"The Revenue Man and the Girl" (Biograph, 1911, one reel)
Dir: D.W. Griffith; camera: G.W. Bitzer
With Edwin August, Dorothy West, Gladys Logan, Alfred Paget, and Donald Crisp as an extra.

This rarely shown Biograph, released in September of 1911, is hardly a great early Griffith, but it's no mere pot-boiler either. He obviously lavished more care than usual on it, and there are interesting portents of things to come -- Dorothy West and the dove, for example, brings to mind later images of Lillian Gish in "Way Down East". The New Jersey landscape is utilized well to suggest the hill country of the South, and is intelligently photographed by Bitzer. The original Biograph synopsis tells us that the lovers "leave the mountains for the city beautiful" -- but the closing scene reveals all too clearly the encroachment of civilization on a still fairly wild New Jersey, via several quite modern dwellings on the left of the screen!

"While the Tide Was Rising" (Edison, 1914, one reel) Written, directed by and starring Ben Wilson.

Nicely photographed, well-paced and fast-moving, this little Edison melodrama resembles Griffith's short thrillers for Biograph ("Her Terrible Ordeal", "A Terrible Discovery", "The Lesser Evil") far more than it does the usual rather stodgy Edison films of the period. The explanation obviously lies in the fact that it is largely a one-man show by Ben Wilson, who may already have been dreaming of his ultimate career as a serial star and director. (We ran his "Officer 444" complete at the Huff Society a few years ago.) Quite certainly it is one of the few really exciting Edison films we've come across. Some of the subtitles appear to be missing, but the print is otherwise complete.

"Motor Boat Ranas" (Pathé-Jack Sennett, 1928) Dir: Harry Edwards

When we first came across "Motor Boat Ranas" some eight years ago, it seemed a rather inferior Sennett, and thus was carefully shunted away from the Huffites! In the intervening years, we've looked at so many bad Sennets that frankly it now seems rather good! At least, it's lively, moves along at a rapid clip, has some grand moments from Dilly Devan, and some genuinely amusing subtitles. By 1928, Sennett's best days were certainly behind him -- this is formula stuff, done without much imagination or real style (even though directed by Harry Edwards, who had made Harry Langdon's best feature, "Tramp Tramp Tramp"). But by 1928 most of Sennett's comedies were awful -- slow, involved marital farces for the most part, more resembling the later sound two-reelers of Leon Uris to the fast, visual slapstick treats that had made Jack famous. They were loaded down with titles, and almost devoid of action. Amid such an environment, "Motor Boat Ranas" is at least a pleasant oasis of visual gags, and Dilly Devan -- with his perpetual gleeful appreciation of Vernon Dent's misfortunes -- is a delight as always.

(Notes on prints: "The Revenue Man and the Girl" was processed from a very much shrunk original negative; the occasional jiggling is a fault that can now unfortunately, no longer be corrected. "Motor Boat Ranas" is a sound aperture print -- hence the cut-off titles. Pictorially it suffers hardly at all, but you'll need to fill in some of the gaps in the titles yourself. In case you miss it, the full title of Carmelita's night club ditty is "You may belong to someone else but tonight you go wrong with me."

Based on the novel by General Lew Wallace; scenario by Carey Wilson; adaptation by June Mathis; continuity: Carey Wilson, Pesse Jereydh. 12 reels. (Our print: 9 reels)

The Cast: Ben Hur (Ramon Novarro) Kessala (Francis X. Bushman) Esther (Lay Loavoy) Idamone (Betty Bronson) Mother of Ben Hur (Claire Kodowell) Tirzah (Kathleen Key) Iras (Carmel Myers) Simonides (Nigel be Bruller) Sheik Ilerim (Litchell Levis) Sanballat (Leo White) Arrius (Frank Currier) Balthasar (Charles Belcher) Anrah (Dale Fuller)

IMPORTANT. We hope all of you read our warning concerning the condition of this print; for the benefit of those of you who may be guests, we'll repeat it here. The print is a bad dupe, and definitely does not do justice to the original. Obviously it was taken from a well-used 35mm release print that was full of splices, scratches and even some hips. On top of inferior source material, the lab work was bad too. This is no way to judge a picture, and normally we would never shown such an inferior print. Obviously at the present time, it is interesting as a matter of historical research to show this original version, and thus we are showing it primarily as a service to the many students among us. Undoubtedly we'll attract many tonight who are not members or students, so to them especially we address this warning:

NOT to judge "Ben Hur" by a print which just doesn't permit the grandeur to come through. Eastman House in Rochester does have a meticulous 35mm print of this subject, and what a joy it is to behold. However, for the time being at least, they have been asked by MGM not to screen it at all. If you've seen the new one, you'll understand why! Our print runs only some nine reels of the original 12. Most of the meat remains, but bits and pieces are hacked throughout. Much of the motivation is obscure, and a good deal of Kessala's footage is missing. The ends of the sea battle and chariot race are off, but only the tail ends; in each case, the sequence is resolved before the cuts. (Probably these sequences ended at reel-ends, which is always the footage that gets damaged first.) Most of Carmel Myers' scenes are gone, and the Technicolor sequences reproduce (in black and white of course) rather fuzzily. The print does seem to get a little better as it progresses - or maybe it's just that one gets used to it!

It would be all too easy to launch those notes with an all-out attack on the new "Ben Hur", but perhaps that wouldn't be altogether fair. In his review of "Ben Hur" in "Films in Review", Henry Hart commented that it was unfair to compare the two versions. In the following issue, Edward Connor leapt into the fray with the statement that there just was no comparison, and that the original was far superior. Presumably there'll be no argument on that point.

However, Mr. Connor based most of his resentments on the differences between the two pictures, and the scenes that the first one had and the second one didn't. After all, however much fun it was for the pirates to use bowls of snakes in 1924, it doesn't necessarily follow that the pirates have to use snakes in 1959 as well!

Once one gets used to the fact that the new "Ben Hur" is a long yawn (but not even a restless yawn) one mellows a little. One feels a little like Gloria Swanson in reel seven of "Indiscreet" when she tells the no-good Monroe Owsley: "You're not really bad - you're just not very bright"!
The cheap sets and inept matte-shots one has to overlook; nobody makes big stuff in these inflated days when laboratory faking will fool nine out of ten people. Even the ludicrous miniatures in the sea battle wouldn't be so bad if they were cut shorter, and disguised with a little more smoke and fury. What is less forgivable is the unutterable slowness of it all -- the long, static takes; the endless conversations where nothing is said; the lack of cutaways, and indeed, the chariot race apart, the lack of any kind of filmic grammar. But when all is said and done, one is annoyed not so much by the film itself as by the fact that it was made by a one-dynamic craftsman like William Wyler. (Had Richard Thorpe made it, it would have been easier to take). And the supreme insult of all has nothing to do with the film itself -- it's the gullibility or sheer ignorance of the critics who have been acclimating it as both a masterpiece of filmic art and the greatest spectacle ever made. One wonders at their fitness for their jobs -- and I shouldn't be surprised if MGM doesn't wonder too -- for even if the critics forget, the men at Metro must remember the original creation?

Having spent longer than I intended to berating the 1959 "Ben Hur", let me hasten to add that the original version was hardly a great film either. It had many of the faults of the new one, and was saddled by a singularly inept director in Fred Niblo. Thanks to titles like "Ben Hur" and "Blood and Sand" and stars like Valentino and Fairbanks, Niblo put out some pretty big hits -- but if he ever made a really good film, I haven't seen it. What saved the original "Ben Hur" was its size. Even when nothing was happening, it was good to look at. The sets were sumptuous and solid. The players were attractive and performed well. (The new version suffers badly from its editing; Hepburn makes a loutish Hur, and Nessida, being smaller of stature and far more of a gentleman, too often seems the victim rather than the oppressor; Bushman indeed was a "noble Roman" in every sense of the word, and Novarro's smaller stature and more sensitive features made him a perfect opponent as Hur).

Niblo's direction was that of a traffic cop -- and while traffic cops are necessary to maintain order, a film like "Ben Hur" needs someone at the helm a little above the traditions of law and order. There were no traffic-cop elements in Griffith's direction of "Intolerance" or "Orphans of the Storm". But despite this pedestrian quality to it, the original "Ben Hur" remained a reasonably-paced movie -- done as a comic strip if you like, as opposed to the more intellectualised approach by Wyler -- and when the two big spectacle scenes arrived, the whole movie came to life. The sea battle, quite one of the best things of its kind ever staged, restricted its miniatures only to establishing shots -- and for the rest, full scale ships battled one another with a fantastic savagery but, despite chopped off heads, little of the nauseous gore that characterises the new wholly miniature or studio tank stuff. And of course, even this was easily toppled by the magnificent chariot race episode -- staged for Niblo by second-unit man D. Reaves Mason, just as Yakima Canutt and Andrew Mason staged it for Wyler. In some ways perhaps, the new race is more exciting. It has the surprising taste to dispense with Rosza's thundering and formless music. And it provides an absolute circus for stuntmen Canutt, Cliff Lyons et al. It is a tremendously exciting sequence, and together with the interesting scene of the increased strokes in the galley, it is the only really cinematic stuff in the film.

The old race however does have more style I think; neater editing, a greater variety of angles. And of course, it has far more to work with in the way of size. The opening shot is a knockout -- the simple low angle trucking shot as the camera follows the chariots into the arena, then slowly pans up to reveal that stupendous set. The new one tries to have its cake and eat it -- it tries to knock the audience dead with a big shot first, and then attempts to repeat that stunning pan shot. But this time, as the camera pans up, one is more dizzy than impressed as all of the little pieces of matte work that make up the "set" zip-zap into place.

All in all, not a bad job.
Niblo's "Ben Hur" is a "tasteful" production - which may be one of its drawbacks. The new one is "tasteful" too. Sometimes it's a little more fun to have less taste and more showmanship. Both versions also share a surprising lack of humor.

The facts surrounding the production of Niblo's version are too much a part of Hollywood history (and legend) to need much repetition here .... how the film was started, stopped, shot with George Walsh as Hur, reshot with Novarro, directors and writers fired and replaced, extras presumed dead after a disaster in the sea battle, and how finally, after constant opposition from Italian Fascists, the bulk of the film was re-shot in Hollywood. Pooley Croyther covers the whole debacle in a reasonably accurate form in "The Lion's Den". Erratum: "The Lion's Share".

Strangely, nobody was starred in the original - even Novarro received only featured billing. He and Hughes carry the film superbly, though there is a most touching performance (abbreviated, alas, in this print) from Betty Bronson as the Madonna. According to Miss Bronson, Fred Niblo was violently opposed to using her for the role, and only did so under protest when Thalberg was equally violently convinced that she was right.

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Wm. K. Everson --------------------------------------------------

Coming programs:

Thursday of this week:

CONRAD VEIDT in "The Spy in Black" (Powell-Pressburger, 1938)
Two sound two-reelers from silent comedy greats -
Raymond Griffith in "The Sleeping Porch"; Harry Langdon in "Tired Feet"
Plus Laurel and Hardy in "Laughing Gravy"

Wednesday the 24th:

"Scars of Jealousy" (Ince, 1923) with Lloyd Hughes, Frank Keenan
"A Chapter in Her Life" (Lois Weber, 1923) with Jane Kerton, Fred Thomson

Coming in March:

Al Jolson in "Say It With Songs" (1929) with Karlon Nixon, Fred Kohler,
Davey Lee, Frank Carpeau

"Lucky Devil" with Richard Dix, Esther Ralston, Edna May Oliver

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POST SCRIPT

A final thought on the new "Ben Hur". Even with inflated costs and salaries and the lengthy location trip, it's difficult to figure out just where that $15 million went to. It certainly doesn't show on the screen. One must assume that a large percentage of it must have been studio overhead - e.g., GM assigning all overhead costs to pictures in production, even if out of the studio.