"A KNIGHT OF THE BLACK ART" (Melies, 1908) 1 reel

The polish of Melies' trick effects is no longer a surprise of course, but it continues to be most impressive. Some of the jump cuts and superimpositions here are exceptionally smoothly executed, and the whole short - just a parade of conjuring tricks - is quite delightful.

"UNDERWORLD OF PARIS" (Pathé, 1906) One reel

It is doubtful that this is the correct title, and possibly some of you may be able to identify it; I have a sneaking suspicion that it may have been included in the Museum of Modern Art's French cycle a few years back. Anyway, it is a remarkable little one-reeler; despite the painted studio backdrops, its starkness comes through, and its savagery seems uncomfortably real. Most of it is shot in the Paris streets and on the Seine, and it seems infinitely superior to some contemporary New York efforts as "Life of an American Policeman" - always assuming of course that the 1906 date is correct.

"HIS DARKER SELF" (W.W. Hodkinson, 1924) Presented by Albert Grey; directed by Jack Noble; based on "Mammy's Boy" by Arthur Caesar; edited and titled by Ralph Spence; starring Lloyd Hamilton, with Lucille LaVerne, Sally Long, Tom Milson, Tom O'Malley, Irma Harrison, Edna May Spear, Kate Bruce, Warren Cook. Original length: 5 reels. This print is a 2-reel condensation. (The Albert Grey who "presented" the film was Griffith's brother & business manager.)

Not exactly a world-shattering comedy, "HIs Darker Self" is actually more interesting for its background than for what it is. Originally, it was set up as a D.W. Griffith production, with Al Jolson starring. Apparently a couple of days' shooting had been completed, and then Al walked out; since his contract had not yet been signed, nothing could be done. Lloyd Hamilton was signed to replace him, and Griffith, apparently feeling that it was now becoming a lesser project, abandoned the film too. Jack Noble took over the direction, but it's interesting to note that the film went out without any script or camera credits. Possibly Griffith himself had worked on the former; possibly Bitzer or one of Griffith's other stock cameramen photographed it, and for reasons of prudence preferred not to be associated with it. In any event, it's an interesting little oddity, condensed here to a short consisting of one basic sequence, with a beginning and ending of sorts to round it out. Some of the camerawork has a typical Griffith feel to it, though it's odd to see an iris of flowers and a butterfly being used for comic instead of poetic effect. And of course there are several Griffith players on hand, including Sally Long, for whom he had high hopes at one time. The reviews indicate that this short version contains some of the best material; as "Film Daily" remarked, the "darkie stuff" is very funny and there should have been more of it; too much of the rest doesn't jell, and while there are good launces, there are too few for a feature. The Daily also predicted (correctly) that it was a disappointing vehicle for Lloyd Hamilton's first feature, and that he'd probably soon be back in shorts again. The titles are well up to Ralph Spence's usually witty standard, though one classic is missing - a prohibition era parody on the famous nursery rhyme, which went - "Sing a Song of Sixpence, a Hip Pocket Full of Rye, Four and Twenty Blackbirds Picked to the Eye"! Incidentally, if nothing else, with its blatantracism it should dispel all those rumours about Griffith ever after trying to "atone" for "The Birth of a Nation".

"THE PERILS OF PAULINE" (Eclectic, 1914) Dir; Louis Gauntier; with Pearl White, Crane Wilbur, Paul Panzer.

A brief and delightful excerpt in which Pearl is threatened with death from a snake, and is saved by the quick-witted Crane Wilbur, and one of the wonderfully expressive "perils" subtitles.

- INTERMISSION -

"A SHIP COMES IN" (Oscil B.D'Amville-Pathé, 1928) Produced and directed by William L. Howard; original story by Julian Josephson; scenario by Josephson and Sonya Levien; photographed by Lucien Andriot; titles by Joan Kraft; edited by Barbara Hunter. 7 reels.

The Cast: Peter Fleznik (Rudolph Schidler); Mama Fleznik (Louise Dresser); Judge Gresham (Robert Edeson); Dan (Lucien Littlefield); Gregor (Louis Newth); Eric Fleznik (Hilton Holmes); Martha (Linda Landi); Batinka (Evelyn Mills and Virginia Davis); Sokol (Fritz Feld)
When "A Ship Comes In" was first offered to the exhibitors via the trade papers in July of 1926, it was rather lost amidst pages of ads boosting first of all the silents then doing extra business on Broadway thanks to synchronized scores (\*TINS; TAMBEAST; UNEV; TOM'S CABIN etc.) and secondly announcing all the soundies coming up. First National were promising a minimum of 71 sound features for the new season, and good old FBO had a double-page spread warning exhibitors - "DON'T BE PANICKED BY SOUND -- THE SHOW MUST GO ON!"

The trade reviews were all good, praising the fine performances of Dresser and Schrader, and the expert direction. Typical quotes: "...a very sincere and realistic story of an immigrant family, it is told without bunk and flag waggery, and therefore is one of the strongest patriotic pictures ever screened... the family life of the immigrant was never better portrayed on the screen... a natural for the Fourth, but will click any time with intelligent audience's craving for gripping human emotion, splendid acting, a wealth of pathos." But the good reviews didn't result in good bookings; a few weeks later the trades carried big ads, not, as is usual, growing over broken records, but literally begging exhibitors to book it. The headline was EVERY FIRST RUN THEATRE SHOULD SCREEN THIS PICTURE! The ad went on to comment on "the genius of William K. Howard and remind exhibitors of his past money makers. Then it went into this little spiel:

"Pathe steps out with one of the big surprises of the year... an inspiring production comparable only to the greatest masterpieces of the screen. The same dynamic human element responsible for the irresistible appeal of such pictures as Herbert Brenon's "Sorrell and Son," Murnau's "Sunrise," Frank Borzage's "7th Heaven" and Charlie Chaplin's "A Woman of Paris" are combined to a superlative degree in "A Ship Comes In".

Needless to say, the film isn't THAT good. But it is in many ways a fine piece of work that could well have been a good deal finer without some of the cheapening plot gimmicks that suggest a certain amount of front office concern about a difficult plot not having enough "popular appeal". However, even as it stands, it's a stylish piece of work, and the only important silent Howard film that seems to be available today. Howard, one of the most unjustly forgotten of directors, had made some twenty films prior to this, including his masterpiece "White Gold". "A Ship Comes In" was his last film for DeMille, and he was just on the threshold of his peak period at Fox and Metro, a period in which he was to specialize in expert melodrama.

"A Ship Comes In" is a carefully made film; the sets are good and solid-looking, the lighting and camerawork expert. The film takes its time, and builds up a genuinely convincing impression of the difficulties of an immigrant family. (Howard's parents were themselves Irish immigrants). Some contrived plot motivations apart, the film is honest, restrained, and free of false sentiment. A minor element of melodrama, involving the Bolsheviki scare of the period, allows Howard's not yet fully developed flair for melodrama to come to roaring life, and some scenes of menace in shadowy basements are worthy of Fritz Lang. (Even then it seemed fashionable for Nazis to look like beatniks and to be grouped under modernistic paintings!) Other scenes have a tremendous emotional power and visual beauty; the touching scene of the mother's farewell to her boy as he leaves for war-played largely off-screen - is a beautiful episode that bears comparison with Walthall's homecoming in "The Birth of a Nation". Howard uses the moving camera with care and discrimination - in a period when the camera was beginning to run amok, it moves here only when there is a logical or dramatic reason for it to do so. Too, the film provides interesting glimpses of the montage and fast cutting that were later, in more polished form, to become such a trademark of Howard's. Twice there is interesting and tense cross-cutting between clocks - a device of which Howard seemed very fond, and one that he used to the last, in films like "Klondyke Fury" (1928).

Another interesting and quite unusual aspect are the subtleties of John Krafft - written, but not condescendingly, in the idiom of the immigrant hero.

We last showed "A Ship Comes In" on September 20th, 1955. Prior to that it hadn't been seen in years; nor has it been shown elsewhere since, so a revival today would be much in order.

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William K. Everson

Next Tuesday - April 24th -- A Charles Ray Program -- 1916-1936

THE PINCH HITTER (1916) -- excerpts from VANITY; GARDEN OF EDEN; TICKET TO A CRIME; AND JUST MY LUCK (1935)