THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Tuesday August 26th., 1958.

LILLIAN GISH
in
"THE WHITE SISTER"

Produced and directed by HENRY KING. A Charles H. Duell Jr. presentation for Inspiration Pictures, released through Metro Pictures Corp., 1923. 11 Reels. Based on the novel by F. Marion Crawford; adapted by George V. Hobart, Charles E. Whittaker; photographed by Roy Overbaugh, assisted by William Schurr and Fernando Risi; Art Direction by Robert M. Haas; Edited by Duncan Mansfield; Titles by Will M. Ritchey and Don Bartlett.

The Cast:

Angela Chiaromonte (LILLIAN GISH); Capt. Giovanni Severi (RONALD COLMAN); Marchesa di Mola (Gail Kane); Monsignor Saracinesca (J. Barney Sherry); Prince Chiaromonte (Charles Lane); Madame Bernard (Juliette La Violette); Professor Ugo Severi (Sig. Serena); Count del Ferice (Ramon Ibanez); Alfredo del Ferice (Alfredo Martinelli); Mother Superior (Carloni Talli); Alfredo’s Tutor (Antonio Barda); Archbishop (Guiseppe Pavoni).

This print loaned to the society through the courtesy of Miss Lillian Gish.

While last month’s "La Bohème" seemed to fail because of its emphasis on style, and lack of warmth, "The White Sister" ironically falls into a completely opposite category, failing to impress as it should because of a complete lack of any directorial style. However, it is easy to see why it was such a tremendous popular success in its day, and many of the ingredients that made it so popular still work. It is big and lavish, so typical of the larger-than-life romances of the 20’s, it is sensitively acted by Miss Gish, and above all, it is a gentle and delicate romance, as opposed to the often ugly and usually sex-obsessed filmic love stories today ("Written on the Wind", "A Farewell to Arms", and so many others).

"The White Sister", first a novel, was later transformed into a play and a "musical romance" as it was termed. Viola Allen scored a tremendous hit on stage in the Lillian Gish role, and also starred in the first film version — for Essanay in 1915. MGM remade the film as a talkie in 1933, with Helen Hayes and Clark Gable in the leads, and Lewis Stone and Edward Arnold in supporting roles. While retaining the same basic story as in Henry King’s version (Victor Fleming directed the new one) it was both a neater, and a far more contrived, interpretation. It sprawled less, emphasised the romantic angles more, brought in a triangular element, did away with the volcano and the floods, and supplanted them by a great deal of aerial warfare footage. It was a typical MGM product of the thirties — glossy, flawless, and somewhat heartless. For all of its organisation and neat dovetailing of story-lines, it lacked the romantic sweep of the silent version.
However, even as a silent "The White Sister" does fall somewhat below the standard of certain other romantic classics of the era -- particularly "Way Down East", and to a lesser degree "The White Rose". The blame for this must fall solely on the shoulders of Henry King, surely one of the most curious and enigmatic of all directors. A master in his own genre -- the depiction of various aspects of Americana ("Tol'able David", "State Fair", "I'd Climb the Highest Mountain") -- and a director of talent when dealing with restricted, semi-psychological themes ("The Gunfighter", "Twelve O'Clock High"), he seems to flounder hopelessly when tackling anything foreign to the American scene, and especially when it is allied with elements of spectacle.

In 1923, it is reported, King saw himself as a potential successor to Griffith. Surprisingly, he showed no inclination to follow up "Tol'able David" with more films that would utilize to the full his unique talent for that sort of fare. Instead, he wanted size, and spectacle. "The White Sister" interested him not at all as a film; what did interest him was the opportunity to head a location unit in Italy, assume sole responsibility, and turn out a "big" picture. Yet oddly enough, King makes no attempt to exploit the few opportunities for spectacle that "The White Sister" offers. Having assembled hundreds of Arabs out in the desert for a big skirmish scene, he lets the sequence fizzle out before it gets under way. Similarly, the volcanic fireworks and the flood scenes at the end, are sketchy in the extreme. The flood scenes are well staged, but there are far too few of them, and they seem dragged in just to provide a climax (which has been well-planted and hinted at throughout the film). At no time does this disaster sequence become as logically integrated into the story-line as was, for example, the storm and ice-floe sequence that climaxed "Way Down East". Too, story-line seems to be King's main concern. With such wonderful players as Lillian Gish and Ronald Colman to work with, King handles them very casually. One feels that the success of their big scenes together is due more to their own zeal than King's guidance. Another example of King's lack of concern for anything but basic story-line is the sequence of Colman's escape across the desert. Material that could have been wonderfully dramatic is conveyed by just one or two scenes, and a couple of sub-titles.

Miss Gish recalls that there were almost no rehearsals for the film; such as there were were instigated by the actors themselves, on the way over to Italy by boat. The famous sequence of Miss Gish taking her final vows was filmed in one night -- after the unit had been working for a full day. In this case, due mainly to Miss Gish's performance, such lack of preparedness certainly doesn't show up on the screen, but it seems very typical of King that such an important sequence should have been shot in such a manner. Incidentally, King was apparently already looking ahead to "Romola", since on her way back to America Miss Gish stopped off for costume fittings for that film. "Romola", shown by this society a few years ago, had most of the flaws of "The White Sister", but none of its virtues. And considering how effective Colman was in "The White Sister", his shabby role in "Romola" is particularly hard to understand.

One other factor sadly missing in "The White Sister" is the camerawork of a man like Hendrik Sartov, who photographed Miss Gish so superbly in "Way Down East" and "La Bohême". Roy Overbaugh's photography is always competent, but is never inspired. In a film which relies so much on pictorial beauty, and has no many opportunities for it, the hand of a Sartov is very much missed.

The Catholic Church of course cooperated fully in the production of the picture, supervising detail, making the costumes etc., balking only at permitting nuns to act in the film. The famous sequence of the taking of the final vows may seem a trifle tasteless and bizarre to non-Catholic eyes, and since it is treated almost in documentary fashion, it tends to become a trifle harrowing. Also this
sequence is decidedly not helped by King's extraordinary tastelessness in cross-cutting it with shots of Ronald Colman rushing home aboard a warship, an attempt to create melodramatic tension that is decidedly out of place.

Incidentally, considering that the film is obviously sympathetic to Catholicism, some things are quite surprising. Ronald Colman's outburst against "the tyranny of the church" is not met with an equally strong defense; and most of the nuns seem a rather weird lot too. One trio reminds one of nothing more than the witches in "Macbeth"!

Thanks primarily to the work of Miss Gish and Mr. Colman, and the innate sensitivity of the story, the basic love-theme comes across very well, and remains most moving. The secondary story of Colman's brother, a scientist devoting his time to volcanic study, is a trifle ludicrous, mainly because it is never developed. King reverts to it only when he needs to cut away from the love story for a time lapse, and unfortunately it soon becomes more amusing than dramatic. However, in the long run, despite being a film that certainly doesn't realise its potential (how Maurice Tourneur could have realised it!)

"The White Sister" does still impress, and doesn't date. Any flaws it has now, it had in 1923. And little vignettes are often very poignant and moving. Look, for instance, at that little scene of Gail Kane tongue-lashing the heroine's dead mother — and Lillian, her face a composite of sorrow and disbelief that anyone could be so evil, hesitatingly pointing a finger heavenwards and asking Miss Kane to desist, before she is overheard. It is a beautiful little scene in which all those emotions and ideas are conveyed — and are gone — in far less time than it takes to describe the scene on paper.

Although Miss Gish's fragile beauty is not manipulated as well as it would have been with Sartov at the helm, her performance remains one of her very best. And Colman is fine too, in his first important American role. (A number of lesser roles in films like Selznick's "Handcuffs and Kisses" had preceded it). Incidentally, Miss Gish recalls that it was necessary to get Mr. Colman slightly drunk before he could stop being a gentleman long enough to get any feeling into the scene in which he turns on her and tells her that despite her nun's vows, she must stay with him!

An enormously popular film in its day, "The White Sister" nevertheless wasn't quite the money-maker that is generally supposed, due mainly to financial manipulations by Metro. Since they didn't own the film, but were merely distributing it, they used the film as a wedge to promote more income for wholly Metro owned product. Thus exhibitors were forced to pay a high price for films like "Scaramouche" (which were moving slowly) in order to get "The White Sister", which Metro then let them have quite cheaply. It was a common procedure in the 20's — and not exactly uncommon today, despite the apparent outlawry of the block-booking system.

This is the first New York revival of "The White Sister" in a great many years; we hope you'll enjoy it.

"NEW YORK" (Hal Roach, 1926 app., 2 reels)
We still haven't traced the original title of this silent "Our Gang" comedy, despite perusal of hundreds of titles. Roach's titles rarely had any bearing on the content of his comedies, unfortunately, but this one may have been "Fast Freight" or "Railroadin", although frankly it looks earlier than that. Anyway, it's a good toned print of a vintage Our Gang, with some nostalgic scenes of NY in the 20's.

Program Notes & Enquiries: Bill Everson, Manhattan Towers Hotel, 2166 Broadway, NY