THE THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Tuesday May 20th., 1957, at the Delphi Hall.

LILLIAN GISH

in

The Letter

with

Lars Hanson
Henry B. Walthall
Karl Dane

Directed by Victor Seastrom

Also

two

D.W. GRIFFITH
Reductions

DOROTHY GISH

in

Painted Lady (1913)

with

Blanche Sweet

LILLIAN GISH

Richard Barthelmess

in

Way Down East (1920)

(Excerpts)

LILLIAN GISH

DOROTHY GISH

LILLIAN and DOROTHY GISH

Our two programs this week will concentrate on a representative selection of the work of these two fine and sensitive actresses during the silent period. This society has already screened most of their few available films - "The Birth of a Nation", "Romola", "Old Heidelberg", "The Mothering Heart". All too few of the others seem to be available now, although it is sincerely to be hoped that the Museum of Modern Art will one day show "True Heart Susie", a recent acquisition.
and still one of the best of the Griffith productions. It is particularly unfortunate that the charming and frothy comedies that Dorothy Gish did so well seem to have completely disappeared. And one would give much to see again "Remodelling Her Husband", in which Lillian directed Dorothy. However, there is a 35mm print of "Nell Gwynn" in New York (made by Dorothy Gish in England for Herbert Wilcox in 1928) and we are trying hard to obtain this for a special screening. In the meantime, our two programs this week will bring those two lovely faces and graceful acting styles back to our screen again.

"THE PAINTED LADY" (Majestic, 1912) Produced by D.W. Griffith; based on a story by Charles Thompson as published in "Cavalier" magazine; starring DOROTHY GISH and BLANCHE SWEET, with Josephine Crowell, W.E. Lawrence, Howard Gaye, Tom Wilson.

This immediate post-Biograph production of Griffith's is quite a rarity. The title seems to have been quite a popular one in that period, since only a year earlier D.W. himself used the same title at biograph; and only a year later another company made a film called "The Painted Lady's Child"! It's a more polished variation on a theme Griffith had used earlier in "Two Paths" and other Biographs, that of two sisters - one who takes the easy path, and one who remains a "good" girl. It's a nicely done little drama, with good interior sets and a variety of exteriors. This print incidentally was made from a fast decomposing 35mm print, and some scenes were too far gone to be copied. Thus the jerky continuity must be blamed on the ravages of time, and not on the original editing. Only one important scene is missing however, the scene of Dorothy finding Blanche Sweet in the apartment of Dorothy's boy-friend. However, the action preceding this missing scene makes the motivation quite clear.

"WAY DOWN EAST" (Griffith-United Artists, 1920) Directed by Griffith, photographed by Billy Bitzer and Hendrik Sarff; with LILLIAN GISH, RICHARD BARTELL, LOWELL SHERMAN, CREIGHTON HALE, MARY HAY, BURR MACINTOSH, KATE BRUCE, EMILY FITZROY, and NORMA SHEARER and CAROL DEMPSTER among the extras.

Since this is a Gish program rather than a Griffith program, this is perhaps not the appropriate time to launch into a long discussion of "Way Down East", except to comment that it provides a perfect example of Griffith setting out deliberately to make a "commercial" picture, and at the same time using basically trivial material which he moulded into something that was both meaningful and important. If not as great a film as "The Birth of a Nation", "Intolerance" or "Broken blossoms", it was still an exceedingly fine film -- and a tremendously successful one. And it was fortunate for Griffith that it was, for continuing returns from it enabled Griffith to keep going in the rather lean period that lay ahead -- the period during which "Orphans of the Storm" was planned and produced. Lillian Gish’s acting in this film was perhaps her very best for Griffith. This is not to denigrate her performances in prior Griffith films (especially "Broken Blossoms", "Hearts of the World" and "True Heart Susie"), but this was the first real Gish vehicle for Griffith, and the first in which her big dramatic scenes were not subordinated by the overall story and the stress on melodrama. Our two excerpts consist of the fine sequence of the baptism and death of the baby; and of course the exciting and magnificently cut climax of the rescue from the ice-floe.

INTERMISSION-
"THE SCARLET LETTER" (MGM, 1926) Produced and directed by Victor Seastrom; scenario by Frances Marion; photographed by Hendrik Sartov.

The Cast (As a matter of interest, we are adding the names of the equivalent principal players in the talkie remake)

Fester Prynne................. Lillian Gish (Colleen Moore)
Rev. Dimmesdale............. Lars Hanson (Hardie Albright)
Roger Prynne................. Henry B. Walthall (Henry B. Walthall)
Giles.......................... Karl Dane (Alan Hale)
Governor Bellingham.......... William H. Tuckey (William Barnum)
distress Hibbins.............. Marcella Corday (Virgina Howell)
Pearl.......................... Joyce Coad (Cora Sue Collins)
Beadle......................... Jules Cowles
Jailer......................... Fred Herzog
Patience...................... Mary Hawes
French Sea Captain........... James A. Marcus
Indian........................ Chief Vowiachie
Townswoman................... Polly Moran

When Hawthorne wrote "The Scarlet Letter" in 1850, he doubted that it would achieve any popular success, and commented at the time: "Some portions of the book are powerfully written, but my writings do not, nor ever will, appeal to the broadest class of sympathies and therefore will not obtain a wide popularity. The main narrative ... lacks sunshine". Yet the book was a success, and the first edition (5000 copies) was sold within two weeks. Later the story was adapted for the theatre, and proved a successful vehicle for Richard Mansfield and other stars. It was filmed quite early, by Edison. No less than two film versions were made in 1917, one by Fox and one by Selznick; a talkie was made (by Robert Vignola) for an independent company in the early 30's, and the story is still frequently dramatised on television. Certainly the best of all the film versions was this film of MGM's in 1926 -- a period when literary adaptations for the screen were in full-scale vogue.

Made by the noted Swedish director Victor Seastrom, it is perhaps the most un-American film ever put out by Metro, especially under the Mayer regime. The word "un-American" is of course used in its literal, not its current political sense. The austere theme and backgrounds, the fanaticism, the intertwining of beauty and sensitivity with bigotry and stark tragedy, these were all elements that were second-nature to the Scandinavian directors. Even the photography was affected by this Scandinavian approach. Sartov's camerawork is magnificent throughout, but it has the cold, organised beauty of Seastrom and Molander, and not the lush, spontaneous beauty that Sartov (and other cameramen) produced under Griffith. This is no criticism of either approach, merely a recognition of how much a cameraman's style is controlled by his director. One of the effects that Seastrom and Sartov obtain is still a powerful and lovely little vignette -- a visual symbol of Hester Prynne's pregnancy, conveyed by the shadow of a wheel.

Paul Rotha, whose pompous generalisations can be a little grating, was properly impressed by "The Scarlet Letter", and, writing in "The Film Till Now", considers it far and away Seastrom's best American film. "The Tower of Lies", "Confessions of a Queen" and others he dismisses as "dull", and he comments "He Who Gets Slapped" only for its magical woodland sequence. ("The Wind" was quite superb of course, but this was a later Seastrom-Gish film). Of "The Scarlet Letter" he writes: "...it was a film made in one key, for even the humorous relief of the stocks and the ducking-pool were fitted into the pattern
of sorrow. Seastrom's sweeping sense of landscape, so evident in his earlier Swedish pictures, was expanded and gave an enchanting atmosphere to the first love scene between Miss Gish and Lars Hanson. Seastrom, Rotha notes, also made "a Griffith-like use of the elements".

On the selection of Victor Seastrom to direct, Miss Gish has remarked: "The Swedish people are closer to what our Pilgrims were, or what we consider them to have been, than our present day Americans. Irving Thalberg selected Victor Seastrom...he got the spirit of the story exactly, and was himself a fine actor... he was a Scandinavian, thorough and prompt."

The conception of the film differs in several ways from that of the original novel. Hawthorne stressed, for example, a distinct mystical element - and too, built an atmosphere of witchcraft and superstitious fear completely absent from the film. The love story of Hester and Dimmesdale occupies a far less prominent position in the novel, for in fact it is not until near the story's conclusion that it is revealed that the pastor is the father of the child. Other major differences include the character of Hester herself, who is described by Hawthorne as "a young woman... tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale... dark and abundant hair". Too, she is essentially a Puritan, and not the emotional misfit of the film. Incidentally, it is worth noting that if Hanson's overpowering remorse in the film seems a trifle too sudden, it is because a whole chunk was deleted from the script before the film went into production. In this sequence Hester's little daughter runs semi-nude through the streets on the sabbath, shocking the townspeople, and bringing forth the accusation "Child of sin - child of the devil!" It is this episode, primarily, which brings on Dimmesdale's self-punishment.

The Majestic remake in the early 30's differed in several aspects. It started with the arrival of Hester's husband to the village, just in time to witness her humiliation on the pillory. (This pillory sequence actually occurs about a third of the way through the MGM version -- and the husband's appearance is still later). Everything that happened prior to that is only referred to briefly in conversation. And unlike the Gish version, which hints that Hester may soon die, the latter version achieves a mildly happy ending by having the townspeople at last look on Hester with tolerance and understanding. Although a large-scale film (comparatively speaking) for an independent film, it was generally quite poor, and very slowly paced. The comedy content was increased to no great advantage, and repartee of the "Says Thee?" caliber didn't help either. Henry B. Wallthall however, with much more footage than in the original, was really quite fine. Colleen Moore tried hard as Hester, but either because she looked too stumpy, or because one remembered her too well as the self-reliant gal of the jazz-age, she just didn't convince. It was quite obvious that she had studied the Gish performance -- and that her cameraman had studied Sartov! Incidentally, judging from a print of the Colleen Moore version that I screened just the other day, it seems that its original negative is fast on the way to decomposition. The Moore version, by the way, starts off with a strange foreword that almost apologizes for the Puritan era, but adds that it was a very necessary phase in the development of the American way of life as it is today. Somehow, it's rather difficult to know just how to take that!

On her re-union with Henry B. Walthall, opposite whom she had played in Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" and "The Great Love", Miss Gish remarked: "When we played in "The Birth of a Nation", I just came to Mr. Walthall's ear, and now I am actually taller than he is". (She had grown some seven inches in the interim). Incidentally, like Mary Pickford and other really top stars of the 20's, Miss Gish was in a position (at MGM) to insist on the cameraman she wanted. She asked for -- and got -- Hendrik Sartov, a former professor of
physics at the University of Rotterdam, and cameraman on many of the Griffith films. Sartov was one of the finest cameramen in the business, and certainly nobody succeeded better than he in capturing Lillian's fragile beauty for the screen.

While Gish and Hanson naturally hold most of the limelight, Henry B. Walthall, in his few scenes, strides in and out of the film as dramatically as one would expect, like a wraith from the past.

Perhaps because of its stern austerity in a year (1926) when most of the really big hits were frankly escapist, "The Scarlet Letter" was not markedly popular either with the critics or the public. Polling over 200 critics (encompassing trade as well as fan reviewers, highbrows as well as lowbrows), the Film Daily came up with this "Best Ten" list. The German "Variety" was rated the best film of the year, followed by, in order, "Ben Hur", "The Big Parade", "The Black Pirate", "Beau Geste", "Stella Dallas", "The Volga Boatman", "What Price Glory", "The Sea Beast" and "La Boheme".

Frankly, the value of ANY "Best Ten" list that includes "The Volga Boatman" - an insufferable mediocrity - is open to question. However, there's no denying that the bulk of the films on that list do represent a satisfying blending of good moviemaking with good boxoffice. Certainly, one would have expected the Vidor-Gish "La Boheme" to be a little higher on the list. Or perhaps one wouldn't. Let's look at the runners-up. No.11 is James Cruze's "Old Ironsides", a big, top-sold Here - except for the climactic battle. No.12 is "Behind the Front", a weak and obvious comedy, the fantastic success of which has always been a real mystery. Now however, as we go down the list, we gradually come across the really good pictures. Nos. 15, 16 and 17 respectively are "The Grand Duchess and the Waltz", "Maren Nostrum" and "The Waltz Dream". No.19 is Langdon's wonderful "The Strong Man", followed in order by Murnau's "Faust", "The Scarlet Letter" (at last!), Flaherty's "Moana", Ford's "Three Bad Men", Vidor's "Bordelays the Magnificent". As we go on down we come across such films as "Kiki", "The Merry Widow", "Pottery", "Son of the Sheik", "So This is Paris", Dorothy Dye's "Neil Gwynn", "The Phantom of the Opera" and - in 44th place - what was unquestionably the finest comedy of that year, Harry Langdon's "Tramp Tramp Tramp".

MGM apparently anticipated critical and public apathy, and tried to sell the film as an "art" rather than a popular attraction. Instead of putting it into their big showcase in New York, the Capitol (where "La Boheme" took in around $104 thousand dollars in a two-week-run in July), MGM opened it at the Central Theatre instead. Here it ran for 19 consecutive weeks, with, it's worth noting, remarkably sustained receipts. The film built a little, so that the fifth week of the run was the most successful, with a gross of over $16,000. (The theatre seated only 322, with prices ranging from $1.10 to $2.20). Thereafter the grosses fluctuated between $15,000 per week and $11,000. The only real big drop came in December, when receipts dropped to around $8,500 per week. After three weeks of this, it was presumably conceded that "The Scarlet Letter" was not quite the film to divert the Christmas shoppers, so MGM hurriedly rushed in "The Fire Brigade".

One of the stories put out by MGM's publicity department at the time was that Marners borrowed a church choir from Los Angeles to sing during the shooting, feeling that his players would not be in an appropriate mood without it.... a story that Cecil B. DeMille has always found useful too, in publicising his Biblical endeavors!
Victor Seastrom, who was acting in and directing Swedish films in 1912, was still acting until fairly recently. Following his big American star vehicles in the late 20's (including "The Divine Woman" with Garbo and Hanson), his directorial activity slackened. His last film as a director was in England in the mid-30's - the odd, stylised, but quite interesting "Under the Red Rose". His later Swedish acting assignments included a remake of "The Tower of Lies", in which he assumed the Chaney role. Under a singularly curious arrangement, MGM, who owned the rights to the Selma Lagerlof story, permitted it to be remade so long as distribution was limited to the Scandinavian countries. Lars Hanson, who made his American debut in "The Scarlet Letter" (on the strength of his performance in "The Saga of Gösta Berling"), is still active in Sweden, and recently played the lead there in a stage version of "Caine Mutiny". Few of his later Swedish films appear to have been released here, and it is especially unfortunate that his "Ride Tonight" (mid-forties), a brilliant film directed by Gustav Molander, never reached these shores.

To conclude, "The Scarlet Letter" is a surprisingly lavish film, considering its slight and intimate theme. Some of the crowd scenes are staged on a really large scale. Lit with an artificial sun generating a $25,000,000 candle-power, the crowd scenes seem almost to provide a welcome congestion (even when the action is heavy or tragic) because of their very contrast with the claustrophobic atmosphere of the whole, and the feeling of individuals hemmed in by convention, by the fear of others, and even by rigidity of thought.

But when all is said and done, "The Scarlet Letter" has to stand by the performance of its star -- and even with "Way Down East" and "La Bohème" taken into consideration, it is almost certainly her finest performance in any film. The usual Gish fragility and charm is well in evidence; how could anyone remain unmoved by the shot of Lillian in the stocks, a fluttering eye and a weak smile trying to hide the tears? But there is much more to her performance than such purely visual appeal. As the critic of the New York Sun put it in August of 1926, "Miss Gish, for the first time in the memory of the oldest inhabitant of the cinema palaces, plays a mature woman, a woman of depth and feeling, of wisdom and noble spirit". Perhaps that is a generalisation that is a trifle unfair to earlier Gish roles, but in essence it isn't too far off the mark. It gives Miss Gish her best role -- and she gives it her best performance.

Wm. K. Everson

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As a post-script comment not only on the decline of the film generally, but also on the decline in movie audiences, it's interesting to conjecture how this story might fare if remade today. After all, it is a story built around sex, and sensitivity in such stories seems today to have been jettisoned in favor of being "fearless", "daring" and "outspoken". We have a concrete example in the current "A Farewell to Arms". In its original version it had a delicate sensitivity quite akin to that of "The Scarlet Letter"; the current overblown "spectacular" replaces it all with vulgarity and ugliness.