Three Mack Sennett comedies

WHISPERING WHISKERS (1926) Pathe; with Billy Bevan and Andy Clyde.

Although the Sennett's of the 30's were quite variable, Billy Bevan seemed to have a happy knack of appearing only in good ones. Not particularly funny in himself, and with no distinct screen character, he yet had a lively and likable personality - even when howling with sadistic glee at someone else's misfortunes. Although "Whispering Whiskers" is not as good as "Lizzies of the Field" and some of the other Bevans, it is still fast, lively and inventive. Actually our print merely represents half of the original film. Sennett had a habit of making some of his two-reelers in two very distinct halves, linked only by the stars. This of course was done with a view to splitting up the film later into two one-reelers -- basically the same policy that was employed in the early 50's by Lippert and other companies, who made cheap mysteries in two distinct 26 minute halves with a view to later television sales. In Sennett's case, the policy was more than justified, for the full two-reelers were often badly padded and lacking in pace, while these two-in-one comedies always moved like lightning. We have seen the second half of "Whispering Whiskers", and apart from the continued use of Bevan and Clyde as tramps, it has absolutely no connection with this first half. Incidentally, please disregard the credits on this film (and on "The Lion's Whiskers") as they are completely meaningless. A London distributor, in a deplorable lapse of customary British taste, thought the films would be improved by a nonsensical sound and effects track. (Needless to say, we are not using this track at our showing). The addition of this simple track apparently justified crediting a producer, associate producer, editor and sundry other technicians, to the total exclusion of Sennett and his crew.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON (1926) Pathe; directed by Frank Capra. Starring Harry Langdon, with Vernon Dent.

Harry Langdon's comedies for Sennett were strange mixtures of typical Sennett slapstick with Langdon's own unique, not yet fully developed pantomimic style and babyish personality. Langdon was a difficult comedian to handle properly; Sennett himself hadn't the time - or the ability - to really exploit the sad little comedian properly. And when Langdon had established himself as a top-ranking comedian in features, he made the mistake of assuming that he could write and direct himself. Alas, he couldn't, and never quite understanding why, he was slipping, he proceeded to destroy himself in increasingly bad films like "The Chaser" and "Three's a Crowd". In between the rise and fall, were only a handful of pictures representing Langdon at his peak - most notably the brilliant "Tramp Tramp Tramp", the slightly less good but still outstanding "The Strong Man", and the last couple of reels of "Long Pants", which compensated to a large degree for the failure, and tastelessness, of the rest of the film. "Saturday Afternoon" has moments of really fine Langdon pantomime, and was one of his better ones for Sennett. (None of them were really great). Originally it was a three-reeler, and a very protracted one at that. Literally NOTHING happened in the second reel at all. Our version is an unobtrusively cut one-reeler, which successfully incorporates all of the comedy highlights.
THE LION'S WHISKERS (1924) Pathe; with Billy Bevan, Andy Clyde and Madeleine Hurlock.

Whenever Sennett was stuck for an idea, he just let a lion loose in a film studio. It always seemed to work - as much in the feature "The Extra Girl" as in this little short. There are some enjoyable glimpses of old cameras, a robust performance from Miss Hurlock (later Mrs Robert E. Sherwood) and one wonderfully risque gag which they'd hardly get away with in this age of (quote) adult movies and a free screen (unquote).

INTERMISSION

"THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA" (Universal, 1925, 9 reels)

Presented by Carl Laemmle; directed by Rupert Julian; based on the book by Gaston Leroux. Scenario by Raymond Shrock and Elliot J. Clawson; photographed by Charles Van Enger, Virgil Miller and Milton Bridenbecker; Assistant director (billed as Supplementary Director): Edward Sedgwick.

The Cast: LON CHANEY (Erik, the Phantom); Mary Philbin (Christine Daae); Norman Kerry (Raoul de Chagny); Snitz Edwards (Florine Papillon); Gibson Gowland (Simon); John St. Polis (Philippe de Chagny); Virginia Pearson (Carlotta); Arthur Edmund Carewe (The Persian); Edwin Yorkes (Mamma Valerius); Anton Vaverka (The Prompter); Bernard Siegel (Joseph Buquest); Olive Ann Alcorn (La Sorelli); Edward Cecil (Faust); Alexander Bovani (Mephisto); John Miljan (Valentine); Crace Marvin (Martha); George B. Williams (M. Richard, manager); Bruce Covington (M. Monacharmin) Cesar Gravina (Retiring Manager).

1925, the year of "The Phantom of the Opera", was considered a bad year by the movie industry. Receipts were dropping, and radio (as later, television) was blamed. Ironically, in retrospect, it can be seen as probably the greatest single year in the history of American movies. What one year has produced as many successes (both artistic and financial) as 1925, which, in addition to "The Phantom of the Opera", offered "The Big Parade", "A Kiss for Cinderella", "Peter Pan", "The Gold Rush", "Stella Dallas", "Tumbleweeds", "Little Annie Rooney", "The Sea Beast", "The Merry Widow", "The Son of Zorro", "Are Parents People?", "Sally of the Sawdust", "East Lynne", "The Tower of Lies", "Go West", "The Lost World", "The Dark Angel", "The Unholy Three", "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter" -- and many others too frustrating to mention.

"The Phantom" was certainly one of the biggest popular successes of all those films, and together with the earlier "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" (1922) rated as Lon Chaney's most successful feature.

As a piece of expertly contrived hokum, the film just couldn't miss. With that plot, those wonderful settings (spectacular in the extreme, and the more so in 1925 when a number of key scenes were photographed in Technicolor) and the superb performance of Chaney, both bizarre and sympathetic, no director could have turned out a dull picture. Certainly Director Rupert Julian didn't, and occasionally he rises to considerable heights. The unmasking scene is a brilliant horror episode, imitated many times, but equalled only once -- in 1933's "The Mystery of the Wax Museum". Many of the scenes in the grim caverns beneath the opera house have very real beauty, and dramatic power, in their composition. The scene of Mary Philbin being led off on
on horse-back through the crypt, her long veil hanging behind, is a
memorable image - as is the floating of the gondola along the sinister black
lake. Bizarre little vignettes - the Phantom's hand emerging from beneath
the waters to drag a victim to his doom, and the searchers invading the
unknown corridors with upraised hands to ward off the noose of the Phantom -
evoke genuine thrills. These moments are so good that one wishes the whole
were of a like standard. Possibly if "Phantom of the Opera" had been directed
by Tod Browning rather than Rupert Julian it might have been a far better
picture. Possibly too, it might have been a slower-paced, and less commercial
one, for to Browning a bizarre plot and carefully developed atmospherics were
of far more import than pacing and movement. Perhaps the ideal director for
"The Phantom" would have been James Whale (still several years away from his
first film at the time) who could always be depended upon to combine
artistry with commercialism, and style with showmanship.

Certainly however, there is no complaint concerning the excitement that the
film does generate, even though it be the excitement of the melodramatic
serial rather than that of the mystery. It's full-blooded melodramatic fare,
reaching a lively climax with the heroes trapped in sundry torture chambers,
and their fate in the hands of the heroine. If she turns a metal grasshopper,
their lives will be spared; if she turns the scorpion, the entire Opera House
will be blown to bits. (Villains in horror films always seemed to plant one
little lever or switch which could bring their whole little world down around
their ears in a matter of seconds, viz not only "Phantom", but also "The Bride
of Frankenstein", "The Black Cat" and sundry others). Unsubtle, and perhaps
even disappointing through it may be, the 1925 Phantom certainly offered - and
still offers - far more excitement than the tame thrills displayed in the
early 40's remake which had far more opera than phantom.

The setting of the story, the Paris opera house, was built in the 1970's. Its
foundations were deep enough to allow a 50' high backdrop to be lowered into
it. The grand stairway had steps of white marble, with antique red marble
balusters. A chandelier with 170 gas burners lit the huge looking-glasses at
the back of the foyer. Employees included over 100 carpenters, 100 supernumi-
aries, 100 choristers, 80 musicians, etc. Horses were hoisted on to the huge
stage by elevators, and elaborate water and fire effects were frequently
created on the stage. The opera house contained 2,531 doors, 14 furnaces, 9
reservoirs, and dressing room space for 529 people. Universal, under Carl
Laemmle's guidance, never minced spending money (even on lesser pictures), and
on a spectacle like this, it flowed freely. (This was in complete contrast
to Paramount, who made the cheapest and skimpist "big" pictures of any
studio). The sets in "The Phantom" are truly gigantic, most especially the
enormous staircase. Universal's Phantom stage is still there, and still so
named - and can be recognised even from without Universal's gates, towering
upwards above all the other stages.

Rupert Julian was a strange director whose true worth is difficult to
evaluate. If he directed as much of "Merry Go Round" (on which he replaced
Von Stroheim) as he is supposed to have directed, he is a better craftsman
than any of his other films would lead one to expect. It is significant that
his most interesting films were those on which he was not the sole director;
films like "Merry Go Round" and "Walking Back", one of the most interesting
jazz-age essays. Films other than "The Phantom" (certainly his best picture)
which Julian directed alone were usually competent, but no more - as for
example, "The Yankee Clipper", and the first sound remake of "The Cat and the
Canary", "The Cat Creeps". Whatever his shortcomings may have been, he
seemed willing enough to learn from others - "The Phantom", it will be noted,
contains no less than six members of the "Stroheim Stock Company" - five of
whom appeared in "Merry Go Round". Personally, Julian was rather an arrogant
individual. A former actor, he "acted" the role of director to the hilt, wearing flashy clothes, riding boots, and striding around the set at times with a riding crop!

The book, by Gaston Leroux (on whom Charles Shibuk will comment later in these notes) was an old-fashioned mystery with out-dated dialogue, and far too much action taking place "off-screen", to be referred to only in flashback. This even included the unmasking scene. The screenplay eliminates much of the padding, and adds a bang-up, rip-roaring chase climax - quite absent from the book, which ended quietly and mysteriously. ("Hunchback" too, had had its quiet ending "doctored" for melodramatic screen purposes). The new ending also allowed Universal to take advantage of the old Notre Dame set, which was still in use until a few years ago. Chaney runs past it in the closing reel of "Phantom" as he flees from the mob.

The original prints of "Phantom" had several sequences in Technicolor incidentally, most notably the great masque in which the Phantom suddenly appears in a flaming red cloak, and later scenes on the roof of the opera house wherein the Phantom, his red cloak billowing in the wind, eavesdrops on the young lovers, Mary Philbin and Norman Kerry. (Mary is as delightful and winsome as always; Kerry as stiff as ever - but trying as hard as ever!) There was also a climactic scene, missing from our print, of the lovers in the garden, also shot in color.

A word or two about the completeness of our print, which is really a composite of two versions. When sound came in, the film was re-released with a music and effects track, and added operatic sequences. A new opening - of a watchman prowling through the catacombs - was also added, with narration over. The Phantom was also given one line of dialogue as the chandelier falls; Chaney was not shown on-screen while the line was spoken, and of course his voice was not used. The new operatic sequences, for which Mary Philbin was recalled, were incredibly dull and static. To allow for the added length, the original version was shortened somewhat - and shortened clumsily. No complete sequences were removed, but several were reduced in length. The film suffers from this clumsy re-editing job because even originally the editing was bad, and critics who otherwise raved about the film went out of their way to point out the almost amateurish editing, which sometimes cut off scenes right in the middle of action. Our print is a silent print of the sound reissue - but with the long operatic inserts drastically shortened. Thus, all in all this print is in the neighborhood of a reel shorter than the original release prints.

Universal's remake had little of the colorful adventure of this original. It even made the unmasking scene its climactic highlight - here it is merely one of many thrills, and spaced at the halfway mark. However, the remake - with Claude Rains, Susanna Foster and Nelson Eddy was very popular, and prompted not only a further imitation in "The Climax" (Susanna Foster, Boris Karloff) but a number of grade-B derivations too - not the least of which was PRG's "Phantom of 42nd Street"!

"Lon Chaney's make-up for this part subjected him to self-torture second only to that for "The Hunchback", wrote George Mitchell in "Films in Review" of December 1953. "In his nose he inserted a device that spread the nostrils and lifted the tip to produce the effect of a naked skull. He heightened this with protruding false teeth to which were attached small prongs that drew back the corners of his lips. Celluloid discs in his mouth distorted his cheekbones". Copies of "Films in Review" with George Mitchell's fine article will be
available at the screening.

"The Film Daily", which considered "The Phantom" a "marvellous money-getting picture" and "a great production", had this to say about Chaney's makeup:

"The question may arise whether women will like the appearance of Lon Chaney as the Phantom. He is first shown with a mask, which is horrible enough, but when the mask is pulled away the distorted features may prove unpleasant to some, but at that he gives a great performance and again demonstrates that he is a master of makeup".

A word or two about Universal's current biography of Chaney, "The Man of a Thousand Faces", about which the advance trade reviews haven't been overly-enthusiastic. Personally, we found it a surprisingly good film. What a pleasure it is, and especially so soon after the lamentable biopic on Buster Keaton, to report that at last Hollywood has made a really worthwhile picture on the life of one of its stars-- and on its own history. "The Man of a Thousand Faces" not only tells the story of Lon Chaney with obvious respect and sensitivity, but it treats the Hollywood of the silent era with respect -- and love -- too. Most important of all, it is a careful and serious recapitulation of an era, with a real sense of period that was so notably absent in the Pearl White, Lillian Roth, Jimmy Walker and Keaton biographies. In "The Man of a Thousand Faces", cars and costumes change -- convincingly -- with each time lapse. So do the cameras, which range from an old Pathé model in earlier shots, to a Mitchell in the middle sections, winding up with a "sweat box" camera in 1930 for the "Unholy Three" sequence. Although the first hour is devoted entirely to Chaney's pre-screen career (his vaudeville hoofing, and his marital difficulties with his first wife), interest is maintained well, particularly in some very touching scenes involving Chaney and his deaf-mute parents. But it is the movie material, occupying the second hour of the film, that is of prime interest, and for once this has been exceptionally well done and avoids most of the cliches. The reconstruction of a key scene from "The Miracle Man" is particularly well done, as is the unmasking scene from "Phantom" which duplicates the original remarkably well, save for the substitution of a bosomy starlet for the more sensitive Mary Philbin. The material from "The Hunchback" is slightly less successful since, curiously, Cagney's facial makeup is made far more monstrous than was Chaney's. Too, the "scene" from "Hunchback" that we are shown (a long drawn out whipping sequence) was actually never in the original film, which avoided such brutalities and handled the whole flogging by one shot of Chaney's agonised face, a slow fade, and a title. This sequence is further marred by the arrival of Chaney's first wife on the set, and the unlikely occurrence of Chaney holding up a huge and expensive scene while he berates her and has her taken from the lot. (Universal's publicity claims that the original "Hunchback" set was used for this sequence, which of course is quite untrue. Unfortunately they torn it down a couple of years too soon!) This, however, is the only unsatisfying episode in an otherwise quite remarkable film. What a relief to find a complete absence of smart-aleck name-dropping. Apart from a quick reference to Sennett, the only "names" dropped are those of Irving Thalberg and George Loane Tucker, both of whom figure quite prominently in the plot. It's pleasant too, to see Universal not trying to take all the credit for Chaney -- via well-recreated posters, and by other means, it is made quite plain that the bulk of Chaney's films were actually made for MGM. Undoubtedly, one can claim errors of omission -- or question some of the rather sweeping generalisations at times -- but at least the facts that are presented are not deliberately falsified, as they were in the Keaton film. Some may quibble over the rather over-idealised portrait of Irving Thalberg
an effective performance by Robert Evans, once one has accepted his somewhat self-conscious understudy) who is presented as an artist forever battling with the New York home office. But again, this is a minor quibble. And incidentally it is good to see Carl Laemmle's portrait prominently displayed in several scenes.

Its movie history content apart, "The Man of a Thousand Faces" is admittedly "schmaltzy" at times — but it's good, honest, BIG schmaltz, somehow akin with the big pictures of the '20's, where emotion never hid itself, and coy and chi-chi understudy was happily never heard of. The fine musical score by Frank Skinner matches this feeling too. The music for "Phantom" and other recreated sequences is real silent movie music — full and virile, and done without condensation. And the rest of the music — and in particular a haunting melody used as a theme for Chaney's sign-language conversations with his parents — is perfectly in period and wonderfully effective.

Chaney was certainly a better and more sensitive actor than Cagney is able to make him appear. And in line with the recent no-punches-pulled method of biographing (Lillian Boxfish, Diana Barrymore), his personal weaknesses (a hatred of his first wife, resulting in an estrangement with his son) seem a trifle exaggerated and "manipulated" for their dramatic values. But "The Man of a Thousand Faces" — both informative, and genuinely and sincerely moving despite the hole — is such a tremendous improvement over others of its genre that its minor faults can be easily pushed aside. Apart from being a film that will give younger generations an accurate impression of both a man — and an era — that was before their time, it is obviously a film of solid commercial values. If it lives up to expectations at the boxoffice, perhaps it may pave the way for other equally well-planned tributes to movie greats — among them, I hope, D.W. Griffith, William S. Hart and possibly even E. W. Strickelne.

** Program Notes by William K. Everson **

** A SUPPLEMENTARY PROGRAM NOTE by CHARLES SHULK **

Gaston Leroux (1868-1927), French author of "The Phantom of the Opera", was first and foremost a detective story writer. His "Mystery of the Yellow Room" (1908) and its sequel "The Perfume of the Lady in Black" (1909), both featuring detective Joseph Rouletabille, are landmarks in the history of the detective novel, although they are sadly neglected today. Detective story historian Howard Haycraft states: "The author's narrative method can be compared only to the serial thrillers of the early moving picture days. The dialogue stems directly from the "Hith" and "Aha!" school. (Mr. Haycraft fails to mention "The Phantom of the Opera" as it is not a detective story and lies outside the scope of his critical volume "Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story", published in 1941).

Art critic and detective storywriter Willard Huntington Wright (S.S. Van Dine) continues with: "A detective novel is nearly always more popular in the country in which it is laid than a foreign country where the conditions, both human and topographic, are unfamiliar ... (Leroux's novels) have never had their deserved popularity in this country because of their locales; but "Phantom of the Opera"
by the same author, which is a sheer mystery story, has been a great success here, due largely to that very unfamiliarity of setting that has worked against the success of his detective novels.

In the opinion of William K. Everson, Rupert Julian's film version of "The Phantom of the Opera" was not quite the film it should have been, and its total impact "left much to be desired." The film's major fault lies in the fact that Julian has elected to use a literal adaptation of part of the original novel, rather than trying to transcribe his material into cinematic terms. Tod Browning made the mistake of basing his version of "Dracula" on the play - not the novel - and failing to translate it into proper screen terms. This, again to quote Bill Everson, "resulted in a plodding, talkative development, with much of the vital action taking place off-screen.

James Whale was more successful with "Frankenstein" because he based his adaptation on one motif of Mary W. Shelley's novel - the hostility of mankind toward the man-made outsider - but perverted the theme by "accidentally" giving a criminal's diseased brain to "The Monster" to explain his anti-social acts. In fairness to Whale, "Frankenstein" was an introspective early 19th century novel that would prove difficult for anyone to translate into screen terms. Yet, without literary considerations, "Frankenstein" still stands up as a film. Mention must be made of F.W. Murnau's "Nosferatu", one of the very best of the silent horror film classics. Henrik Galeen in his brilliant adaptation of Bram Stoker's "Dracula" wisely used the central characters of the novel, and imbued the plot with his own ideas on the subjects of "Good", "Evil" and "The Power of Love". Thus, with Galeen's script and some imaginative camerawork by Wagner and Krampf, Murnau succeeded admirably in capturing the spirit and intent of Stoker's novel. Shrock and Clawson's adaptation of "Phantom" followed the bare outline of the novel, but substituted a melodramatic chase in place of Leroux's romanticised and heavily sentimental conclusion.

A minor character in the novel had his part in the film expanded solely to act as a catalyst for this new ending. (Gibson Gowland, of "Greed", plays this role). However, it should be remembered that "Dracula" and especially "Frankenstein" also had their endings changed from the original source novels. There is also a remarkable structural similarity present in the revised endings of both "Frankenstein" and "Phantom of the Opera".

A further criticism of "Phantom of the Opera" is that Lon Chaney, as the Phantom, fails to reach us through his genuine acting ability. He is severely handicapped by using masks, immobile makeup, and having to wear heavy, all-enveloping costumes. A mitigating factor is that the character of the Phantom is, almost by necessity, superficially dealt with in the film - a fact that detracts from giving Chaney a certain amount of greater audience sympathy than is present in the novel. It should be stated that Chaney's work in "The Hunchback..." is vastly superior to his work in "The Phantom...", and the material is more ideally suited to this actor's peculiar talents. Furthermore, Norman Kerry is badly miscast as the hero. Kerry is too stiff and wooden an actor to play the novel's romantic and impetuous 17 year old hero, who is madly in love with the young and beautiful singer. However, Kerry cannot be blamed for any acting limitations in his ridiculous fainting scene in a moment of peril. This is a directorial mistake of Julian's, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the novel.

In spite of its faults, "The Phantom"... is at times quite a gripping film, and keeps moving toward its slam-bang finale with a singleness of purpose that is devoid of the comic touches that usually clutter up films of this nature. "The Phantom..." was, needless to say, a Bowing boxoffice success, and ranks near the top of fondly remembered horror classics of the silent era.