"Resurrection" (Biograph, 1909) One reel; Directed by D.W. Griffith; with Florence Lawrence, Arthur Johnson, Frank Powell, Mack Sennett. From the novel by Tolstoy.

In our monthly mailing, we inadvertently referred to this as a 1908 Biograph, directed by McDougall. Probably we were thinking of "The Miliitias", for this is quite definitely an early Griffith -- and a good one. Not as advanced in content as the same year's "A Corner in Wheat" or as polished in style as "The Lonely Villa", it is nevertheless a well turned out little film in which the story is told quite eloquently without titles. The camera constantly switches from long shot to medium shot set-ups, and once there is even an extremely effective closeup insert of a finger tracing the words of the Bible. And for the sheer temerity involved in adapting a 1000 page tome into a one-reeler (and changing the ending into the bargain!) Griffith certainly rates our healthy respect. There were of course several later and more ambitious feature adaptations of the novel, three in this country alone -- one in 1918, a late silent with Rod La Roque and Dolores Del Rio, and an early talkie with John Boles and Lupe Velez.

"The Manicure Lady" (Biograph, 1911) One reel; directed by D.W. Griffith; with Vivian Prescott, Mack Sennett, Kate Bruce, Vernon Cherry, Eddie Dillon, Grace Henderson, Charles West, Jack Hulhail.

Griffith rarely tackled a comedy in his Biograph days, and when he did (as in "The Primale Call") it usually got so mixed up with social comment and melodrama that it never quite paid off. "The Manicure Lady" succeeds rather well though; it's gentle, restrained, and all quite trivial, but rather pleasing nonetheless. It keeps on the go, and the camera is mounted on a truck to give some added pep to the final mild chase scene. Most intriguing of all though is the complete restraint of Mack Sennett, who, in a role that certainly allows for mugging, gives a sober and wellunderplayed comedy performance -- something that he was to more than make up for when, only a year later, he was to start making his Keystone comedies.

An historical footnote: the car used in the closing chase is D.W.'s own; watch closely and you'll spot his initials DNG painted quite handsomely on the door!

POLISHING UP (Vitagraph, 1911) One reel; directed by James Young; with John Bunny (John) Flora Finch (Flora, his wife) William Humphreys (Dr. Reynolds) Phyllis Gray (Maud Elaine) Emily Hayes (Belle St. Clair) Paul Kelly (Bellboy)

As with Broncho Billy Anderson, a scant handful of the early John Bunny films seem to have survived. And what a pity it is, for Bunny is such a warm and delightful personality, and his comedies so far superior to the crude knockabout that passed for humour in those early days. This little farce of harmless marital infidelity has somewhat the format of the Leon Errol comedies for 30th in the forties; but it is less frenetic, and has a great deal more humanity and real charm.

BEASTS OF THE VALLEY (Chesterfield, 1926) Two reels; directed and written by Paul Hurst; photographed by Frank Gutner; with Hedda Nova, Robert Walker, Leslie Yates, William Calles, Yakima Canutt.

"Beasts of the Valley" is no historic landmark, and it certainly isn't great art, but it is a lot of fun in its simple-minded way, and that seems reason enough to play it. One of a series of June and July two-reelers made for Chesterfield in the late 20's, it's wild, serial-like stuff that must have pleased the youngsters on Saturday afternoons. Hedda Nova (the last of several exotic movie names that she used) is already looking a bit seedy, and as in the Vera Ralston movies, one wonders why hero and villain alike find her so irresistible. Robert Walker, the hero, has lost some weight and some of his good looks since his early Edison days ("Jail of the City" etc) and within just a few reels has been reduced to playing villains. Leslie Yates, as the heavy, is as thoroughly villainous as they come; while Wallace Long, Noah Beery and Montague Love all rolled into one -- and Yakima Canutt's presence as an extra suggests stunt that don't materialize. Probably he was employed to handle some of the wild animals -- or possibly he had been working on some other movie on the same lot, and just hung around to pick up a few extra dollars! Incidentally, the titles through are a delight, and a wonderful example of the power of the adjective. The villain's negro aide is described as "half white", and the natives as only "half civilized"
KISMET (Robertson-Cole Productions, 1920) 7 reels; directed by Louis Gasnier, from the play by Edward Enblock; starring OTIS SKINNER, with Herschel Mayall, Nicholas Dunne, Emmett King, Leon Hary, Elinor Fair, Hamilton Revelle, Paul Wegel, Rosemary Theby, Corinna Skinner, Tom Kennedy.

Like our earlier "Resurrection," this "Kismet" was the first of four movie versions. Unfortunately, we haven't seen the second -- a very early talkie for Warners with Skinner repeating his original role, and Loretta Young and Sidney Blackmer in the other leads. If we take Arliss' sound remake of "The Green Goddess" as a criterion, it may have been quite marvelous, since, like Arliss and Barrymore, Skinner had a rich voice and wonderful delivery.

But, putting this version aside until such time that we can see it, there's no doubt whatsoever that this first silent version is immeasurably superior to the two later MGM versions, for all their opulence, Technicolor, and top-heavy star casts.

"Kismet" has little reputation in film history, and is not a universally-liked film. There are many who claim that it is "dull" and uncinematic, and admittedly it is no filmic masterpiece, although it is probably the best film ever made by that curious director Louis Gasnier, whose films range from "The Perils of Pauline" to "Forsaking Commandments." But I suspect that most of its disparagers either expect far too much, or expect entirely the wrong things.

It is first and foremost a showcase for Otis Skinner, a wonderful actor of the old school who, even without sound, brings the film to tremendously vibrant life. His is an acting of color, gesture, flourishes, a bravura that stops far short of ham, and very often achieves remarkably underplayed tones of subtlety. Secondly, it is deliberately theatrical in its story-telling; with a wily, amorous of a hero, and all sorts of interwoven story-elements including a life-long vendetta and a long-lost son, it "performs" to most of these eminently filmic ingredients rather than showing them. But it never lets itself become merely a photographed play; it gets out of doors when it can, it is extremely ornate in its luxurious sets, decor, and well-handled crowds; and it often seems to kid the limitations of the stage by overdramatizing the magic of the camera. When the beggar-magician performs his tricks, they are not of the simple carpet-flying variety -- flowers bloom and bud in stop-motion instead, and the really filmic highspots -- such as the drowning of the villain in the pool -- are played for all they are worth.

At one point there's a delightful use of the "iris" technique as part of the palace architecture -- and the harren scene involves some of the most pleasingly blatant nudity we've seen on the start muffin screens for many a day!

All of the acting is beautifully in keeping with the overall florid style, and some of the players -- veterans all -- repeat their original stage roles. Only Elinor Fair seems rather subdued and unable to live up to the titles with the same sort of bewitching beauty, although she was to become rather prettier in the years ahead. But while we're on the subject of titles, these alone are worth any admission price in themselves. Lifted wholesale from the play, they contain any number of florid gems of prose which are just too good not to record for posterity here. A princess, learning that the "prince" with whom she shared her bed, was actually not of noble birth, exclaims in disgust "I have trafficked with a beggar!" The villain threatens the hero with "The blackest death in all Islam!" and tells him that if he fails, "Thy virgin maid shall pay thy debt with her white body!" Later he denies a marriage agreement with her, but says "Her father offered her to me not for my own but to serve my blackcarmors," and the princess tells the unhappy maid "I'll have thee altogether till these faints!" But the piece-de-resistance is saved for the moment when the heroine is offered to the lecherous villain, "Unwell, that I may learn the sweet heaven that is to be mine!" he informs her, and when she thereupon threatens suicide, his snappy comeback is "Trouble not thy hand. At dawn thou shalt be tortured with gorgeous and untold sufferings!"

Future students of eroticism may find these titles an endless delight. In the meantime, the picture as is is a thorough and complete joy if taken in the right spirit -- and a rare and welcome glimpse of a great actor in his prime.

NEXT TUESDAY -- JULY 24 -- FIRST IN A SERIES OF THREE PROGRAMS OF HORROR AND MYSTERY

"MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE" (1923) -- Robert Florey, with Bela Lugosi
"THE GREENE MURDER CASE" (1929) -- Frank Tuttle, with Wm. Powell, Jean Arthur and an excerpt from "The Vampire Bat" (1923) with Atwill and Fay Wray

WM. K. EVANSON