"SANTA CLAUS VS CUPID" (Edison; released Dec. 9, 1915) One reel.
Written by Alan Crosland; directed by Will Louis
Starring Raymond McKee, with Billy Casey, Mabel Dwight, Gladys Gene, Florence Stover, Grace Morrissey, Mrs Wallace Erskine, Guido Colucci, Edith Wright.

Few of the later Edison one-reelers have much cinematic or other interest, but "Santa Claus vs Cupid" is a decided cut above the average Edison release, though still lacking the technique of current Tho and earlier Griffith-Biograph shorts. Its main interest to us tonight, of course, is as an example of the earlier film work of Alan Crosland. Crosland was born in East Orange, New Jersey, close to the Edison workshops. He initially pursued an acting career on the stage, but it soon became apparent that his greater talent lay in writing. After newspaper work, he joined Edison, turning out little stories like this one, until in 1918 he earned a real name for himself with "The Unbeliever", an Edison feature. Sadly under-rated by historians, he brought fine style many films in the 20's - among them "In Old San Francisco", "When a Man Loves" and "The Jazz Singer". His sound career was spotty, but with only one abysmally bad picture - "Captain Thunder". "Viennese Nights" was fine stuff, and "Massacre", "Silver Lining" and others were of considerable interest.

Apart from its neatly written story, in which romance and pathos are nicely dovetailed, "Santa Claus vs Cupid" has more than average interest in its reflection of the times, a reflection that extends even to the title. Love and sex were still not subjects to be dealt with except in a most superficial way, and the solution was usually to make them "cute". Thus the "Cupid" tag on movie titles was somewhat overworked - "Cupid's Caprice", "Cupid in a Dental Parlor" and so on. The plight of the cabman, being slowly put out of work by the automobile age, is touched upon, and we get a brief glimpse of one of the stately old estates of upper Manhattan - in this case, the Paterno estate. But perhaps most of all, the film gives us a glimpse of a simple Christmas that has gone forever - when the mere appearance of a Father Christmas in person at a party was the highlight of the whole holiday. No objectionably jovial Father Christmases rumbling out their messages on tw at every station break - and no semi-sober, hollow-eyed Santa on every street corner and in every department store! We've certainly lost far more than we've gained, and the pity is that it's a simple, unpretentious and even unimportant little film like this that has to remind us of it.

Before "DON JUAN", we'll be presenting brief excerpts from some of the sound musical shorts that preceded the film at its premiere on August 6th, 1926.

"DON JUAN" (Warner Bros., 1926) 13 reels Directed by Alan Crosland
Written for the screen by Earle Meridith; photographed by Byron Haskins and Gordon Holinghead; art director, Ben Carré; edited by Harold McCord; titles by Walter B. Anthony and Maude Fulton; electrical effects by F.N. Murphy; Burmese Style Dance - Marion Morgan; Property Master, A.C. Wilson; art titles by Victor Vance.

The Cast: DON JUAN and DON JOSE (JOHN BARRYMORE); Adriana (Mary Astor); Pedrillo (Willard Louis); Lucretia Borgia (Estelle Taylor); Cesare Borgia (Warner Oland); Donati (Montague Love); Renza, Adriana's maid (Helene Costello); Beatrice (Jane Winton); Maia (Myrna Loy); Leonoro (John Roche);
"Don Juan" is usually thought of as the film that was used to introduce Vitaphone --- and little more; just as "The Jazz Singer" is too often casually dismissed as a sentimental piece of corn that gained fame only because it ushered in talkies. Thus have two of Alain Coudal's finest works been almost eradicated as films; small wonder that this wonderfully vigorous and stylish director is almost unknown today, while the hacks --- the Fred Nibloes and the Allan Deans --- are revered for the laurels usually won for them by their stars and their made-to-measure vehicles. "Don Juan," is, in its own way, wonderful stuff --- expertly staged and directed, lush, flamboyant, magnificently mounted, and done with just the right tongue-in-cheek approach. Barrimore's performance is superbly sardonic --- quite one of the best of his career, though (rightly) less seriously conceived and executed than with many of his other roles. In contrast to the dull and plodding "Don Juan," despite a dearth of physical action until the closing reels, vibrates with life and excitement from beginning to end. (Erratum: the title "Jean Brumel" was eliminated from that last sentence.)

The original "Don Juan" was written by a Spanish monk, one Gabriel Talles, and was intended to sway one's sympathies towards a spiritual life. Byron later took a somewhat different tack. Bose Meredith's screenplay is supposed to combine elements of both Talles and Byron, but what comes out is a sheer Barrimore "vehicle" from the first scene to the last --- here you'll see familiar "bits" repeated from earlier Barrimores, as well as bits that were themselves to be repeated later. (For example, the prison scene between Juan and Lucrezia Borgia shows up again, with minor variations, in "Tempest"). Barrimore certainly has himself a field-day, and one suspects that many scenes (particularly the wonderful episodes where he impersonates --- convincingly --- Gustav von Seyffertitz) were written in at his suggestion to satisfy his delightfully bizarre leanings.

"Don Juan" is a masterpiece of hokum and style, if nothing else. It is not a film that stands up too well to repeated viewings, but that, after all, is hardly criticism. Wonderfully satisfying as many films are on repeated viewings (especially emotional subjects, like "Sunrise"), films are, after all, designed primarily for those who see them once. It is the initial impression that counts, and in this respect, "Don Juan" scores mightily. It is a real eye-popper of a production, and the visual impact is stunning. And the lovely, full, sweeping original score adds to that impact.

So impressive are the immediate impacts of sight and sound that it would be very easy to over-rate this film on a single viewing --- just as it was too easy to under-rate "The Sea Hawk" on an initial viewing, something I was guilty of last month. (On a second go-round, and with music, "The Sea Hawk" seemed a far superior film than hitherto --- but by then the notes had been written, far more critically than the film warranted). "Don Juan" quite certainly has flaws, and one of the chief disappointments is the lack of a really top cameraman. The sets glisten; the duel is a marvellously done sequence; but one feels that with this kind of material to photograph, no one could go wrong. The camerawork is mechanically first-rate, but it seems to contain nothing that was not contributed by script or direction. What Charlie Rosher could have done with this! But --- why quibble? DON JUAN with its wonderful flavor, fine titles, nostalgic score and literally all-star cast, is loads of fun all the way. If we got a tenth as much in today's movies we'd be well pleased.

Ma. K. Everson