"THE PATENT LEATHER KID" (1927)


The Cast: Richard Barthelmess (The Patent Leather Kid), Molly O'Day (Curly Callahan, The Golden Dancer), Arthur Stone (Puffy), Lawford Davidsen (Capt. Breen), Mathew Bete (Jake Stuke), Raymond Turner (Mobile Molasses), Hank Mann (Sergeant), Lucien Prival (German Officer), Higel de Brulier (French Doctor), Fred O'Boeck, Cliff Salm, Henry Murdoch, Charlie Sullivan, John Kelb, Al Albom (Tank Crew).

There will be an intermission at the end of Part One.

Next to "Tol'able David" (and not considering "Way Down East" and "Broken Blossoms" as Richard Barthelmess vehicles) "The Patent Leather Kid" was quite certainly Barthelmess' most successful silent. And unquestionably it was physically his biggest production. In some ways, it is a little too big for its own good, and too long. In attempting to blow up its novelistic story-line to significant proportions, and emulate "The Big Parade," it sabotages some of its best elements. Its good honest sentimental hole is partially dispelled by being too protracted. And the determination to make it "a big show" all the way results in too many false notes that could easily have been avoided by the underplaying that King Vidor got into both "The Big Parade" and "The Crowd"--underplaying that didn't for a moment minimize the essential bigness of theme. But for all its overlength and minor flaws, one doesn't feel inclined to quibble too much with "The Patent Leather Kid." After all, it has never been touted as a great artistic (or neglected) masterpiece. All anyone has ever claimed for it was that it was a sure-fire commercial attraction, and a blockbuster at the boxoffice, and this one can readily believe. Neither budget nor size of set nor size of emotions has been stinted upon, and yet the spume of production values doesn't result in a larger-than-life impression. The sets of New York streets, cafes, boxing arenas etc. are superbly realistic, and often look like actual locales (which they aren't); today's so-called neo-realism, in which unrealistic action takes place against authentic backgrounds, could learn a lesson from this in the realism that can be created within studio walls. Some of the exteriors of course are standing sets, and you'll probably recall the little French village as having turned up the following year in "Li'l Abner." Most of the war action scenes were shot, with full army cooperation, at Fort Lewis in Washington -- which also turned out the troops and the equipment for Universal's "To Hell and Back" a few years ago. The battle scenes are huge, massive, well-organized, but can't quite escape the flavor of being a Hollywood spectacle rather than the real thing. Again, it's just a little "too big" in its scope, a little too all-embracing in its incident. Nevertheless, it's a most exciting piece of film-making, and it's interesting to see Arthur Edeson using some shots that he copied again when he photographed "All Quiet on the Western Front" three years later -- indicating once again what an important part of the creative team the cameraman often is, and not merely a technician who just shoots what the director tells him.

"The Patent Leather Kid" was directed by Alfred Santell, who also did Barthelmess' "The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come." Santell was an extraordinarily versatile director, who could range from the light-hearted frolics of Celene Moore's "Orchids and Ermine" to the heavy if over-written dramatics of "Winter set." But his real forte seems to have been in lighter fields than this -- comedies, musicals, and the simple little romances like "Tess of the Storm Country," "Daddy Long Legs" and "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" -- all of which he did in the early '30's. "The Patent Leather Kid" just wasn't his cup of tea -- but regardless of that, it's still a powerful and exciting film, with a really fine performance from Richard Barthelmess and a good one from Molly O'Day. She tries a little too hard to establish herself as an important new dramatic actress (in a part made to measure for Carol Dempster) -- but for a newcomer she does extremely well, and the film DID make a star of her.