PEARL WHITE -- AND THE EARLY SERIALS

Ever since our first silent serial show (in August, 1955) we've had many requests for a follow-up -- and especially for Pearl White material. Frankly we've delayed out of the fear that such a show might be a sad let-down, but finally -- here it is. A word of warning, however, to those of you who remember the early serials through rose-colored glasses that 40 years have clouded with nostalgia, and to those of you who have seen but little of them and regard Pearl White -- by reputation -- as representing the zenith of those wonderful days of the chapter plays.

Although Pearl White was a unique personality, her serials themselves were never really top-grade. Nor were the early serials really notable for speed and spectacular thrills; mystery was their main forte, and the spectacular action and daredevil stunts came into their own somewhat later, most notably in the Pathe serials of the 20's. Finally, relatively few of these early serials are available to us in anything approximating their original state; prints are duped several generations, are incomplete, and often missing the very necessary subtitles.

If you expect a non-stop parade of action from tonight's compilation you may be disappointed; that just wasn't what the earliest serials offered. But if you don't set your sights too high, I think you'll find this an enjoyable and certainly reasonably representative cross-section of those chapter-plays. For contrast, we have included a few brief excerpts from the faster and more polished serials of the 20's.

You'll find one or two items in the program not originally announced, and also one deletion. We have already played two episodes of "What Happened to Mary", and found that the two remaining to us were of such strictly non-melodramatic content that they hardly fitted into the context of tonight's program. So, we'll be using these in the regular way on a later program. Secondly, although not originally announced, we did -- on our program notes last Tuesday -- mention a "Fantomas" excerpt as being shown tonight. This too proved very tame, and decidedly not representative of that exciting film. So -- with a long show anyway, and probably a warm one -- we thought it best not to add length to the show for no solid reason. The various items squeezed out -- including another "Hazard of Helen" episode -- will quite certainly find their way into upcoming shows.

******************************************************************************

PROGRAM IN ORDER OF SCREENING

"THE SERIAL QUEENS" (Biograph Television, 1956) One reel; script & editing: W.K. Everson; narrator: Paul Killiam

This quick roundup of serials from 1914-1929 starts off with excerpts from "The Hazards of Helen" and "The Perils of Pauline", and then presents highlights from a number of Pathé and Universal serials with Ruth Roland, Pearl White, Bill Desmond, William Duncan, Walter Miller, Allene Dare and others. Directors represented include Spencer Gordon Bennett, W.S. Van Dyke, J.P. McGowan and Paul Hurst. The serials: THE SHIELDING SHADOW (1916) THE FATAL RING (1917) THE TIGER'S TRAIL (1919) WHITE EAGLE (1922) THE FAST EXPRESS (1924) RETURN OF THE HIDDLE RIDER (1927) MAN WITHOUT A FACE (1927) THE TERRIBLE PEOPLE (1927) and TIMBER QUEEN (1922).

"THE PERILS OF PAULINE" (Gaumont, 1914) Dir: Louis Gasnier; starring Pearl
Notwithstanding the occasional real thrills, the crudity and downright illiteracy of "The Perils of Pauline" is a never-ending source of amazement. It was lucky to be the first of its genre; novelty presumably offset other shortcomings, although at a time when extremely able and polished little films were being made, acceptance of its slipshod production is still surprising. It is strangely infantile titles - and the mis-spelling of words (even when those words and whole sentences were lifted bodily from the novel) - really have to be seen to be believed. Nothing, surely, can ever top that classic title (included in our first show) when Pearl is told that she is to be subjected to a test to prove her "immoral strength", the supposition being that she is a Goddess. However, there are some lulus in today's episodes too. Having criticised it perhaps a little more than it warrants, we'll go on to say that it remains lively and darned good fun, and the cast look as though they were enjoying themselves as much as anyone - villain Paul Panzer in particular! As for Pearl herself, I can't think of any player in 1914 who had more sheer personality than she did. There were better actresses certainly; girls who were prettier; but Pearl had that indefinable something "special". For one thing, she seemed to enjoy everything she did - and to convey that enjoyment to the audience. Too, she was a strikingly attractive girl in a healthy, open-air, big-sister fashion. The prevailing standards of beauty for heroines at that time demanded a girlish innocence, a little sister appeal. Pearl's laughing face wasn't the kind to inspire romantic sighs from the boys - but it wasn't the kind to suggest that she needed kindness and protection either. Pearl could take care of herself - and the boy friend too. As such, she was at least a generation ahead of her time, and her good looks and bounding personality were insufficiently appreciated at the time. Her personality more than made up for any deficiencies in the serials themselves - and if her publicity, and her hoked-up "biography" and the ludicrous press stories that she never used doubts all seem more than a little wild today, we should remember that the art (?) of movie publicity was then much younger even than the movies themselves. Today's publicity is really no less wild - and it's a lot less fun!

"ZUDORA" (Thanhouser, 1914) 20 episodes; written by Donald Goodman, directed by Frederic Sullivan and Howard Hansell; with James Cruze, Marguerite Snow, Harry Benham. One reel excerpt.

Mid-way between "The Million Dollar Mystery" and "The 20 Million Dollar Mystery", "Zudora" was one of the most successful of all the early serials. Since the opening titles to the film (which include that wonderful old Thanhouser trademark) give quite a lot of its history, we'll add no further comments here, except to say that it is obviously a polished and well-made little film, and in its original form undoubtedly far less confusing than it here appears, minus all but one or two titles. Knowing the title of the episode - "The Foiled Elopement" - only makes it more difficult to figure out!

"PLUNDER" (Pathé; 15 episodes; 1923) Written by George B. Seitz and Bertram Millhauser; directed by Seitz; with Pearl White, Warren William, Harry Semels.

Pearl's last serial was far from being one of her best, and had a remarkably tame climax, but this excerpt from episode nine is good lively action stuff, with Pearl sinking in a quicksand and battling the villains, all in the wilds of New Jersey!

"The Hazards of Helen" (Kalem; 1915) Dir: J.P. McGowan; with Helen Gibson. Excerpt

This climactic excerpt is from the second "Hazards" series, with Helen Gibson having taken over from Helen Holmes. It's good, polished, well-edited material. Gibson was more of an actress than Holmes, more of an athlete.
"The Flame Fighter" (Rayart; 1925; 10 episodes) Dir: Robert Dillon; with Herbert Rawlinson, Brenda Lane, Purnell Pratt.

A very brief glimpse of a slightly above average independent serial of the 20's; Rayart was the forerunner of the present Allied Artists.

"King of the Kongo" (Mascot; 1929) Dir: Richard Thorpe; with Walter Miller, Jacqueline Logan, Boris Karloff.

Another brief glimpse: this was Mascot's first sound serial, though also released in silent form, Boris Karloff can be seen in our few scenes, and Richard Thorpe seems to have been a much more animated director then than now.

(CHANGE OF REEL: NOT AN INTERMISSION)

"PEARL OF THE ARMY" (Pathe; 1916) 15 episodes; directed by Edward Jose; written by G.W. McConnell and George B. Seitz; supervised by Louis Gasnier; with Pearl White, Ralph Kellard, Theodore Friebus (Major Brent) W.T. Carleton (Colonel Dare) Marie Wayne (Bertha Bonn). 5 reels of excerpts.

Although not a particularly outstanding serial, we are presenting some rather lengthy excerpts from this film because the pictorial quality (from the original negative) is exceptionally good -- and because Pearl herself never looked lovelier than in this film. We culled these five reels from almost twice as much footage; much of the serial is quite turgid, and all of it is baffling, but of the material available, these are quite certainly the best scenes. Over the years I have seen a great deal of this serial, including a feature version, and I have never understood what it is all about. The material tonight has been very strangely edited so that it makes even less sense; there are misplaced scenes, jump cuts, and very few titles. I suggest therefore that you make no attempt to follow it or unravel the mystery of who the "Silent Menace" is -- but just sit back and enjoy it. Some of the titles were added about ten years ago for a proposed tv release that never came off, and they almost rival the original "Perils" titles in some respects. At one point a young lady tells us "I cannot think of marriage, or anything else for that matter!", while at another great moment, when the re-editing and removal of titles has almost bludgeoned one into insensibility, the villain comes on to tell his cronies that he "has everyone hopelessly confused now!" and that "we haven't much more time to go running around like this!". Other gems of 1950 title-writing I'll leave you to determine for yourself. (We'll be merciful and not name the prominent writer of titles for foreign movies who created these literary masterpieces!)

While it obviously isn't fair to judge any film by such badly-edited excerpts, it does seem, even in its original state, to have been unnecessarily complicated. Also, there are more than a few evidences of carelessness. The Silent Menace at one point enters a cabin that is surrounded by snow; when the army follows him, minutes later, there isn't a trace of it. And when a scene is shot at a railway station, notice all the passengers gawking out of the window at the cameraman. Nevertheless, it has all the trimmings -- including that old gimmick of having a suspect appear where the masked villain had been seconds before -- and some lovely shots in old Fort Lee, atop New Jersey's Palisades, and so on. Even if you don't know what it's all about, I think you'll find it vastly entertaining.

INTERMISSION

We have been wanting for some time to show TERROR, but never felt quite justified. It is not a particularly good picture, and the print is one of those dupes that we try to avoid. Yet, for the right audience, it can be a tremendously enjoyable picture. If we haven’t got that "right" and sympathetic audience tonight, then we’ll never have it - so here is TERROR, or, as it was called in the U.S., THE PERILS OF PARIS.

It was Pearl's last film - made the year after PLUNDER, and also after a string of straight, non-serial melodramas for Fox. Pearl made it in Paris, but apparently somewhat reluctantly. At the time, she commented:

"I will tell you that this "Terror" is the last picture in which I am going to work. I want to direct, but I was talked into playing it. I wrote the story. But I think this business of being the whole show is a bad idea. You lose your perspective. After this I'm going to direct stories other people have written. "Terror" is a stunt picture. It's fast. The first picture to be made in the American style by an American company in Paris. I guess it's the first picture ever made right in the traffic there, and it is really the first time the famous sewers of Paris ever have been photographed. We took lights down there and got some great stuff."

Disregarding Pearl's claims for "firsts", one gets the impression - both from her comments, from the lack of an officially designated director - and from the picture itself - that Pearl handled at least some of the direction herself. If so, it may explain why she never directed again, because while the direction isn't exactly bad, it is jerky, uneven and generally confused. One seldom knows just who is who, or what the motivations are. Luckily however there's enough excitement to keep it going, and a grand climax with fights and chases over the roof-tops and through the sewers.

Pearl herself handled the U.S. sale of the picture, and unfortunately didn't work out a particularly good deal; a small company handled it, and distribution was but limited.

Our print by the way is one of those annoying dupes that is obviously made from a really good original 35mm print, but has been spoiled by shoddy lab work. However, Pearl White material - like certain Chaplins - is so rare that the really good print is the sad exception rather than the rule.

Wm. K. Everson

Tonight's program will be introduced by Mr. Allan Brock, a prominent actors' agent in the 20's and 30's, and a friend of both Pearl White and Ruth Roland.

Next program: Tuesday next, room 10-C

Program One in the Horror Cycle: THE OLD SCHOOL:
Paul Leni's THE CAT AND THE CANARY (1927) Laura La Plante, Creighton Hale
Victor Halperin's WHITE ZOMBIE (1933) Bela Lugosi, Johnny Barron

Program Notes & Enquiries: W.K.Everson,Hotel Bradford, 210 W. 70th St., NYC 23
Committee: Edward Gorey, Sandra Everson, Charles Shibuk, Dorothy Lovell.