D.W. GRIFFITH's "THE IDOL DANCER" (1920)
S.M. EISENSTEIN's "THE GENERAL LINE" (1926-29)

"THE GENERAL LINE" (THE OLD AND THE NEW) Directed by S.M. Eisenstein, assisted by G.V. Alexandrov; photographed by Eduard Tisse. 70 mins. With Marfa Lapkina.

In the wake of Marie Seton's scholarly analysis and description of "The General Line" in her biography of Eisenstein, a lengthy re-evaluation here seems unnecessary. It remains one of the best and most interesting of all Eisenstein's films, despite the conditions under which it was made. Eisenstein started the film in 1926, and then had to abandon it to concentrate on "October" in 1927. When he was able to return to "The General Line" much of it was already out of date, not least in that the collectivisation of farming that it was advocating was already well under way. Thus Eisenstein, with Alexandrov's assistance, had to re-shuffle, re-write, and adjust the balance of the film. Considering all these difficulties, "The General Line" is a remarkably unified piece of work.

Needless to say, like all Russian films designed for propagandist purposes, it is "loaded" to the hilt. One can become vastly irritated by constantly seeing the non-progressive "old guard" represented only via scenes of self-indulgence, obesity and thick, fat, sweaty necks -- or wine dribbling over enormous chins. And the perennial cheerfulness and optimism of the "little people" is perhaps even more nauseating, since it seems to have even less foundation. However, one has to accept these automatically as facets peculiar to this form of national filmic propaganda. With other directors, such facets were the be-all and end-all of the whole production; with Eisenstein, they were merely incidentals. With other directors, the "message" was all; with Eisenstein, technique was all -- and the propaganda succeeded only because the film succeeded. Regardless of content, "The General Line" is superb cinema all the way, with stunningly composed and photographed images, and sequence after sequence that is justly famous and classic of its kind -- the race between the old man and the youth in the wheat field, the climactic tractor episode, the mating of the bulls, and two more personal Eisenstein elements: a surprising and whimsical comic episode, lampooning the workings of bureaucracy, and a typically anti-religious and anti-church sequence as the church leaders pray for rain, bringing all their "resources" into play -- and all totally in vain.

Our print is a dupe of course, but a relatively good one. Apart from the first few feet, it is reasonably sharp and clear, and the beauty of the camerawork comes through well. It seems to correspond with what we borrowed from James Card of Eastman House some seven years ago (not the same print, but a print from the same negative) and Herman Weinberg has pointed out that it is slightly longer than the prints generally circulated in this country.

Note: unfortunately we have to run this print silent, and without music. This is due to the physical condition of the print itself. While it looks fine on the screen, and doesn't have too many splices, it is badly shrunked and full of torn or pulled perforations, so that it has to be carefully "nursed" through each showing, and sometimes held in the gate by hand. Quite apart from the fact that it would be difficult to play a score while giving it this kind of attention, I was also afraid to risk further damage to the print by subjecting it to the hazards of running and re-running it for timing and scoring. A film as intricate as this needs a meticulous score, or none at all; a casual or ad-libbed score could definitely work against it. While we dislike running silents without music, we think you'll find that this one is good enough
"THE IDOL DANCER" (D.W. Griffith-First National, 1920) Photographed by G.W. Bitzer; scenario by S.E.Z. Allen, from the story "Blood of Covenanters" by Gordon Ray Young. 7 reels.

The Cast:
The Beachcomber (RICHARD BARTHELMESS); White Almond Flower (CLARINE SEYHOUR); Walter Kincaid (Greighton Hale); Rev. Franklin Blythe (George MacQuarrie); Mrs Blythe (Kate Bruce); Peter, a native minister (Porter Strong); Pansy (Florence Short); The Blackbirder (Anders Randolph) Chief Wando (Walter James)

Since it is the purpose of this film society to screen any interesting and rare silents, the failures as well as the successes, we need not apologise here for showing what is frankly a bad film. Not having seen "Scarlet Days", "One Exciting Night" or "Sally of the Sawdust", I cannot categorically state that this is his worst picture, but I think it safe to assume that all three were infinitely better and that "The Idol Dancer" was perhaps the only really bad film D.W. made. (Even later, weak entries like "Drums of Love" and the remake of "The Battle of the Sexes" had many worthwhile qualities). But the question arises -- is "The Idol Dancer" really a Griffith picture?

Its opening credit states: "Anyone advertising a picture as a Griffith production without the name "Griffith" and trademark "DG" on each film is guilty of fraudulent advertising". Could it be that on this occasion, D.W. himself was pulling a bit of a fraud?

Apart from the fact that it doesn't look like a Griffith production, there is the circumstance of its production -- made simultaneously in the Bahamas with "The Love Flower", a first-class Griffith production which bears his personal stamp on every frame. The shoddiness of this one, in comparison, is quite startling. Elmer Clifton, a former Griffith player and now a director, was along on the trip for unspecified duties, for which he received a large and unexplained bonus.

When the suspicion that Griffith had not directed this film was brought into the open a year or two ago, Griffith's biographer, Seymour Stern, denounced it vigorously. Stern knows a great deal more about Griffith's movements and motivations than I do, and his explanations and "proofs" are worthy of consideration. (They appear in the article "The Cold War Against D.W. Griffith" in "Films in Review"). However, Stern's assertion that this is all a part of the Communist conspiracy to discredit Griffith doesn't, in this case, hold water. If anything, they would be doing Griffith a tremendous favor by trying to disassociate him with personal direction of "The Idol Dancer"!

The overall impression, certainly, is of someone trying valiantly to imitate Griffith, but falling somewhat short. The Griffith grammar is there -- the cutbacks, the fades within scenes, and so on -- but it all seems badly applied, and some of the editing is downright shoddy. The traditional race to the rescue at the end seems more authentically D.W. -- complete to the little group besieged in a log cabin, natives pounding on the doors, and the hero leading a rescue party. This is good, vigorous stuff, and comes off well. Incidentally, if nothing else, the comic relief and quaint behaviour of the natives certainly confirms once and for all that Griffith had no "remorse" or "guilt" feelings over "The Birth of a Nation"!

By any standards "The Idol Dancer" would be a weak film, but our criticism of it would be less harsh were not Griffith's own standards so high. If we knew that it had been directed by Elmer Clifton, it would be easier to accept (although even for Clifton, it seems uninspired). Another directorial possibility is S.E.Z. Allen, credited with the scenario, but who had
directed a handful of films.

It was not well received at the time, and First National in particular were most bitter about its quality, feeling that their contract with Griffith entitled them to really top-notch product. Presumably even Griffith was far from satisfied with it, and tried to give it more stature than it had via the titles, and "documentary" footnotes which are often meaningless. One such title, concerning Clarine Seymour's dance, offers this choice information:

"Note: here are an old people -- so old they know the follies of civilization. They sold ivory peacocks to the Phoenicians in the time when Solomon built his temple".

The titles throughout are wonderfully florid and very much in the Griffith idiom, yet they too indicate a certain apathy on Griffith's part, for most of them, re-worked a little, are lifted bodily from the original story by Gordon Ray Young. It's a well, if flowery, written yarn, and runs for only 26 pages of double-spaced typing. Griffith also apparently used titles to bolster the story after prints were completed and delivered to First National for distribution. On April 1st, 1920, after 79 prints had already been circulated through 31 exchanges, orders were sent out to insert new titles, one of them being the opening title: "If in all this there be a moral, it is that good example is the greatest preachment".

Griffith was apparently much impressed with Clarine Seymour, although her performance here is disappointing, and her "dance" hard to take seriously. However, she was scheduled to play Anna Moore in "Way Down East", and it was only her untimely death, after a little preliminary shooting had already been done, that caused Lillian Gish to take over the role. Barthelmess, at this time, was fast becoming one of the most popular leading men in films. He'd made 7 films in 1919, including four films opposite Dorothy Gish under Flimar Clifton's direction, and, for Griffith, "Broken Blossoms" and "Scarlet Days". "The Idol Dancer" was the first of his three Griffith films in 1920, the other two being "The Love Flower" and "Way Down East". "The Love Flower", a little known Griffith, had some stunning camerawork that foreshadowed (and surpassed) Flaherty's South Seas work by several years. We hope to show this film shortly.

Quite incidentally, to add to the general sense of mystery and chaos surrounding "The Idol Dancer", Griffith and his whole company were feared lost at sea when a storm overtook them en route to the Bahamas. They finally showed up after several days without food or water.

Having criticised the film so heavily, you may by now be expecting a totally worthless film. It isn't; there are some lovely sea and landscapes - including some fine New England scenes - by Bitzer, Barthelmess is fine (how his strong face helps patently weak situations) and there are moments of genuine excitement. But oh how depressing it would be if it were proven that D.W. really did direct it!

Our print is absolutely complete, and a recent reduction from the original negative. However, being the first such print made, it is an uncorrected answer print -- occasionally too light, occasionally too dark. This is an ordinary flaw in printing, and not as the film should appear. In 35mm, with all the tones, it must have been, pictorially at least, quite stunning.

NEXT PROGRAM - Tuesday next, April 28th - same time, same place -
A JOHN FORD program. AIR MAIL (1932) with Ralph Bellamy, Pat O'Brien and Gloria Stuart; and excerpts from THE PRISONER OF SHARK ISLAND, DRUMS ALONG THE MOHAWK (Color), THE WAGONMASTER and THEY WERE EXPENDABLE.