

Universal: 1925-27

When Universal set up shop it called itself the Universal Film Manufacturing Company - and it was an appropriate name. The exceptions like "All Quiet on the Western Front" notwithstanding, Universal has always been concerned more with commercially packaged "product" -- and it is to their credit that so much of this machine-tooled work has turned out so entertainingly. They always gave their customers their money's-worth, and our program tonight provides a good cross-section of their unimportant but extremely neatly made "bread-and-butter" product -- some of the tastiest of its kind in the 20's.

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"THE BASHFUL WHIRLWIND" (A Mustang Western, 1925) 2 reels; story by Pierre Loucks; continuity by Carl Krusada; photographed by Charles Kaufman; directed by Ernst Laemmle; starring EDMUND COBB, with Mary Beth Milford, Roy Hughes, Clark Comstock.

There's really little that one can - or need - say about this diverting little western. Like the Hoot Gibsons, it is not to be taken too seriously and has a good deal of comedy mixed in with its lively action. It's fast and well done, with some good hard-riding running inserts of Ed Cobb, who seems to be handling most of his own rough stuff here, including a transfer from horse to stagecoach. Cobb is still around incidentally, in very minor bit roles. Cobb was never a top-line western star, but had a certain following on a middle level; in sound westerns he played primarily as a heavy, although occasionally (as in "Arizona Badman") he'd get an interesting off-beat "good bad-man" role.

"CITY OF STARS" (Universal, 1925) 2 reels; written and directed by H. Bruce Humberstone.

A short designed to advertise upcoming Universal films (many of which will be familiar to old Huffians), "City of Stars" was also out to propagate the theory that at Universal all stars, directors and executives were just one big happy happy family, under the benign leadership of Carl Laemmle, with the own aim of bestowing outstanding entertainment of unsurpassed quality on the moviegoers of the world. And if they made a buck so doing, that was fine, but of course that was the secondary consideration! "City of Stars" gets off to a good start with a portrait of beaming Uncle Carl, and an admirer saying "With that smile, it's no wonder he has a million friends!". Since its propaganda value is nil today of course, one can sit back nostalgically and enjoy the scenes of the old studio (which has changed remarkably little) and of its stars of the 20's. The studio tour tends to skip rather annoyingly past all the wonderful standing sets, and too many of these are glimpsed rather than seen, but there are pleasant introductions to such directors as William Seiter and Harry Pollard, and stars like Laura LaPlante, Hoot Gibson, Marion Nixon, May McAvoy, Reginald De ny, Jack Hoxie, Bill Desmond, Norman Kerry, Patsy Ruth Miller and everybody else within reach - except Chaney, who was singularly uncooperative about such things, and never had a very high opinion of Universal anyway! However, as compensation we get to meet the studio's general manager, Raymond L. Schrock! Some of the things we are told are a little hard to take -- Norman Kerry, it would seem, is working on two pictures at the same time, and one or two location scenes (e.g., one from "Peacock Feathers") actually some 30 miles from the studio are depicted as being within studio confines! And every picture that Universal had completed, or was preparing, is shown as being "in production" on this busy lot. But why quibble? It's a showmanlike little film, and showmanship is something sadly lacking today.

"ON YOUR TOES" (1927) Directed by Fred Newmeyer; starring Reginald Denny, with Mary Carr, Barbara Worth, Hayden Stevenson, Frank Hagney, Gertrude Howard, and Andy Devine and Leon Janney as extras. 6 reels.

One of the later Denny vehicles at Universal, "On Your Toes" is obviously cheaper and more quickly made than "Skinner's Dress Suit" and "California Straight Ahead". However, it is also better than "What Happened to Jones" (a very weak Denny, despite excellent reviews at the time) and "The Cheerful Fraud" and others that were considered more successful, so on the whole it is well up to his average standard. There's a little more story than usual, and more action (Denny is a boxer, and some of the climactic fight scenes may be stock from his earlier "The Abysmal Brute"). The plot is a wonderfully hokey old affair with every cliché in the book, complete with grandmother Mary Carr rushing to the ringside as Denny is facing defeat, and giving him the all-important message which enables him to go in and win! Universal didn't leave out a single cliché, and we won't spoil your fun by enumerating them; enough that in these clear-cut and unsophisticated surroundings, they work. It's a very nicely mounted production, with good photography and performances -- with lovely Barbara Worth quite a standout. Denny recently remarked incidentally that he considered Fred Newmeyer (who directed this) a very inferior director, who left most of the real work to his comedy stars. This may well explain why Newmeyer's features away from Lloyd and Denny never really amounted to very much. And since Denny seems a pleasant and unbiased fellow, with a great deal of respect for Seiter, Pollard and others of his directors, one can assume that his opinions of Newmeyer have some foundation. One would like to see "That's My Daddy", considered by many to be Denny's very best picture, and try to determine just who was responsible for its success. Newmeyer directed it, Denny wrote it. Outside of Eastman House however, we don't know of a print floating around at present.

BONUS ITEM

Tonight's program is somewhat shorter than we had envisioned. But rather than add other silent material and upset the balance of the Universal "combination", we decided to put in a little "bonus" item that several of our members have asked to see, but that has never found a place in a regular program.

The film is "ECHO OF APPLAUSE", a 50-minute history of the movies, done with taste and seriousness, but not with too much excitement. More footage than is required is devoted to the history of photography per se, and the movie material appears only in the last half of the film. Much of it by now is familiar of course, and there are only the briefest of clips from the "big" films. However, some of the primitives and obscurer films are quite fascinating, and as long as you don't expect too much, you may find a lot of enjoyment in this film. It was written and produced in England by James Anderson, and released there by Warner Brothers.

.... AND AN APOLOGY

As these notes are finished, it is already well into the wee hours of the morning, and pressure of work has prevented an earlier start on musical scoring. In any event, 2 of tonight's four prints are a little on the rocky side, and as much attention will have to be given to keeping them in the projector as to providing music for them. So as of this moment, it rather looks as though our scoring will be a rather off-the-cuff affair. Its unfair to the films to so present them, but sometimes it can't be helped.

Next show - Friday next, May 22; Dietrich and Donat in Jacques Feyder's KNIGHT WITHOUT ARMOR; Laurel & Hardy in ME & MY PAL; Charlie Chase in "SKIP THE MALOU".

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