A Program of Americana

"THE GLODHPPER" (Triangle, 1917) Directed by Victor Schertzinger; presented by Thomas H. Ince; photographed by Paul E. Eagler; 5 reels; starring Charles Ray, with Marguery Wilson, Charles French, Lydia Knott.

Tremendously popular in those innocent, friendly days of pre-1920, when the movies entertained so effortlessly, the Charlie Ray vehicles do not, as a group, stand up as well today as do the contemporary groups of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford films. This is not so much due to flaws in the films themselves — they were all expertly made — as to irritations in Ray's screen character. The "country-boy" hero, so typical of the period, is not necessarily passé either — Bartholomew! "ToT'able David" exerts as much appeal today as it did in 1920. But there was something of the milk-sop about Ray — he was more than a bumpkin, but without sufficient determination and set-up-and-go to win him the audience's unqualified support (something that Mary Pickford never had to worry about!) And in too many films, Ray finally won out via talents that the titles told us he possessed, but that the picture itself did little to substantiate — as a singer, as a baseball whiz, and here as a dancer.

However, this slap at Ray over a gulf of more than forty years is perhaps a little unfair; audiences of 1917 doubtless found his contrived shyness far more appealing than Doug's extroverted brashness. And his pictures were an often delightful and authentic record of a rural Americana that was on the verge of disappearing. "The Glodhopper" is one of the simplest and most typical of his early vehicles; the rural scenes have a great deal of charm, and the big-city sequences an enjoyably exaggerated gusto.

The stress is on Ray throughout, but Marguery Wilson makes a lovely heroine as always, and Lydia Knott, actress-mother of director Lambert Hillyer, gives an interesting performance. The excellent photography is the work of Paul E. Eagler (who finished off "Portrait of Jennie" when Joe August died during its shooting, and who now operates a special effects company in Hollywood).

"MAN TO MAN" (Warner Bros., 1930) Directed by Allan Dwan; scenario by Joseph Jackson from "Barber John's Boy" by Ben Ames Williams; photographed by Ira Morgan; 7 reels; with Phillips Holmes, Grant Mitchell, Lucille Powers, Barbara Weeks, Charles Sellon, Dwight Frye, Russell Simpson, George Marion, Paul Nicholson, Robert Emmett O'Connor, Otis Harlan, James Neil, Johnny Larkin.

"Man to Man" is a curious kind of film for a major company to have made in 1930, when the stress was on fast talk, transcribed theatrical works, noise, musical and otherwise, and hard-bitten melodramatics. It is a quiet, unsensational film, with deliberately understated dramatics, and in fact is almost a throwback to the Ray vehicles. One can very well imagine the same story being filmed 15 years earlier, with Ray and Frank Keenan, and Schertzinger or Reginald Barker directing. Phillips Holmes has very much of a Ray role — sensitive, decent, a little weak. The only basic difference is that his problem has slightly more psychological depth than Ray was ever called upon to face. One has to approach "Man to Man" just as one approaches "The Glodhopper" — expecting little in terms of incident or drama, and accepting it for its mood and faithful reconstruction of period and locale.
Both films are programmers; neither are of outstanding importance; but perhaps "Man to Man" is the more interesting in the long run, for having been made -- the way it was made -- at such an odd period of film history. To me at least, it was an obscure film -- I knew nothing about it until I screened it. Certainly it made no great impression at the time. Yet the reviews were all good, and seemed impressed by its "old-time" values.

I have never thought too much of Allan Dwan as a director. His "The Iron Mask", photographed entirely in long and medium shot, seemed quite primitive for 1922. Too often, like Fred Niblo, he seemed to be a hack just going through the motions, and chalking up box-office hits to his credit mainly by virtue of big star names -- of whom Douglas Fairbanks was the biggest of course. But, strangely, he seems to have taken far more of a personal interest in a little film like "Man to Man" than he did in any of "Robin Hood". The scenes of small-town life -- main street, the barber shop, picnic grounds -- are handled with both conviction and affection. Many of the compositions are quite lovely, and there is one really beautiful shot of a couple of lovers, sitting in their roadster at dusk, while a locomotive roars by in the background. And the long sequence of the father's homecoming, mainly underplayed, is a very sensitively handled episode. Coincidentally, one of the best sequences Dwan ever directed was of remarkably similar content -- the opening of "Belle Le Grande", an otherwise mediocre Republic pot-boiler of the late 40's, showing Vera Ralston, somewhat soiled, returning after many years to her home in the South. It was a beautiful episode, played in silence and with long tracking shots.

As in "The Gilded Lily", small-town crises are concentrated in the bank. It's rather odd though, that the shortage in the Ray film should be so much higher than in the talkie: On the other hand, it's rather pleasant to find a film from the thirties being realistic enough to admit that a couple of thousand dollars is still a substantial enough amount to cause serious problems.

Even though a short film, "Man to Man" slows down towards the end -- mainly because the solution is apparent to the audience long before it is to the protagonists. But even when nothing much is happening, there's plenty to watch on the screen -- especially grand old Otis Harlan, with his waddling walk, old-timers George Marion and Russell Simpson, and most of all Grant Mitchell, giving a really moving and sensitive performance, in marked contrast to the pompous tightwad roles in which he was typecast in later years.

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Next Program -- Tuesday next. The 26th -- room 8-C. A POT-FOURRI OF SHORTS

SUNDOWN LIMITED (Our Gang, 1924); A WOMAN OF SIN (Reliance, 1914);
SKYLARKING (Bennett, 1923); THE FIRE BUG (Biograph 1905) THE SUBURBANITE
(Biograph 1904); FISH (Biograph 1916); MY BABY (Griffith-Mary Pickford,
1912); THE LEATHERPUSHERS (1922); two episodes; Reginald Denny); COHEN
SAVES THE FLAG (Bennett, '14); MATE'S FATHER (Roach-Charlie Chase, '35);
ANY OLD FORT (Roach-Laurel and Hardy) and FAPPY'S PUPPY (Cartoon)