
One of the best of Universal's popular "Collegians" series, "The Last Lap" is the immediate follow-up to the canoe-tipping episode that many of you saw at our screening last Friday. (It contained one of the most deathless sequences in all movie history. Dorothy Gulliver and a group of girl-friends, standing by the side of a small artificial lake in a park, are suddenly all bowled over backwards into it by a woollen sweater, thrown at one of them! Instead of the expected slapstick splash, we were treated to some stunning underwater stuff as the girls sank several fathoms to a sea-weedy bottom! Hero Lewis dived in to the rescue, and as he clambered ashore again with a damp Dorothy, it could be seen that the water, barely covering his feet, was but an inch or two deep. To top it off, Universal had the gall to insert a title - "Ella's still down there!" - whereupon George dived down into the tank again to free a girl trapped beneath an iron bench, that presumably had also been upset by the same sweater. It was quite a sequence!) "The Last Lap" has nothing quite so spectacular to offer, though for erotic tastes it has an odd little episode with a nude little boy, but it does maintain the 20's tradition that colleges were designed for anything but study, and it winds up with a well-done cross-country race. As always in this series, the production values are good, the photography first-rate, and the crowds full of familiar looking faces who disappear before positive identification can be made!


A companion piece to "Those Exciting Days" and "It Happened To You" in dealing with the years immediately prior to (and during) World War One, "This Was Yesterday" is probably the very best of Robert Youngson's documentaries. The footage culled for this one is magnificent stuff, and it's beautifully put together. As always with this producer, there's far too much narration and too much bathos, but the visual aspects more than compensate. There are striking scenes of particularly harsh winters ... wonderfully majestic footage of the campaign against Villa, all of it looking as though it were directed by John Ford and photographed by Joe August ... exciting shots of submarine warfare, the New Jersey munitions explosions. Sentimentality aside, the narration is literate and informed, although it's unintentionally a little amusing to hear the narrator tell us, in indignant and uncomprehending tones, that Mexico's government asked Pershing's invading army to leave! "This Was Yesterday" is not only a first-rate documentary; it also reminds one what enterprising, creative and even poetic newsreel cameramen were on the job in those days. In 1951, you can't even get this kind of camerawork in a multi-reel wide-screen epic.

- INTERMISSION -

"LILAC TIME" (First National, 1928) A John McCormack presentation. Directed by George Fitzmaurice. From a play by Jane Cowl and Jane Murfin; adaptation by Willis Goldbeck; scenario by Carey Wilson; photographed by Sidney Hickox; aerial photography by Alvin Knechtel; titles by George Marion jr., edited by Al Hall. II Reels.

With COLLEEN MOORE, GARY COOPER, Eugenie Besserer, Burr McIntosh, Kathryn McGuire, George Cooper, Emile Chantard, Cleve Moore, Albert Conti, Paul Hurst.
LILAC TIME is one of those odd films that everyone remembers, yet that has never been revived. Reputedly, it is Colleen Moore's favorite film — yet she never had her own print. Recently, an article in FILMS IN REVIEW (on aerial photography) claimed that it, WINGS and HELL'S ANGELS were the greatest of all the air war films, then didn't say another word about it, despite devoting pages to the other two. It's almost as if people didn't want to recall it too clearly, lest a memory be shattered. And seeing the film today, that is almost what happens.

It's not surprising that memories of 1928 may be a little vague today. Perhaps no other year in film history has presented such a picture of upheaval. LILAC TIME came to the screen when talkies were already in.

It was a silent, but had music and effects. So did every big new picture of the period -- and so too did TEMPEST, THE MAN WHO LAUGHS, WINGS, TWO LOVERS and other recent big hits, being rushed out again with added scores. The trade papers were full of nothing else. Reginald Denny, George Fitzmaurice, Texas Guinan, big names and little names, all were good for a story if they were going to do their first talkie.

Jolson's SINGING FOOL was awaiting release; THE TERROR was being mildly chastised for being like a stage play; but it was all-talkie. King Vidor, just back from Europe, looked around in dismay and said he couldn't believe it — and didn't want to. Music he could go along with, but dialogue -- ugh! Cecil B. DeMille thought deeply, and pronounced his opinion -- yes, talkies were here to stay he thought. And in the midst of all this, a few little cinematic gems almost got lost in the shuffle. Laurel and Hardy's "Two Tars", called "Two Tough Tars" when previewed, was good enough to hold its own, sound or not. But Robert Wienen's "Hands of Orlac", bravely trying to buck the tide, didn't stand much of a chance.

However, LILAC TIME was just about the biggest of the new films - Garbo's MYSTERIOUS LADY wasn't much competition. It did have Technicolor sequences, and most of all, it had the theme song. It caught on, and did top business in its Broadway road show engagement at the Central. And in Colorado Springs it had just enjoyed the biggest opening day's business of any picture ever to play there with the exception of "The Lost World".

Despite the turmoil, critical acumen wasn't dead however, and the comments of THE FILM DAILY are sound. They found "the early portions full of comedy, and charming ... but the finish not too strong". They summed up: ....very light-weight story ... nothing particularly new about it ... a familiar offering that is artificial in development. But the public will like it. Boxoffice, despite extremely sentimental story of war.

Incidentally, the release length of the film was 3967 feet. Our print runs to almost 11,000 feet. Presumably this is the 100% silent version — possibly it was pepped up a bit for the sound-effects and music release.

At any rate, we need no qualms about there being anything missing — although, because of hype, most of the titles have been removed, and replaced by typewritten ones. Thus in one rather carelessly typed title, we find reference to a "German boomer".

It's all too easy to see just why LILAC TIME doesn't click as it should. For one thing, it's a transparently obvious attempt to wrap up SEVENTH HEAVEN and WINGS in one package. If any director could have pulled it off, Borzage or Wellman might — but certainly not George Fitzmaurice, an extremely curious choice. Unsurpassed in tongue-in-cheek extravaganzas and romances ("Son of the Sheik" is still one of his best) Fitzmaurice just didn't have it in him for sensitive romances -- or gutty action spectacles. And maybe he knew it. He knew which side his bread was buttered on here -- despite the trimmings, this was a Colleen Moore vehicle — and that's the way Fitzmaurice approaches it.
Colleen Moore, sad to say, is the film's second major drawback. To say she was better suited to flapper comedies is not to minimize her ability; she could and did turn out solid dramatic performances, most notably in "Go Big". But her persistent tendency to react rather than to act has never been more apparent than here; every situation is prolonged far beyond its valid length solely by repeated reaction shots of its star (and unofficial producer); being irritatingly coy, harassed, terrified, moved, or whatever the situation demands, and doing it all by the cutaway and the reaction shot. And, we might add, looking a little too old to be completely convincing at any of it.

Moore's major concern seems to have been to make a good solid show-case for herself, and thus the non-Moore sequences tend to show both lack of concern and lack of budget. The flying scenes, which are a long time coming, are exciting enough, but somehow without class. The planes seem to be any old ones that were hanging around, and are not authentic to the period at all. (In addition, both German and English planes are the same!) The crashes are inexpensively staged, the planes being merely hoisted up and dropped from cranes. Ships in flames are merely made to look that way by having the fire painted on to the film. Contrast all this with a big bombing raid, quite unnecessary to the plot. Colleen is in almost every shot, so she has no qualms about unwrapping the bankroll, and wrecking the best set in the picture! Worst of all, none of our old Heinie pals like William von Brinken seem to have been called in; instead - heresy - we find the Nuns under the command of no less than Albert Conti!

Having spent two pages criticizing "Illiac Time", let's also admit that it's a lot of fun. Gary Cooper comes off extremely well as the hero, despite being upstaged by Miss Moore. It's a solid looking film, with most of the trimmings one expects of a war film, if little of its atmosphere. There's the inevitable "Big Push", some grand (subtitled) conversations in the wonderful old tradition, a whale of a stunt sequence when a plane runs amok on the field, and a spectacular (if prolonged) climax, which reminds one of Scarlett O'Hara searching among the wounded in Atlanta. Not a spectacular, "Illiac Time" is nevertheless a pretty big production, (even stealing one of its "biggest" moments quite scandalously from "The Big Parade") and on the whole a very entertaining one. It's too leisurely - too devoid of plot - too much concerned with closeups of Miss Moore - but once those planes take off in reel eight, it becomes well worth the wait.

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NEXT TUESDAY:

Frank Lloyd's THE SEA HAWK (1924) with Milton Sills, Enid Bennett, Wallace Beery, Marc McDonald, Lloyd Hughes, William Collier jr. 12 reels.