LILLIAN GISH

JOHN GILBERT

in

KING VIDOR'S

"LA BOHEME"

(M.G.M., 1926)

9 Reels

Adapted by Fred De Gresac from Henry Murger's "Life in the Latin Quarter"; Continuity by Ray Doyle and Harry Behn; sets by Cedric Gibbons and Arnold Gillespie; photographed by Hendrik Sartov; editor - Hugh Wynn; Produced and directed by King Vidor. Musical score arranged by Major Edward Bowes, David Mendoza and William Axt.

The Cast: Mimi (LILLIAN GISH); Rodolphe (JOHN GILBERT); Musette (Renee Adoree); Count Paul (Roy D'Arcy); Colline (Edward Everett Horton); Marcel (Gino Corrado); Schaunard (George Hassell); Alexis (David Mir); Bernard (Gene Poupon); Benoit (Karl Dane); Madame Benoit (Matilde Comont); Louise (Catherine Vidor); Phemie (Valentina Zimina); Theatre Manager (Frank Currier); Factory supervisor (Blanche Payson).

La Bohème" is a film that for many years has seemed totally unavailable. None of the film archives have ever screened it, nor has it ever been made available to film societies. Forbidden - or unattainable - fruit always seems to be the more delectable, and because of this - and tantalising references to it in the recent books by King Vidor and Bosley Crowther - this particular fruit has achieved a status which it does not altogether warrant. It is, too, a film that needs seeing more than once. When I screened it initially, it seemed quite disappointing, but subsequent viewings have produced a far more satisfying reaction. In any event, it is a film long overdue for revival, and we are most grateful to Miss Lillian Gish for making this print available to us. A beautiful print from the original negative, it appears quite complete.

Despite the omnipresence of Mr. Mayer, "La Bohème" was made primarily as a prestige picture for the studio. It was to be a follow-up for Vidor and Gilbert to their "The Big Parade", and it was designed as a showcase for Miss Gish as her initial film under the MGM banner. ("The White Sister" was merely released, not produced, by Metro). It came out as part of a group of "block-buster" hits representing MGM's lustiest era, the others including "Ben Hur", "The Big Parade", "The Blackbird" (Chaney), "His Secretary" (Norma Shearer) and Garbo's "The Torrent". Metro, in a big sales push, contrived to have all of these films playing simultaneously in Chicago and New York and other key cities. It was a happy period for moviegoers, with "The Johnstown Flood", "Irene", "Dancing Mothers", "The Bat", "The Black Pirate", Gloria Swanson's "Untamed Lady" and sundry other delights also on view simultaneously from the other companies.

"La Boheme" made many of the "Best 20" lists at the end of the year, but didn't
quite generate the excitement MGM hoped for after the ecstatic trade press reviews. The Motion Picture Herald termed it "a credit to the screen", an "exquisite masterpiece" and "a monument to the industry". It opened at the Embassy Theatre in New York (succeeding Stroheim's "The Merry Widow") to solid but not outstanding business. It really caught on as a red-hot boxoffice attraction only in Germany, where it is still remembered very fondly.

Perhaps, like Griffith's films, it was too out-of-step with the tempo of those jazzed up times to have much universal appeal. Frankly what it lacks is good honest "shmaltz". This is not to criticise Vidor for taking his work seriously and trying to create a film of artistry rather than showmanship. But, after all, and especially without the operatic trimmings, "La Bohème" is a trivial and contrived story -- an artificial one, despite its basis in fact. (Allegedly all of the principal characters were friends and acquaintances of Henry Murger). Its delicacy and beauty need stylised handling to be completely realised; Miss Gish gives it that style in her performance, but Vidor unfortunately doesn't in his direction, which is imaginative and intelligent, but somehow always rather aloof. When we screened the film with Miss Gish recently, she drew a comparison between the style of this film and that of the similarly cold "War and Peace", also by Vidor. And it's an apt comparison, although not an all-conclusive one. Vidor's style was not generally cold and aloof, as is more than shown by "The Crowd" and "Hallelujah". But somehow his feeling for humanity seems to extend only to films and themes with contemporary settings; period pieces and spectacles (other than westerns) seem to create a barrier for Vidor which keeps genuine warmth submerged beneath pageantry.

Not that "La Bohème" is without warmth and beauty; but those qualities seem to derive principally from Miss Gish herself, and from her cameraman, Hendrik Sartov, rather than from Vidor. Sartov of course had worked with Miss Gish earlier, and had been Griffith's principal cameraman since "Way Down East". His photography in "La Bohème" is quite stunning; at times so much so that one is rather uncomfortably aware of the hours and hours of time that must have been entailed in setting up specific lighting effects. One incredible two-shot of Lillian Gish and John Gilbert contrives to have Miss Gish's face softly filtered, and Gilbert's resting in shadow! Sartov also gets some particularly striking and dramatic effects in the final sequence of Miss Gish's dying flight through the cobbled streets of Montmartre. (Having gone through the mill for Griffith, she outdoes herself in this episode for Vidor, which must have been one of the most physically taxing sequences since the ice-floe episode from "Way Down East"). "Pride in the Sun" was the only other film in which Lillian Gish was directed by Vidor.

Incidentally, for such an important film, "La Bohème" is a surprisingly inexpensive film in many ways. Use is made of standing sets, and apart from the Montmartre streets, no other big new sets figure in the film. This of course is no criticism, since the film doesn't need size, but it is surprising to find such economy in such a big film at a time when MGM seemed to spend money almost for the sake of it. "La Bohème" most certainly isn't a cheap film (Mr. Sartov's demands have been eaten up enough of the budget to have made a year's supply of Tim McCoy westerns over on the W.S. Van Dyke unit) but neither is it quite as opulent as "The Merry Widow" or "The Temptress".

Mimi of course could have been written for Miss Gish, and she plays it beautifully, as effective in the few comedy moments as in the scenes of drama and tragedy. There is one particularly delightful scene in which she pantomimes the action of Rodolphe's forthcoming play. Of her performance, the
Motion Picture Herald wrote: "Lillian Gish makes an ideal Mimi, the role exactly suiting her in every respect, and she has never been seen to better advantage. Her handling of the entire story, but especially from the time she drags herself through the streets until she rests in death, will linger long in the memory".

In his book "A Tree is a Tree", Vidor devotes a long chapter to "La Bohème", and concludes with this passage:

"Miss Gish was an artist who spared herself in no way. She threw herself wholeheartedly into everything she did, even dying. She wanted to know days ahead when we would film her death scene. She wanted to get in the mood and stay in it. This gave me some alarm. Perhaps as a precautionary measure I decided I had better schedule it on the last day of shooting. She asked for three days' notice, and Jack Gilbert and I watched Lillian grow paler and paler, thinner and thinner. When she arrived on the set that fateful day, we saw her sunken eyes, her hollow cheeks, and we noticed that her lips had curled outward and were parched with dryness. What on earth had she done to herself? I ventured to ask about her lips and she said in syllables hardly audible that she had succeeded in removing all saliva from her mouth by not drinking any liquids for three days, and by keeping cotton pads between her teeth and gums even in her sleep ..... (in the death scene) I let the camera continue on her lifeless form and the tragic faces around her and decided to call "cut" only when I saw that Miss Gish was forced to inhale after holding her breath to simulate death. But the familiar movement of the chest didn't come. She neither inhaled nor exhaled. I began to fear she had played her part too well. Too frightened to speak the one word that would halt the movement of the camera, I wondered how to bridge this fantastic moment back to the coldness of reality. After what seemed many, many minutes I waved my hand before the camera as a signal to stop. Still there was no movement from Lillian. John Gilbert bent close, and softly whispered her name. Her eyes slowly opened. She permitted herself her first deep breath since the scene had started; for the past days she had trained herself, somehow or other, to get along without visible breathing. It was necessary to wet her lips before she could speak. By this time there was no one on the set whose eyes were dry. The movies have never known a more dedicated artist than Lillian Gish".

John Gilbert, hampered by a non-too-sympathetic role, is hardly at his best as Rodolphe, although physically he is a fine choice, and Renee Adoree, hidden behind a black wig and ugly clothes, is abominably wasted. Roy D'Arcy merely repeats his "Merry Widow" villainy; an incredible (but enjoyable) display of unrestrained lechery. Edward Everett Horton, in a supporting role, seems already to have perfected the comic mannerisms and expressions that were later to make him such a successful comedian. (Of course, he had already achieved more than mere "supporting player" stature, and a starring comedy vehicle - "The Nutcracker" - was playing around simultaneously with "La Bohème").

The Catherine Vidor who appears in a minor role is King Vidor's sister. Incidentally, the original publicity material for the film states that Rosa Bonheur, Guy De Maupassant, Charles Beaudelaire and Sarah Bernhardt "are all portrayed on the screen for the first time", and can be seen mingling with Mimi and Rodolphe in the cafe groupings. If this is so, they are certainly - and perhaps meritoriously - not so identified.

Despite its shortcomings, this "La Bohème" is certainly the best of the several versions, both operatic and non-operatic, to reach the screen to date. The Gertrude Lawrence-Douglas Fairbanks version, made in England in the 30's, had its moments. And an Austrian version with Martha Eggerth and Jan Kiepura, was wonderfully virile stuff in the all-out-Schmaltz tradition. "La Bohème" is perhaps about mid-way (from the standpoint of artistry and quality) in Miss
Gish's MGM group. "The Wind" and "The Scarlet Letter" can probably be considered better; "Annie Laurie" and "The Enemy" can certainly be considered of lesser merit. Incidentally, in the same issue of the Motion Picture Herald in which "La Bohème" is reviewed, appears an outspoken editorial, and suggested screen treatment, in respect of Channing Pollock's "The Enemy", in which the writer roundly attacks Hollywood for not daring to tackle it!

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Preceding "LA BOHÈME" will be:

"LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1928) Directed by Clyde Bruckman, supervised by Leo McCarey; story by Hal Roach.
With LAUREL & HARDY, Edgar Kennedy.

Despite the temptations offered by the title, we're definitely starting the show with this comedy, and not finishing with it! Produced in 1927 and released in 1928, it's far from being top-flight Laurel and Hardy. But it's one that hasn't been seen around in a couple of generations, and is certainly well worth laughing at again today. The humor is a little too forced and stretched, but there's plenty of that wonderful sadism, and some grand closeups of Hardy's familiar bemused and pitiful face making that direct appeal for audience sympathy. One or two of the standard L & H gags seem to be seen at their source in this one. Incidentally, does ANYBODY know if laughing gas REALLY has the effect that comedy makers have ALWAYS had us believe it does?

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Program Notes and enquiries:
William K. Everson, Manhattan Towers Hotel, 2166 Broadway, New York City 24.
Committee: Charles Shibuk, Edward S. Gorey, Dorothy Lovell.

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PROGRAMS FOR AUGUST

"THE WHITE SISTER" (Henry King) with Lillian Gish and Ronald Colman will be the key item of the August shows.

Also scheduled for August is King Vidor's THE JACK KNIFE MAN and THE LOCKED DOOR (George Fitzmaurice, 1929) with Barbara Stanwyck, Betty Bronson, Rod la Rocque, William Boyd, Zasu Pitts and Mack Swain. There may well be a third show fitted in, since THE JACK KNIFE MAN has to be run ahead of our regular schedule, or we'll lose it. Notes will be circulated during the first week in August.

Also definitely lined up (for September) is another all Laurel and Hardy show, which we hope will also be an "extra" program in order not to deprive the two or three misanthropes who DON'T like L & H of their regular two shows a month! Don Phelps has written us a fine appreciation of L & H, and we're also working on an index to their work -- or at least, as detailed a listing of it as will be possible between now and the show-date.

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A post-script on "LA BOHÈME". In our musical score we have utilised many of the themes from Puccini's opera. This is somewhat at variance with Metro's original score, since the opera was not then a public domain property, and Metro apparently didn't want the expense of clearing the music rights.