"SKINNER'S DRESS SUIT" (Universal, 1925; released 1926) Directed by William A. Seiter; script by Rex Taylor, from the original story by Henry Irving Dodge, Lawrence Marston and Edward Pauton; photographed by Arthur Todd. 7 reels


During December of 1925, Universal were screening to the trade their two newest Reginald Denny comedies. The first of them, "What Happened to Jones" (also directed by William Seiter) rated first-class reviews, and was considered Denny's best to date. Then, a few days later, the critics saw "Skinner's Dress Suit" and were even more enthusiastic. "Harrison's Reports", for example, stated: "Mr. Denny has appeared in many good comedies, but none of them equals this is entertaining values ... it can be shown anywhere and under any conditions. It is sure to give satisfaction". The verdict of The Film Daily was "Denny's best yet ... after a succession of real comedy hits, Denny scores another knockout and you have another boxoffice hit. Surefire entertainment - you cannot afford to lose out on this one!" It's worth noting that every review commented on the film's "clean and wholesome appeal", and on its complete absence of the vulgarity and sex which characterized so many other current comedies.

"Skinner's Dress Suit", which had been made previously by Essanay in 1917 with Bryant Washburn, Virginia Valli and Hazel Daly, is the slight but slick "Saturday Evening Post" type comedy which has almost completely disappeared from current cinema. As "B" productions they would cost too much, since they couldn't succeed with B-calibre talent. And as "A" productions they wouldn't have the guaranteed appeal that would justify their budgets. One of the very few films in a similar vein in recent years (although now some five years ago) was the very pleasing and overlooked Republic film, "The Lady Wants Mink". Perhaps it is no coincidence that that film was also produced and directed by William Seiter.

In plot it is admittedly slim, but nevertheless "Skinner's Dress Suit" is full of gentle charm and fast-paced humor. There is less slapstick and melodramatic action than in the other Denny comedies, and more "situational" fun. It takes as its basic peg that old cliche that "clothes make the man" and comments on the problems of acceptable social life in the 20's, the ways to advancement through keeping up with the boss socially, and the complications of trying to do all this on an inadequate budget. The party scenes are particularly lively, and feature a spirited renditon of the Charleston -- an episode that was played up for all it was worth in the original ads for the film.

"Skinner" too, is a welcome reminder of the high standards of the star vehicle series of the 20's. Few series films are left now -- the Bowery Boys, alas, meander on -- and most of those that have died over the past 10 years were generally of poor, and certainly of cheap, quality. But in the 20's, the good star series were big money-makers, and were budgeted accordingly. "Skinner" is quite a lavish production, with no stinting on sets. Laura La Plante, then Universal's top feminine star, was cast opposite Denny right after doing one of Universal's biggest of the year, "The Midnight Sun".

When we last ran "Skinner's Dress Suit" (some five years ago) we had one of our all-time record smallest audiences. Our membership was small then anyway, and had not yet been "educated" to Mr. Denny. And the fact that the show was held on Christmas Eve probably didn't help, although the ten or so old reliables who
did show up enjoyed the program! Anyway, now seems to be a good time to revive this really delightful little film.

--------- INTERMISSION ---------

"CRIMINALS AT LARGE" (Hal Roach; 1927-9) 2 reels
LAUREL & HARDY, James Finlayson, Tom Kennedy
As we mentioned in our earlier notes, this film is somewhat of a mystery, and we haven't yet tracked down the original title. In recent years, it has always been circulated under this title, but presumably that was just a blind to conceal the fact that it was a bootlegged print. I have never seen anything other than a dupe on this subject, nor any print with original titles. We're not even sure of the date; somehow it seems too good to be one of the Pathe Laurel and Hardy comedies. If it is in that group, it must be at the very tail end of it, since Laurel and Hardy work much more as a team than in any of their other Pathe films. It's good enough to be one of the Metros -- and yet, James Finlayson apart, it has none of the stock MGM comedy players in it. When we solve the mystery, we'll advise you of the film's origin ... in the meantime, we suggest you just enjoy it rather than puzzle over it. One running gag, which we won't spoil by describing, is one of the funniest things Laurel and Hardy have ever done. The latter portion of the film is a building-climbing routine in the "Safety Last" tradition -- and as expertly done. While not Laurel & Hardy's usual forte, it pays off for them as well as it did for Harold Lloyd.

"THREE LITTLE PIGS" (Walt Disney-UA-1933) 1 reel
One might term this "The Birth of a Nation" of cartoons; with its "Who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" theme-song, it remains one of the most diverting of the early Disney's. The music is catchy, the action fast and simple, the drawing charming. Our print is in black-and-white, but the gentle pastel shades of the original color reproduce well. Incidentally, somewhere along the line this cartoon was "doctored" for reissue; originally when the Wolf poses as a salesman, he was drawn (and given dialogue) in such a way as to indicate a Jewish stereotype. This scene was subsequently redrawn and re-dubbed, so that now the wolf is merely a straightforward Fuller Brush man!

"HOLLYWOOD EXTRA GIRL" (Paramount, 1935) 1 reel. Directed by Herbert Moulton; dialogue by Herman Hoffman; continuity by John Flory; photographed by Harry Fischbeck; special effects by Gordon Jennings; starring CECIL B. DEMILLE with Suzanne Emery, Ann Sheridan, Clara Kimball Young, Toby Wing.

Designed as a short to be taken quite seriously (and, incidentally, to plug DeMille's "The Crusades" at the same time), this is possibly the funniest (unintentionally) item on our program tonight. It gets off to a good start with the narrator intoning seriously about "faces" -- while the cameraman focusses solely on bosoms sparsely covered with sea-shells and feathers! DeMille, depicted here as a hard taskmaster who is a fervent disciple of "the art of the cinema" and a paternal friend to struggling young extra girls, gives the performance of his life! In later years, when making "guest" appearances, he became much more benign. Here he is given to unleashing streams of invective on hapless assistant directors who don't quite realize the artistry of their profession! And in one glorious scene, he turns dumbly to his script girl and asks "What'll we do tomorrow?"!

The simplifications of film production methods have to be seen to be believed; sitting inside the studio, DeMille directs a massive exterior
scene. In one take it comes out fully edited and orchestrated, whereupon DeMille calmly says "O.K., let's take a reverse angle on that!" Of course, it's easy for film society audiences to carp at such astonishing fictions; actually we're not carping. It's too much fun for that. And the "Cinderella" theme is maintained right to the last shot, when the narrator explains that even if the extra girl doesn't make good, there's always "that young man back East" waiting with a diamond engagement ring!!

"PUTTING PANTS ON PHILIP" (MGM-Roach-1928) Directed by Clyde Bruckman; supervised by Leo McCarey; photographed by George Stevens.

2 reels

This is the first time that this classic Laurel and Hardy has been shown by any film society, and it's a wonderful re-discovery. We're much indebted to Bob Youngson for making this print available to us. It's a magnificent print, right off the original negative. One of the most unusual (and least typical) of all the Laurel and Hardy comedies, it has little sadism, almost no slapstick, but instead some wonderful visual and situational gags, and also much more character depth than usual, especially insofar as Laurel is concerned. Laurel's wonderful pantomime of a rape victim is one of the subtlest things he has ever done. Frankly that bald statement does a disservice to the sequence in suggesting a vulgarity which is not present; the situation arises logically and hilariously out of the action, just as did their satire with the unwanted baby in "Their First Mistake". To discuss this sequence more would be to rob it of its delicious surprise element, so we'll say no more. The comedy is really more that of Keaton than of Laurel and Hardy, and perhaps this film thus owes rather more to its director, Clyde Bruckman, than did the rest of the L & H comedies to James Horne, et al. Bruckman of course directed some of the best Keaton films, as well as comedies with Lloyd and W.C. Fields. To me at least, this is one of the real gems of comedy from the late 20's, and perhaps the most individual of all the Laurel and Hardy comedies, though not necessarily the funniest.

BONUS

An Announcement and a Warning:

As an added attraction (?) we're running a wonderful (or revolting, depending on how you look at it!) reel of fluffs from old Monogram and Universal films -- film scenes in which actors forget their lines, or lose their tempers, fall over, and generally explode into curses of a surprisingly standardised but nevertheless colorful nature. Although the few really raw expletives have been blopped out, what remains is not the sort of material to expose one's maiden aunt to. So -- nervous or timid people are advised to leave early!! Actually, the real of fluffs is a whale of a lot of fun. John Carroll, it seems, can't speak a line without lousing it up. Western star Jack Randall is the worst of the lot -- what fun it would be to disilllusion the kiddies by putting this reel into a Disneyland show! Boris Karloff's swearing is dignified and gentlemanly, as one would expect, and Carole Lombard's is scatterbrained and shrill! Others involved are Warren Hull, Frankie Darro, George Cleveland, Leroy Mason, Zeffie Tilbury, Eugene Pallette, Holmes Herbert, Polly Ann Young, Movita (with a fine display of temperament), Robert Warwick, Tom Keene, Charles King, William Powell, Claudia Dell, Betty Elythe (her expletive evokes a disapproving stare from Guy Usher!) and sundry others. But Jack Randall and John Carroll are very much the stars of the show, and Carroll's loss of temper makes one wonder about the inventive quality of his fluffs when appearing opposite Vera Ralston at Republic! Old-timers in the society may remember that we ran this reel before, about six years ago.
Then it was a fine clear print, with everybody easily recognisable. What happened to that print we never knew, but this one is a descendant, about twenty times removed. Through the years it has been duped and reduped until little more than shadows remain. You'll have trouble spotting some of the players (although if anyone is concerned, we'll identify all the scenes for you afterwards) but luckily the sound-track is o.k. -- which is really all that matters! This is a very funny reel, but is cut very quickly -- if you allow yourself to laugh too much, you'll miss some very choice swearing in the next scene!

Program Notes & Enquiries: Wm. K. Everson, Manhattan Towers Hotel, 2166 Broadway, New York City 24, NY.

Committee: Charles Shibuk, Edward S. Gorey, Dorothy Lovell.

JULY PROGRAMS

We're not absolutely sure what our July programs will be, as a number of prints are en route to us, and until we've screened them, we can't be sure of either condition or quality.

However, it seems fairly certain that one of the films will be "PEACOCK FEATHERS", a Universal of 1926, directed by Svend Gade. It stars Cullen Landis and Marion Nixon, and is a lovely three-toned print.

Currently on the way from Hollywood is "THE LOCKED DOOR", a 1929 George Fitzmaurice production, written by C. Gardner Sullivan, and starring BETTY BRONSON, BARBARA STANWYCK, WILLIAM BOYD and ROD LA ROCQUE. We haven't seen a Fitzmaurice film yet that wasn't worth a showing, so we're hoping for the best. We might make a special Betty Bronson show out of this by running some 30 minutes of excerpts from PETER PAN along with it.

Or alternatively, we might hold out the PETER PAN material for a memorial show to Herbert Brenon, who has just died. This would depend on our acquiring a worthwhile Brenon feature; so much of his material is just unavailable, and films that are available are all familiar -- BEAU GESTE, THE PASSING OF THE THIRD FLOOR BACK, DANCING MOTHERS, etc. If we can locate a print of THE SPANISH DANCER with Pola Negri (not a top Brenon, but a good one, and one that is occasionally available) we might run that.

And somewhere between Skokie, Illinois, and New York, a print of "MARY TUDOR" is en route to us. This is a German production of the mid-20's starring Ellen Richter; reputedly a very lavish production, but a film on which critical comment, either pro or con, seems hard to find. Actually, unless it's unbearable, it will probably find its way into our programs. Merit has never been our yardstick, and as long as a film has interesting things in it, either historically or filmically, we'll provide a showcase for it. We might even have special showings of some of the "unbearable" rejects if there's enough interest -- does anyone have the stamina for a double-bill consisting of Rod La Rocque in STAND AND DELIVER and Ricardo Cortez in Frank Lloyd's EAGLE OF THE SEA???? We hope not -- but they, and others of their ilk, are lined up patiently waiting for the day when the Huff Society runs out of film.