
Not all silent films are of sufficient quality or importance to warrant revival by film societies or museums, and many of these "outsiders" seem to wind up at the Huff Society. Being devoted to a study of film history, rather than an appreciation of film art, we can afford to show films for no other reason than that they're interesting little programmers and have pleasant people in them. In the same way, our 1930 season will probably feature films like "Tammy and the Bachelor" and "Ring of Fire." "Clinging Vine," at any rate, is an ordinary programmer which certainly caused no great stir in 1926, but it's nicely photographed, well mounted, fitted out with some smart titles, and pleasantly performed by Leatrice Joy and Tom Moore in roles corresponding to those of Rosalind Russell and Melvyn Douglas in a dozen Columbia films of the thirties and forties. It's a casual piece of trivia which is actually at its best when it remains comparatively plotless; when complications set in during the closing reels, they're so contrived and unimportant that they seem, irritatingly, to get in the way of relaxed enjoyment of the faces and the costuming.

Paul Sloane, who directed, was a competent if usually uninspired workman, but he did make some extremely enjoyable films. One of the best, "Corporal Kate" (with Vera Reynolds) we'll be showing next month. To my knowledge, his last film was a modern version of "Madame Butterfly," done in Japan some eight years ago, and giving So-Jinn his last screen role. An extremely good film, it was screened around to prospective buyers, but never actually sold for US release.

I've only once shown "The Clinging Vine" to an audience. This was some six years ago when it was shown at an old ladies' home here in New York. Leatrice Joy, who had friends living there, introduced it, and it was a thundering success. The ladies (several of whom thought Leatrice was moving in, and were quite saddened to find that this was not the case) relaxed, had no plot to worry about, no violence to disturb them, and generally had a wonderful time re-living the days when they were younger. Huff society members may not be quite so generous with their enthusiasm -- but past experiences have shown time and again that films from which we expect very little have a habit of coming to life with music, and before an audience. For what it is worth, "The Clinging Vine" is somewhat of a rarity; this is the only print around, and it's in fine condition, being a reduction print from the original 35mm negative.

**Intermission**

"BARBARA FRIETCHIE" (Thomas H. Ince-Regal Films-PDC, 1924) Directed by Lambert Hillyer; adapted by Hillyer and Christine Johnson from the play by Clyde Fitch, based on the poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. 8 reels.

The Cast: Barbara Fritchie (Florence Vidor) Capt. Trumbull (Edmund Lowe) Colonel Fritchie (Emett King) Jack Negly (Joe Eshyett) Arthur Fritchie (Charles Delaney); Colonel Negly (Louis Fitziery) Sue Royals (Gertrude Short) Mammy Lu (Mattie Peters) Colored Man (Jim Blackwell) Fred Calhoun (Slim Hamilton) His drunken cohort (Ernie Adams) Abraham Lincoln (George Millinge) Young soldier (Donald Keith)

Apart from a shortened main title, this exceptionally fine toned print of "Barbara Fritchie" is quite complete (most of the 16mm prints in circulation are at least a reel shorter). The original negative was destroyed a few years ago, so prints of this clarity and sharpness will be hard to come by in the future.

First, in the interests of historical accuracy, a few words about Miss Fritchie. There WAS such a lady, but there the similarity ends. She was an old woman who lived in Frederick, Maryland, and it is alleged that she did wave the American flag from an upstairs window as the Confederate troops marched by. However, no known records substantiate that Stonewall Jackson ever uttered those flowery sentiments about not harming her. Probably he never even noticed her, and if he had, he would probably have merely considered her a harmless crank and tactfully
ignored her. However, the story lived on, fostered by a particularly bana 1 poem. A great many poems were written around Civil War exploits, and some of them — like "Sheridan's Ride" by Thomas Buchanan Read — were quite fine. But the opus immortalising Miss Frietchie was somewhat below that standard. In the wake of the poem, Clyde Fitch, a writer noted for historical inaccuracy and blatant flag-waving, wrote a play which, with Julia Marlowe in the lead, became a smash hit. Fitch of course also wrote "Beau Brummel" and the patriotic sagas "Betsy Rose" and "The Heart of a Hero", concerning Nathan Hale.

The film itself is hardly a great one, due primarily to the cliché writing of the original play. It was hardly possible to eliminate all the corn (any more than it had been in "Way Down East"), since this is what the paying customers expected and wanted to see. But director Lambert Hillyer, a veteran of the best Bill Hart westerns, worked wonders with it. The exteriors are fine and vigorously handled, and the photography often stunning. (It was the work of Henry Sharp who did such great camerawork in "Lorna Doone", "The Gaucho", "Anna Christie", "The Black Pirate" and other silents). The battle sequences are really lavish, realistically staged, and full of the savagery, excitement and attention to detail that one would expect from a Hart director. And as for the purely dramatic material — despite its inherent corn, this is all rather fun too, in a larger-than-life, barnstorming way. The titles are wonderfully theatrical and flamboyant, every one of them a punch-line or an exit line. As tradition dictates, the war is conducted on a level of mutual respect and according to unbreakable codes of honor. There are some superficial similarities to "The Birth of a Nation", but under-playing of emotions is not one of them. What Griffith would throw away with a subtle expression or a casual glance, is here parlayed into a "B1G" scene, accompanied by a subtitle of matching grandeur.

Although the picture is obviously an expensive one, Ince was not a man to throw money away, and there are several signs of corner-cutting. Occasionally a big scene is merely talked about, and once or twice a too-obvious backdrop intrudes. And Ince made extra-ingenious use of his own studio for sets and locations. The scene of Lowe arresting the two soldiers was shot behind the main administration building, and the front of the studio (modelled on Mount Vernon, Washington's home, and familiar as Selznick's trademark) becomes the centre-piece of Ince's basic Southern town set. A beautiful old Southern mansion with green lawns and hedges in front, it was obviously too good to pass up, and canny Tom built the whole of Frederick's main street around it! (Huff members must be quite familiar with such use of this studio exterior by now — Ince used it as a Louisiana mansion in "Scars of Jealousy", and just a few weeks ago we saw it as a Long Island estate in "The White Sin"). You may also recognize one of the other street sets — it was used towards the end of "The General", as Buster Keaton rumbles the Confederate troops. Incidentally, this version of the Fitch play was already the second, Metro having made a 5-reel adaptation in 1915. Ince's film was given a gala premiere at the newly-opened Piccadilly Theatre at Broadway and 51st Street, and the critics were generally most enthusiastic. The NY Times considered it "a picture produced with charm and clever restraint; both dramatic and patriotic"; Rose Felswick likened it to "The Birth of a Nation", and Louella Parsons singled out Hillyer as being a director who had really come to the forefront in recent years. Certainly it was a good audience picture, and all the critics so stated. Florence Vidor is both lovely and effective as Barbara, if not quite as overpowering as this verbatim quote from Ince's publicity implies:

"A sumptuous and stupendous photoplay, "Barbara Frietchie" is the real heart-throb in that epochal drama of American history played on the bloody fields of Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Appomattox. It typifies the poignant tragedy that was in the hearts of the noble womanhood of Civil War days, while their men fought, brother against brothe 1. Florence Vidor, who stars in the title role of this epoch-making drama, was chosen to portray the great heroine because she possesses in superlative degree that innate charm and beauty typical of the best of American womanhood. Visually and histrionically Miss Vidor is the ideal Barbara, and her interpretation of the role places it among the greatest characterisations in the history of the photodrama".

It's interesting, by the way, that this film was instrumental in healing the deep ill-feeling between Bill Hart and Tom Ince, who had split up, bitterly, some years earlier. In his book "My Life East and West", Hart recalls how, unexpectedly, Tom had written to invite him to the
premier. He was pleased and happy, though unable for various reasons to attend. Earl's wife:

"Life's but a walking shadow... Just a little bit later Tom answered the last call. I'm glad Tom wrote to me -- and I am glad that I wrote to Tom".

In 1924, "Barbara Frietchie" was undoubtedly one of the biggest of the 3D films that PDC released that year. Later, when DeMille joined them, their schedule became more ambitious, but in 1924 the Ince-Billyer film seems to have been the highlight of a year of rather turgid femme-star vehicles at PDC. Other items on the schedule included "Another Scandal" (Lois Wilson), "Her Own Free Will" (Helen Chadwick), "A Cafe in Cairo" and "The Siren of Sevilla" (both Priscilla Dean), "The House of Youth" (Jacqueline Logan), "A Reckless Romance" (Wanda Hawley), "Bumshackle House" (Betty Compson), "Welcome Stranger" (Florence Vidor), "The Wise Virgin" (Patsy Ruth Miller) and (not a "vehicle" and one of the most interesting-scandal of the lot) "The Legend of Hollywood" with Zasu Pitts and Percy Marmon.

Incidentally, "Barbara Frietchie" has a fine prologue depicting the birth of America -- this culled from other Ince epics, including some stunning shots from Touroeur's "Last of the Mohicans". And the concluding reel includes some patriotic flag-wagging the like of which has seldom been seen before or since. We'll say no more, and leave you to discover the delights of these two sequences.

-- William K. Everson --