Comedy Program #2

"GIRLS" (Fox, 1927) One reel; directed by Eugene Forde; supervised by George Marshall; scenario by Edward Moran and Murray Roth from a story by O. Henry; with Richard Walling, Sally Phipps, Ben Hall, George Gay, Nora Cecil, and among the extras, William Gargan, Henry Armetta and Douglas Montgomery.

We're not running "Girls" in the mistaken belief that it's a great comedy; it's more interesting than hilarious, as an example of Fox's answer to Universal's popular "Collegians" series. There are, however, some very funny gags, and a really wild (and completely tasteless!) climax. Our print is a toned original, but in somewhat worn shape -- some four minutes are missing from the original running time, and the film is more than a little spliced, but it's good fun and moves along at a nice zippy pace. There are some interesting faces among the extras, and some of you may remember the star, Richard Walling, from "Walking Back".

"BUMPING INTO BROADWAY" (Pathe, 1920) One reel; starring Harold Lloyd with Bebe Daniels and Noah Young.

Prints come from many sources, and we don't ask too many questions; we're glad to get them! This is a French print, with French titles, and it has been condensed from two reels to one. The cutting has been well done however, and although there are indications of big gaps, nothing too important seems to be missing. It moves right along, and has a lot of very funny situations, including at least one gag (the business with the coat) that Harold repeated in "Safety Last". "Bumping into Broadway" was Harold's first two-reeler -- and one of the last in which Bebe Daniels was his leading lady.

"MOVIELAND" (Educational, 1926) Two reels; directed by Norman S. Taurog; with Lupino Lane, Kathryn McGuire, Wallace Lupino, and as guest stars, Paul Panzer and Lloyd Hamilton.

Educational turned out some of the worst silent (and sound) so-called comedies we ever saw, but the Lupino Lanes seem to have been very much of an exception. The few we've seen have all been wonderful, and while "Movieland" isn't quite as inventive as "Montie of the Mounted", which we ran last year, it has some wonderful gags, many of them of incredible ferocity, and some fine acrobatic slapstick from Lane. Kathryn McGuire, one of Keaton's best leading ladies, makes an excellent foil for Lane.

"ONCE OVER LIGHTLY" (Warner Brothers, 1944) 2 reels; a compilation of Mack Sennett material with Charlie Murray, Ben Turpin, Billy Bevan, Phyllis Haver, Jimmy Finlayson, Kwpie Morgan, the Keystone Cops, and others.

I must admit to announcing this as part of our comedy program before I'd re-screened it. Back in the 40's, when less of the Sennett material had been rediscovered, it all seemed quite wonderful. Today it seems rather inferior, in the light of "The Golden Age of Comedy" and other collections of Sennett footage, although still vastly entertaining and worth a second viewing. Some of the sight gags are just wonderful; others seem rather commonplace, and a good deal of the footage seems to have been selected for no other reason than its being available! There is also one unpardonable
sin -- Billy Devan is incorrectly identified as Snub Pollard! And a good
deal of the Keystone Cops chase sequence is not authentic Sennett, but was
taken from the sound Warner feature "Hollywood Hotel". But there's enough
good material in "Once Over Lightly" to compensate for the dull spots and
the overdone sound effects.


We expounded at some length on the merits of recent Warner cartoons in our
last program notes, so we won't repeat the process here. "The High and the
Flighty" isn't as bizarre a classic as was last week's "Double or Mutton",
but it's still a fine, fast, and quite savage cartoon.

"YOU CAN'T CHEAT AN HONEST MAN" (Universal, 1939) 2 reel excerpt; directed
by George Marshall; written by Charles Bogle (W.C. Fields),


Since "The Bank Dick" - the most unadulterated Fieldsonian ever to hit the
screen - has caused something of a furor on television this week, it seemed
like a good idea to include a lengthy Fields excerpt in our show tonight.
Not that we really needed that excuse! "You Can't Cheat an Honest Man" was
one of Fields' four films for Universal (five, if one includes "Follow the
Boys"), and though Fields himself was off-screen too often in order to
have an equal amount of footage devoted to Edgar Bergen (his long sequences
seem quite flat today), when Fields was ON screen he was marvellous --
masquerading as Gertrude Schlicklgroup, the world's only bearded bareback-
riding, dodging creditors, referring to Eddie Anderson as the "Chief Utahi",
being tricked into giving money to a hodding child who claims that her dog
has been crushed by an elephant, and so on. Our excerpt is of the final
two reels, wherein Fields completely wrecks a high-toned society party with
his loud-mouthed stories about snakes, and engages in a wacky game of ping-
pong with Ivan Lebedoff. This whole generous chunk of film represents
Fields at his very best.

- INTERMISSION -

"BLOCKHEADS" (Hal Roach-MGM, 1938) 6 reels; Produced by Hal Roach and Stan
Laurel; directed by John G. Blystone; story and screenplay by
Charles Rogers, Felix Adler, Harry Langdon, James Farrott and Arnold Belcard;
edited by Bert Jordan. With Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, Minna Gombell,
Patricia Ellis, Billy Gilbert, Harry Woods, Harry Stubbs, James Finlayson,
William Royle.

"Blockheads" is perhaps the last of the vintage Laurel and Hardy films. They
made a couple more with Roach, and another two back at MGM much later, but
"Blockheads" represents the last from the Roach-MGM-Laurel & Hardy hierarchy.
In 1938, it was also planned to be their last film. I remember as a child
being too saddened by the thought that this was their last to get really
enthused about it. And the critics, not affected so sentimentally, were
far from kind. Most thought it quite weak, and some had the temerity to
suggest that if this was the best Laurel and Hardy could do, then it was
high time they split up and went their separate ways.

Of course, with the current paucity of screen comedy, it's easy to accept that
"Blockheads" seems much funnier today than in 1938. But at the same time,
1938 was hardly a year rich in comedy. The cycle of crazy comedies was
spiralling to a close with "It's Love I'm After" and "Merrily We Live";
Chaplin was between pictures; the work of Lloyd and Keaton was only mildly
interesting, Laurel and Hardy were really the last defenders of visual
comedy, and to snub a film as rich in inventive humor as "Blockheads" seems quite beyond comprehension. The very things offered as criticisms were the things that make it such a delight. It had no "plot" -- although attempts at plots, and romantic sub-plots, had marred several other Laurel and Hardy features -- from "Donnie Scotland" to "Swiss Miss". It was just a series of gags, as in their two-reelers. Well, pure, concentrated, unadulterated Laurel and Hardy is certainly more to be recommended than scorned -- and "Blockheads" is pure concentration on L & H, and their most typical material. Almost like old vaudevillians before the final curtain, they trot out their old routines and embellish them -- and throw in a few new ones too. There are gags in "Blockheads" borrowed directly from "The Music Box", "Helpmates" and others -- and the new gags, like the windowshade routine, are of the same high order. Even Harry Langdon, one of the writers, borrowed too and you’ll find traces of "Soldier Man" and "The Strong Man" in the early portions of the film.

"Blockheads" abounds in fast slapstick, in destruction and ordered chaos. Hardy’s meticulously laid plans, and his domestic bliss, are soon shattered. Pompous and politeness is reduced to screaming, frenzied mayhem, and Stan, the unwitting cause of it all, sits patiently on the sidelines of all the warfare, quite unable to figure it all out. "Blockheads" maintains its marvellous pace until about five minutes from the end. Then, suddenly, it falls flat. Neither Laurel and Hardy, nor Langdon and Parrott, nor even John Elystone (who directed Keaton’s "Our Hospitality"), seem to know how to wind it all up. Characteristically they settle for a repeat of an old gag -- from "We Faw Down". It doesn't work as well here as it did then, which is a pity. One would like the last of the vintage Laurel and Hardys to come to its conclusion with a triumphant smash. But in view of all the wonderful stuff that has gone before, one can readily excuse this brief lapse.

"Blockheads" has of course been seen on television, sometimes even complete, though often cut to as little as 15 minutes! But Laurel and Hardy devotees never worry about whether they’ve seen it before, and at least tonight you can enjoy it without having the carefully paced gags ruined through the injection of commercials for cold pills and laxatives.

A final thought: "Blockheads" in 1938, "You Can't Cheat an Honest Man" 1939. Only 20 years. Not too much has happened in that time to musicals, or dramas, or westerns. They’ve gotten less interesting of course, but that we take for granted. But what a difference in the comedy field. These two films seem as remote from the contemporary comedy as do the silents of Keaton & Lloyd. And their best gags, let it be noted, are ones that today would be considered too "offensive" or "tasteless" or "cruel" to be accepted. And so we settle for "Houseboat" and the quiet chuckle. And the quiet chuckle has its place of course; but oh for that good old belly-laugh again!

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NEXT PROGRAMS: March 17th, a second date to be announced.
"THE BUSHER" (Ince; Charles Ray, Colleen Moore, John Gilbert) and
"THE FORBIDDEN CITY" (Norma Tallmadge, Thomas Keighan) will be the first program; "THE STORY" (House Peters, Virginia Valli, Matt Moore) and shorts the second program. Also coming up in the very near future: SANDERS OF THE RIVER (Korda) with Leslie Banks, Paul Robeson; Feyder's GRAINQUERILLE; a great deal of Pearl White material; and a program devoted to the sound serial.