

THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Tuesday September 17 at the Adelphi Hall, 74 Fifth Avenue
(at 14th Street); 7.30 p.m. in room 10-D.

STAGE TO SCREEN

Two widely contrasting examples of the transference to the screen of successful stage plays. In both cases, the star of the original recreates his (and her) role for the motion picture version.

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"THE PASSING OF THE THIRD FLOOR BACK" (Herbert Brenon Productions, 1917)

Released by First National (in 1918); produced and directed by Herbert Brenon; scenario by Brenon and George Edwardes-Hall from the play by Jerome K. Jerome; photographed and edited by Roy Hunt. 75 minutes

Starring JOHN FORBES ROBERTSON as The Stranger, with Augusta Haviland (Mrs Sharpe); Molly Pearson (Stasia); Alfred Hickman and Germaine Bourville (Stasia's parents); Ben Graham (Major Tompkins); Grace Stephens (Mrs Tompkins); Kettey Galanta (Vivian); Robert Fisher (Joe Wright); George Le Guere (Christopher Penny); Sydney Goldin (Jape Samuels); Thornton Bation (Harry Larkcom).

This very rarely revived early Herbert Brenon film is a good example of almost completely faithful and certainly reverential transference of a stage play to the screen. As was often typical of Brenon, little attempt is made to exploit the full possibilities of the screen (a comment that applies equally well to his lovely "Peter Pan" as well), Brenon doubtless feeling that the plot material was strong enough in itself to need no embellishment. Although some changes were made in the plot by Brenon - "to use the greater freedom of the screen", to quote his own explanation - those changes do not seem to make the film any less theatrical. The sets remain very much those of the stage, and the only moments of real cinema are the frequent uses of the cutback. However, for all its limited movement and restricted settings, it is not a slow film, and it maintains interest well. John Forbes Robertson's performance is quite moving, even though critics at the time pointed out that without his melodious voice to give it depth, his acting could hardly equal the performances he had given on stage in both England and the United States. The photography and lighting, the work of Roy Hunt (frequently used by Brenon) are quite fine, and show to their best advantage in our good toned original print.

The story of course is of the mysterious, Christ-like visitor who comes to a house of discord, and brings peace and contentment before he leaves. A British version was made in the thirties, with Conrad Veidt in the lead. The theme, in one form or another, has been a popular one with movie-makers since the earliest days. Biograph's "Pippa Passes" and Edison's "Annie Crawls Upstairs" were of this genre. So, on a somewhat less pretentious level, were the films (some of them at least) of Mary Pickford, Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin. We have a (rare) contemporary example in the really charming and apparently neglected "Tammy", a film with much of the spontaneous freshness and appeal of some of the better Pickfords. "Tammy" is good movie-making, and well worth a visit.

"The Passing of the Third Floor Back" was made during an "interim" period in Brenon's career. Behind him was "Ivanhoe", and the lush Annette Kellerman extravaganzas for Fox. With a reputation for extreme extravagance, Brenon

was proving, via films like this one and "The Fall of the Romanoffs" (also a First National release) that he could also make good commercial films that had merit and economical budgets. His great period was to come in the 20's of course, with such films as "Sorrell and Son", "Peter Pan", "Beau Geste" and the film that was almost certainly his masterpiece, "A Kiss for Cinderella". Inactive as a director since the early 40's, he now lives in retirement in Hollywood.

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"TIGER ROSE" (Warner Brothers, 1923)

Produced and directed by Sidney Franklin, from the play by Willard Mack and David Belasco; adaptation by Edmund Goulding; photographed by Charles Rosher; Assistant director: Millard Webb; editor: Howard Bretherton; 75 minutes

Starring LENORE ULRIC with Forrest Stanley, Theodore Van Eltz, Sam de Grasse, Claude Gillingwater, Joseph Dowling, Andre Beranger.

In complete contrast to the Brenon film, this "Rose Marie"-type story, set in the North West, stages as much of its dramatic action as possible out of doors, and exploits the camera for all it is worth. Superbly photographed by one of the best cameramen in the business (Charles Rosher), "Tiger Rose" is a visual delight -- not only in its fine panoramic landscapes, but also in its beautifully and meticulously lit interior scenes. Actually, these visual elements today seem far more imposing than the rather common-place dramatics. In 1923 however, the film followed hot on the heels of the tremendously successful stage original, and had the added exploitation assist of presenting the star of the original, Lenore Ulric in her first film. (She was to make only a handful of others). Critics felt that Ulric, denied the use of the French accent so essential to the role, was generally less effective than on stage, but "Variety" dissented, and remarked that her performance was "as individual and convincing as her part in "Kiki".

There's some quite lively stunt work and physical action in "Tiger Rose" which would have been impossible on the stage - most notably a really spectacular leap from a cliff into a river, to save the heroine from going over the falls. Probably this sort of material, and the chase scenes, were handled by assistant director Millard Webb, for at this period Sidney Franklin was principally a "class" director of lush romantic themes, and uninterested in action material. (Franklin, recently brought back into executive as well as creative prominence at MGM, started out, with his brother Chester, making really fine little action subjects at Reliance, under Griffith's supervision. Millard Webb likewise got his start with Griffith, though as a crowd player. He went on to become a director of prominence himself, though one of no outstanding talent; among his films were Barrymore's "The Sea Beast", and "Glorifying the American Girl"). Incidentally, Howard Bretherton, who edited the film, seemed to have been much impressed with the river location. Four years later, when he was promoted to a director and given Rin Tin Tin's "Hills of Kentucky" as his first assignment, he took the unit back to the same location, and shot a similar, far more thrilling version of the rescue from the falls.

In adapting "Tiger Rose", Edmund Goulding wisely retained all the key lines of dialogue that had made the play so popular. These included such theatrical blockbusters as "I found her floatin' down the Loon - from God knows where!" and the heroine's greeting to the hero - "I don't know what you say, but you dam cute!

Our print is a first-class toned original, but somewhat shorter than the initial release. In all probability some two-reels of footage are missing, tho' nothing of any consequence appears to be out. Andre Beranger hangs around in a few scenes as little more than an extra, so presumably he figured in a number of additional scenes. Critics at the time were generally agreed that the film WAS too long, so while we're sorry not to have a complete print, we needn't worry too much about "great sequences" being missing. Incidentally, when it was remade as a talkie in 1929 (George Fitzmaurice directing Lupe Velez and Monte Blue) it was tightened up considerably, and ran only a few minutes over an hour.

Apart from the criticism of length, reviewers generally liked the film when it opened at the Rivoli in New York in December of 1923. Here are a few typical quotes:

Motion Picture News: Here is a picture! Contains every element that stamps a masterpiece!

Tribune: "...holds one more than any picture of the sort we can remember".

NY American: "The scenes are admirable. There are what one might almost call "Belasco Effects". There is the lightning that dazzles, and there is the rain that is astoundingly fierce and devastating. It seemed like Belasco let loose for the occasion".

World: "A fine picture, finely done, & really shouldn't be missed".
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BONUS

"CINDERELLA" (UFA, 1923) Directed by Ludwig Berger; with Helga Thomas, Paul Hartman. A thirty-minute condensation.

We are billing this film as a "bonus" because its pictorial quality is extremely poor. Normally such a print would never form a part of our programs, but this is such a rarity, and such a lovely film, that we feel justified in putting it on at the end of our show for those who wish to see it. The film has been blown up from 9.5mm., a process that can be well done. In this case, it has been badly done, and the excess of grain makes it rather tough viewing. Certainly it does no justice to the original film at all, but it does give you an idea of the exceptional beauty, the wonderful sets, and the stylised stress on symmetry, that must have made original 35mm prints, in all their tinted glory, really something to see. This Teutonic Cinderella is typically bizarre, with a graveyard sequence, ghosts, spells and at least one sequence that seems to have been emulated in "The Bride of Frankenstein"!

Next Show: Sept. 24: Reginald Denny, Gertrude Olmsted in 'CALIFORNIA STRAIGHT AHEAD', a Universal comedy of 1925, and "LEATHERNECK" (1929) with William Boyd, Fred Kohler, Robert Armstrong.

Program Notes & enquiries: William K. Everson, 2166 Broadway, NYC 24, NY