The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
November 27, 1959

THRILLS FROM THE SILENTS

An Apology

Two of the excerpt items announced for this evening have had, unfortunately, to be excised from the program -- "King of the Pack" and "Chasing Choo Choo". We previewed these in 35mm, and due to their very shrunken condition, it has not yet been possible to process 16mm prints from them, although the work is in hand. We're sorry about this, and also thankful that we didn't say too much about them in our previous notes. Hence we don't think anyone will have come just for those items, or will be too disappointed. Naturally, we'll schedule them just as soon as possible, and in the meantime have added other material to the show tonight to take their place.

"THE FLAME FIGHTER" (Rayart serial, 1926) Dir: Duke Worne
"FIGHTING FOR FAIR" (1925) With: Eddie Fetherstone, Ben Alexander

Brief stunt action clips from these two lively independent films get our show under way.


Never one of the top serials, "The Master Mystery" was nevertheless a lot of fun, with a robot, a sinister gas that killed off its victims via a laughing hysteria, and all sorts of unlikely chains and gadgets for Mr. Houdini to escape from. These brief excerpts give a fairly good impression of the serial as a whole -- except that it was rather slower-paced than these scenes might lead one to suppose.


This excerpt is actually the bulk of the climactic reel, slightly trimmed because of badly damaged sections. All of the key action is there however, and it's a rousingly done and smoothly photographed piece of hokum. In the late 20's, poor old Ralph Lewis seemed doomed to playing policemen, firemen or locomotive engineers just on the verge of retiring -- and becoming involved in mayhem of this kind! Perhaps it is ungentlemly to conjecture on Ann Sheridan's exact age, but she's no youngster, even here in 1928! Incidentally, there are only flash titles in this excerpt, but all you really need to know is that villain Brooks Benedict has ordered a train blow-up -- and finds out too late that both Ann Sheridan and his mother have boarded that train instead of the later one they had planned to take.

"THE MAN FROM BEYOND" (1921, Houdini Pictures Corp.) Dir: Burton King; story by Harry Houdini

With absurd scripting and poor direction, "The Man from Beyond" was a quite worthless film -- until this climactic reel, with its exciting cliff-edge fistfights and rescue from the falls, the latter a particularly well photographed and edited item. At the time much to do was made about
Houdini risking his life for the sequence, none of which holds much water (no pun intended) if you really study the shots -- and the occasional use of dummies. But it's still thrilling and exciting stuff, and one can easily understand the enthusiasm (if not the judgment) of the critics who thought it superior to the climax of "Way Down East".


The Cast: Harvey Manford (Harry Houdini); Richard Raver (Tully Marshall)
Mary Cameron (Ann Forest) Ethel Delmead (Lae Pusok) Clifton Allison
(Augustus Phillips) Dr. Harry Tyson (Arthur Hoyt) Dudley Cameron (Tom Jefferson) Hannah (Jane Wolf)

Even though it keeps its action and stunt-thrills for the last half of the picture, and starts off rather slowly, "The Grin Game" has such a damned good story and is so well directed that it even overcomes the handicap of Houdini's unpersonable appearance and stilted acting ability. In essence, it's a Fairbanksian yarn, but without the tongue in cheek gusto that Doug would have given it. Which, of course, is no criticism. Irving Willat was a really fine director ("All The Brothers Were Valiant", "North of '36", "The Storm", "The Michigan Kid") though often wasted on trite material. He gets some fine style into even the slower scenes here, particularly a most impressive episode when the isolated heavies envision their own particular advantage (shown as a flash-forward, superimposed) at the death of a business associate. The story itself is a strong one, though less novel today through repetition in such films as "Circumstantial Evidence", "Beyond a Shadow of Doubt" and others. And to an already strong story-line, Arthur P. Reeve has added many of his "Elaine" embellishments; in fact the whole film has much of the flavor of the best silent serials. Yet all the mysterious figures and apparently irrelevant action are neatly dovetailed and logically explained at the proper time.

The action and stunt scenes are well done, even though some of the traps and chainings that Houdini escapes from are rather dragged in by the heels. The final aerial chase and plane wreck is especially effective, not least because the wreck is the real thing (unintended in the script, and thus caught somewhat abruptly by the camera). In 1919 Paramount made a big deal of this, featured the stunt in a newreel and in a special short, and generally proclaimed what a "miracle" it was that Houdini had escaped alive. Frankly it seems impossible that anyone could have escaped such a wreck, and my guess is that some hapless stuntman did meet his end while Houdini watched the whole thing from the ground. The closeups of Houdini dangling from a rope, or crouched on the wings, are obvious studio inserts; and the authentic stunt scenes are in suspiciously long long-shots. If Mr. H had been performing himself, his own vanity would surely have demanded some medium and close shots to prove it. The stunt actually called for a plane to plane transfer, not a crash; but in the course of the transfer, the wings locked - and down went both planes.

In his recent book on Houdini, William Lindsey Grosham relates the very surprising fact that "The Grin Game" was a complete boxoffice flop -- and gives the figures to prove it. It took in about a fifth of what the average Paramount programmer did, despite being superior to many of them (including some of Doug's, like "In Again, Out Again"). Presumably Houdini just couldn't be sold as a movie personality - any more than Red Grange in later years.

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