "Orchids and Ermine" was made in 1927, the same year as "The General", American comedy films had already passed through their Golden Age, and were on the beginning of a decline from which they never recovered, save for a brief, wonderful tangent of hard-bitten crazy comedy in the thirties. "Orchids and Ermine" is one of the last of the gentle, sophisticated comedies of the silent era, and one of Colleen Moore's best subjects. Apart from its fast-moving and inventive humour, it contains much that is both appealing and charming. In this respect, it makes particularly interesting comparison with the more recent "comedies", "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" and "How to Marry a Millionaire", which had basically similar plot-lines. Whether they are entertaining is obviously a matter of taste - or lack of it - but quite certainly they substituted ugliness and vulgarity for the quiet charm of bygone comedies, and the substitution was not for the better. "Orchids" delights in many ways. New Yorkers will love the long sequences shot in and around the Plaza Hotel, and atop a 5th Avenue bus. The film was made during Alfred Santell's peak period, when he was turning out such films as the pleasingly sentimental "The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come", and the gripping "The Patent Leather Kid", with its fine war scenes. Some of his films of the thirties - "Polly of the Circus", "Winterset" - were likewise interesting, but his later films ("Beyond the Blue Horizon", "The Haunted Age") were somewhat disappointing. Carey Wilson and Mervyn LeRoy both here show a deft touch for comedy, surprisingly unexploited in the bulk of their later films for MGM. George J. Folsey, the cameraman, subsequently became one of MGM's top cinematographers, working on "All the Brothers Were Valiant" and other pictures. Incidentally, not the least of the pleasures of "Orchids and Ermine" are the fine, snappy, insolent subtitles -- and Mickey Rooney, making his first film appearance as a very self-confident wizet!

But when all is said and done, "Orchids and Ermine" is so pleasing and amusing mainly because of the charm and personality of its star, Colleen Moore. The pert little star with one blue and one brown eye, something of a combination of Betty Bronson and Clara Bow, had started out with Griffith in 1917, and played opposite Bobby Harron in "The Bad Boy" for Fine Arts-Triangle. But it was "Flaming Youth" for First National six years later that established her as the typical "flapper" heroine. Although she played one or two "Cinderella" roles ("Come On Over", "Little Orphan Annie", "The Wallflower") she continued to enjoy her popularity in a whole series of films for First National between 1922 and the coming of sound films - films like "The Perfect Flapper", "Painted People", "Synthetic Sin", "Her Wild Oat", "Why Be Good?", "Footlights and Fools", "That's a Bad Girl", "The Moderns", "Naughty But Nice" and others that were usually more genteel than their titles indicated. Yet occasionally she ventured forth too into heavy dramatics, and the - effective - results can be seen in "So Big", "Lilac Time", "The Scarlet Letter", and as Spencer Tracy's ambitious wife in the late William K. Howard's "The Power and the Glory". Incidentally, she married John McCormick in 1922 and divorced him in 1930 -- a period that coincided curiously with the duration of the starring vehicles of hers that he "presented" under the First National banner. Co-star Jack Mulhall is still going strong as an extra - you may have noticed him playing three different roles in Rko's "Tennessee's Partner" some months ago.

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