NERL GWYNN - THE DEVIL'S ASSISTANT

A Word about 35mm Screenig

Unfortunately it is not possible for us to provide a musical score for these films tonight. At best, such a score would have to be done "blind" since it isn't possible to pre-screen 35mm in the way that one can with 16mm. And even if such a score had been arranged, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to set up equipment in a professional screening room. However, we think that the added print quality, plus the rarity of the subjects themselves should compensate for the silence.

Secondly, a word about the prints. Putting 35mm prints in shape is a far more ticklish business than performing minor repairs in 16mm. "NERL GWYNN" is a fine print, in good shape, but with a few mis-placed frame lines due to faulty splicing through the years. (This doesn't occur in 16mm). This however can easily be adjusted by the projectionist. "THE DEVIL'S ASSISTANT", alas, is rapidly going the way of all film. This probably will be the last screening of this particular print. The odor of decay is setting in, shrinkage is getting worse, and there are far more signs of deterioration now than there were three months ago. It should project well, but shrinkage affects different projectors in different ways: if there is momentary fluttering, or lack of focus, or even a break or two, we ask your indulgence. This print is having its last fling in this life -- so be kind and patient with it. Within a year I'm afraid, it will have become just a soggy ooze, and within another six months, the ooze will turn to dust, and little will be left. One can still dupe it of course, but half the beauty of these old films is in their camerawork and use of tints and tones; in duping, the quality of the former is lessened, and the latter cannot be recreated at all today. What is left is but a shadow. . . . it is a tragedy that is, alas, beyond remedy.

"THE DEVIL'S ASSISTANT" (Mutual, 1917, 2 reels) Produced and directed by Harry Pollard, and adapted by him from a story by P. Edward Hungerford. Starring Margarita Fischer with Jack Mower.

Miss Fischer was a homely miss of no outstanding acting ability, but her two reel dramas for Mutual were extremely popular, and made valuable counterparts to the comedies of Chaplin that Mutual were also releasing at that time. The Fischer-Pollard films were made in San Diego, and were surprisingly elaborate. This one has good production value, plenty of extras, camera tricks at the drop of a hat, and a quite lavish sequence in hell. A strong, but not sensationalist, preaching against drug addiction, it is still quite a powerful little film despite its naive approach (the doctor who attempts to seduce the heroine by first making an addict of her bears a deliberate resemblance to the stock picturisation of Satan!) The best part of the film is a whole of a delirium sequence in hell, with a spectre of death guiding the heroine across the river Styx, sinners struggling in the water, a three-headed dog and sundry other pleasantries, all in the most flaming red tints that Mutual's labs could dream up.

"NERL GWYNN" (British National Pictures Ltd., 1925; released in the U.S. by Paramount, 1926; 7 reels) Director and scenario - Herbert Wilcox; based on the novel "Mistress Nell Gwyn" by Marjorie Bowen; photographed by Roy Overbaugh; Starring DOROTHY GISH as Nell Gwynn; Randle Ayrton as King Charles 2nd; Juliette Compton as Lady Castlemaine; Sidney Fairbrother as Mrs Gwynn;
Judd Green as Toby Clinker; Edward Sorley as Dickon; Gibb McLaughlin as James.

"If England can produce pictures like this one, the Britishers need not worry about breaking into this market; the market will open its arms to receive them. "Nell Gwynn" is as well produced as any American picture."

This review-opening is from "Harrison's Reports" of July 31, 1926 -- which went on to be more enthusiastic about the British import than it was about such other films reviewed in the same issue as "Son of the Sheik" and Keaton's "Battling Butler". There is no doubt about it having been well received everywhere in 1926; indeed it was on the profits from this film that much of the building of the new Eelstrae Studios was done. When we ran the film for Dorothy Gish a few weeks ago she thought that, in part at least, it held up surprisingly well, and that it was still the best of her British films in the 20's. (She was quite positive about "Madame Pompadour" being the worst!)

The film is very much of a Dorothy Gish vehicle, and she plays it to the hilt. The part of Nell is ideally suited to her lively sense of fun and shrewd pantomime, and it comes as a welcome reminder of what a delightful comedienne she was; what a pity that so little of her work from the 20's remains.

Not a great deal happens in the film (after all, not too much happened in that period of history, either!), but it bowls along merrily at a smart pace, highlighted by Nell's tiltings with another court favorite, and some good sequences, seemingly authentic, of the theatre of that time. Nicely photographed by Roy Overbaugh ("Romola", "The White Sister") the film cunningly manages to look far more expensive than it can have been. The British National Studios were quite small, yet there is no sense of cramping at all -- the sets, if not huge, are large and impressive, and successfully convey the pomp, luxury and elegance of the day. On the whole, it is a far better picture than one is used to from Herbert Wilcox, generally a mediocre and unimaginative director (always excepting the two Edith Cavell films) and is also far better than the 1935 sound remake, also by Wilcox (with Anna Neagle and Cedric Hardwicke), which was a masterpiece (in its way) of boisterous bawdiness, and was severely hacked by censors in this country.

Apart from Miss Gish, nobody has too much to do, but there's an effective performance from Gibb McLaughlin (unbilled) as James. McLaughlin was invaluable in historical dramas, and was also used a great deal in Anglo-German films (e.g., Fabst's "Atlantide"). The print, with its crystal-clear photography and multitudinous tints, really makes one's mouth water -- oh, for lab work like that today!

An historical anecdote for dog-devotees: the little dog carried around by Lady Castlemaine was presented to Dorothy Gish by Wilcox, was christened "Mr. Gwynn", and thereafter took up residence with Lillian Gish in New York. It can be seen with either (or both) Lillian or Dorothy in many stills issued in the late 20's.

Returning to "Harrison's Reports", we find a note that although Nell is a mistress, she is so human that she wins audience sympathy! However . . . "the story is of course suggestive, but it has been handled very delicately. It should prove suitable for all classes of theatres, of all runs. It might not be the right picture for a Sunday entertainment in religious communities".

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