"Thicker than Water" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1935) Director: James Horne
Starring LAUREL AND HARDY, with James Finlayson and Daphne Pollard. Two Reels

This good little Laurel and Hardy comedy - hardly one of their best, but well up to their average standard - will help us to keep in touch with our favorite comedians (using the Royal "our" and not presuming to speak for all of the members) until such time, not too far distant, as we present another show devoted entirely to them. As always, Laurel and Hardy's well-meaning ineptitude provokes some truly gigantic catastrophes -- physical, as well as social. The home life of Mr. Hardy in this one is particularly hectic, from almost the very first scene when a loving kiss, blown to his wife with an elegant flourish of the finger, results in the finger being savagely bitten in response. The film in fact is another entry in what might be termed Laurel and Hardy's perennial indictment of the American Wife -- inevitably presented as a nagging, intolerant monster who assumes the diabolical torture of her mate to be one of the prerogatives of matrimony. Shrewdly, these caricatures of wifely dominance were carefully overdrawn; wives in the audience were thus unable to protest because in so doing they would be automatically admitting that there was more than an element of truth in the mayhem and mental torture that was going on on screen. So, they sat passively and pretended to enjoy themselves. But it is significant that Laurel and Hardy fans are principally male, while the ladies tend to dismiss them with a scornful "Oh, how silly!"

James Horne, who directed this (and many of the best Laurel and Hardy films) was a strange director with a really unique gift for comedy. His silent "The Cruise of the Jasper B" was a minor classic of spoofing, and it is a pity that no prints appear to have survived for re-appraisal. (Happily, the original negative is still in good shape). Horne also made many serials for Columbia, and some of these were, in their way, classics of comedy. "The Spider Returns", for example, directed completely tongue-in-cheek by Horne, packs in all the non-stop action of the genre, and some wonderful comedy too -- comedy that for the most part is in the handling, rather than the writing, and which presumably can be traced directly to Horne improvising and whooping it up as he went along.

"DON Q, SON OF ZORRO" (The Elton Corporation for United Artists, 1925)
11 Reels. Directed by Donald Crisp; photographed by Henry Sharpe; adapted from the novel "Don Q's Love Story" by K. and Hesketh Prichard.

The Cast: Don Cesar de Vega, and Zorro, his father (DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS); Dolores de Muro (MARY ASTOR); General de Muro (Jack McDonald); Don Sebastian (Donald Crisp); The Queen (Stella de Lanti); The Archduke (Warner Oland); Don Fabrique (Jean Hersholt); Colonel Matsado (Albert MacQuarrie); Lola (Lottie Pickford); Robledo (Charles Stevens); Bernardo (Tote du Crow); The Duenna (Martha Franklin); Her Admirer (Roy Coulson); Ramon (Enrique Acosta).

There are those (and I am certainly among them) who feel that Doug Fairbanks was at his best in his pre-"Mark of Zorro" days; that costumes seemed to stifle too much of his pep, good humor, and brash sense of fun. Perhaps the real trouble was that when Doug became a showman and an impresario, he stopped being a personality; he had to put on "class" productions, he became more concerned with artistry than with sheer fun; he began to be influenced by
Griffith and other "serious" film-makers. To Fairbanks, this undoubtedly was progress; and quite certainly, once he had chosen his new path, he never stinted in any way. If one can criticise this later phase in two words, those words would probably be "length" and "pretentiousness". The zip, the sparkle and the invention of such earlier delights as "His Picture in the Papers" and "A Modern Musketeer", to name two exceptionally good ones, seemed to be lost amid a welter of plot and decor.

However, who can argue with success? Audiences loved the new Doug -- possibly because in the somewhat jaded twenties, the All-American boy was so outraged that it wasn't even fashionable to poke fun at him any more.

We have had many requests to show films from the later Fairbanks period, and selected "Don Q, Son of Zorro" for two very good reasons. The first is that it hasn't had a New York showing for at least ten years, and probably longer. The second reason is that, accepting Doug's new format, this film is one of the most enjoyable of his later films. (We can, and will, show others in due course).

In 1925, "Don Q" was one of the really top hits of the year. The Film Daily, polling critics of trade and fan magazines, voted it into third place, as one of the ten best of the year. It was beaten by THE GOLD RUSH and THE UNHOLY THREE, and followed by (in order) THE MERRY WILLOW, THE LAST LAUGH, THE FRESHMAN, THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, THE LOST WORLD, THE BIG PARADE and KISS ME AGAIN. "Easily Doug's best boxoffice attraction for several years. Sure fire. Doug back in the type of character that all his admirers want to see him in": this was the way the Film Daily summed it up. Almost all of the individual "Ten Best" lists rated "Don Q" very high; James Quirk of Photoplay for instance, had it in 5th place, with STELLA LALLAS, PIETER PANE, THE BIG PARADE and THE LAST LAUGH topping it. Other films frequently voted on, but not making the "Top Ten", were A KISS FOR CINDERELLA, LITTLE AMELIE ROONEY, SALLY OF THE SANDS, HE WHO GETS SLAPPED, FREEGIL, CARAS, IRON HORSE, VANISHING AMERICAN, BE: HUR (really released too late for voting), TOWER OF LILS, S.OULCERING FIRE, ISN'T LIFE WONDERFUL? and sundry others. (A few critics erroneously included films that were not strictly speaking 1925 productions).

WHERE! When will we ever again see so many wonderful films in one year's listing? They not only don't make movies like that anymore, but they can't even dream up comparable titles to add false allure to the wide-screen gab-fests that they do make!

Anyway, "Don Q" is loads of fun. It oozes polish and production values. The sets are enormous, the photography is stunning (Henry Sharpe was one of the best; he, Tony Gaudio and Arthur Edeson created some magnificent camerawork for Fairbanks); the decor, the magnificent glass shots (look at the horrible matte-work in "The Ten Commandments" and shudder as you realise how films have declined technically even apart from aesthetic considerations), the overall design -- all is quite stunning. The swashbuckling thrills are fine too, even with the rather long gaps be tween them, and it's a delight to watch such polished performers going through their paces in a movie so typical of the days when the sheer glamor of the cinema was at its peak.

Program Notes & Enquiries: Bill Everson, Manhattan Towers, 2166 Broadway, NYC 24

Our good friend Robert E. Lee of 263 Harrison Street, Nutley NJ has some fine material on view over the next month or two, so if you're not on his mailing list, drop him a line. On March 22/23 he's showing Chaney's THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (the same good, complete print you may have missed at our show last year) April 12/13: "Frist's DON QUITE" with Chaney and Greta NUILTA and "STATE'S ATTORNEY" with JOHN BARRYMORE and Helen Twelvetrees.