Two films from 1925: Charlie Chase & Cecil B. deMille

"Innocent Husbands" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1925) Directed by Leo McCarey; supervised by F. Richard Jones; with Charlie Chase, Katherine Grant, Lucien Littlefield, James Finlayson, Martha Sleeper, Jane Sherman, William Gillespie, Kay de Lys. Two reels.

One of the better Charlie Chase comedies, "Innocent Husbands" has some delightful opening gags atop a bus and in the Hollywood streets; and a number of other excellent gags and situations that are rather superior to the plot per se. In its rather contrived machinations, it is a little too much like those rather tired Leon Errol Rko 2-reelers of the forties, and its story as such doesn't really do Chase justice. But his breezy personality and charm are as winning as always, and some of the gags are among the best he ever had.

"THE ROAD TO YESTERDAY" (Cecil B. deMille-PDC, 1925) 10 reels
Directed by Cecil B. deMille; photographed by Peverell Marley; adapted by Jeanne McPherson and Beulah Marie Dix from the stage play by Beulah Marie Dix and E.G. Sutherland; art direction by Anton Grot, Mitchell Leisen and Paul Tribe; edited by Anne Bauchens; assistant director, Frank Urson.

The Cast:
Kenneth Paulson (Joseph Schillider); Malema Paulson (Jetta Goudal); Jack Vordland (William Boyd); Beth Tyrell (Vera Reynolds); Adrian Tompkins (Casson Ferguson); Dolly Soules (Julia Faye); Aunt Harriet (Trixie Friganza); Hugh Armstrong (Clarence Burton); Anna Vener (Josephine Norman); Watt Earle (Charles West); boy scout (Junior Coghill); Indian (Iron Eyes Cody); and an extra: Walter Long (egg on the crowd in the burning-at-the-stake scene); Chester Morris (at party in reel four); Dick Sutherland (torturer).

"The Road to Yesterday" was deMille's first big personal production after he left Paramount (following dissention on "The Ten Commandments") to form his own company. Rarely seen since the end of the silent period, its last NY showing was in 1956 -- also at this society. Our print is absolutely intact, having been struck at that time from the original 35mm negative. The only other known existing print is the one held by John Hampton's Silent Movie Theatre in Hollywood.

Were "rarity" of course does not make a film a classic, and we make no suggestion that "The Road to Yesterday" is. But it's an oddity, an enjoyably overblown slice of hokum, and an interesting - and revealing - example of deMille's independent work.

DeMille's publicity at the time understandably pulled no punches. His ads advised exhibitors that the film "...marked an epochal advance in motion picture achievement ... a triumph of screen art". Strangely enough though, the trade press duplicated these raves, although perhaps we should not be so naive as to use that "strangely enough", since it was probably even easier for deMille to buy the press than it has been recently for MGM to buy it for "Ben Hur" and "Mutiny on the Bounty". In any event, The Motion Picture World reported: "deMille exceeds his best records; in production and direction he has never done better ... has every quality of greatness". The Motion Picture News agreed: "Hits the mark artistically, dramatically, box-office wise - a fine picture, a great picture, a credit to deMille, and a golden thing for PDC and the exhibitors who will play it". And Motion Picture Today went even further: "The greatest boxoffice picture ever made... (everything) so much bigger and better than ever before ... the religion, while dangerous material, will not serve to lessen its popularity". The picture itself is the best commentary on the "integrity" of those critics!
It's so fashionable among high-brow critics to assail (and ridicule) deMille as a poor director that we hesitate to do so for fear of bracketing ourselves with that generally snobbish and unthinking crowd. However, fashionable or not, it's largely true. DeMille's best pictures were probably his earlier, less pretentious ones, if the Pickfords ("The Little American", "A Romance of the Redwoods") are any criterion. Many of the later spectacles weren't even good fun, although "Union Pacific" was an exception, and others were partially saved by performances or action sequences. "The Road to Yesterday", like 1934's "Four Frightened People" which we showed last year, is especially valuable in assessing deMille's true worth as a director. Here he is on his own, without 2nd unit directors like Arthur Rosson to stage his big action sequences for him; he has only his own resources — and his own money. Thus he plays it safe, keeps a careful eye on the budget, and keeps the spectacle under control. The results speak for themselves, and directorially "The Road to Yesterday" is quite inferior to the work of Griffith, Tourneur, Hart, Ince and others of more than a decade earlier.

Yet without, it's a lot of fun and not without surface merit. Some of the performances are good, and the slick camerawork of Marley (with one or two excellent glass shots) always first-rate. The Grand Canyon exteriors are fine, save one hideously obvious studio replica. The final fire is big and exciting, the duel sequence exceptionally well done (though it's a little disconcerting to see Boyd flashing his best Hopalong Cassidy smile as he flashes a rapier rather than a six-shooter!), and the sets and decor consistently interesting. There are some interesting old timers in the cast, including Charles West, who played the same (but presumably then much bigger) role in the stage version years earlier. The last couple of reels are really quite exciting, and deMille apparently didn't mind spending real money on his castle sets as he knew he'd be able to use them again. They turned up frequently in the deMille-supervised productions at Pathé, he used them again himself in "The Volga Boatman", and rented them out to Sam Goldwyn for "A Night of Love". (For the sake of Mr. G's reputation, we'd better add that that was the title of a Colman-Banky movie!)

Overlooking the question of direction, the main problem with "The Road to Yesterday" is that it's so difficult to know just how to take the story, which is based on what was already in 1925 an out-dated, 20-year-old play on a "Brinley Murphy" theme of reincarnation. It starts off in deadly seriousness, with deMille's accustomed mixture of sex and religion. Then, mid-way, a train wreck transports us back to the principals' prior lives. Literally before the smoke has cleared, the mood changes to bantering comedy, very much tongue-in-cheek, and somewhat of a cross between Fairbanks and "The Boys from Syracuse". Even the titles, and there are some beauties in this section ("Tis written in the stars that our love shall be bitter as hemlock", and "Thou art apter to hurt than heal") seem to be written in a deliberately overstated and sometimes gag-conscious manner. Then suddenly it gets down to brass tacks again, and finishes, as did "The Volga Boatman", on a glorious mélange of sex and brutality - Jette Goudal burning at the stake, and writing very sensuously in the flames without ever looking seriously singed, and the hero being whipped to death in the heroine's bedroom prior to her forced marriage to the villain! Religion, which has been completely forgotten for seven reels, suddenly puts in a re-appearance in reel 10, and seems to prove nothing other than that if one has a frigid wife, prayer and faith are the only answer.

Very little of the plot really holds water, and none of the behaviour is really very logical. Why only one of the four protagonists is wafted back to a prior existence, yet finds her three fellow-sufferers living in the same period of history, is one obvious loose end. It's also a little odd that four Americans should find themselves transported back into
olde England, although of course being shifted back several hundred years in their own habitat would have left them in a wilderness with nothing to see, do, or be, so one can only commend the writers for their invention and good taste in their selection of venue.

In its pseudo-sophisticated approach to marriage, the film reflects much of spirit (filmic and literary at least) of the 20's, and in some of its symbolism (the heel crushing the flower on the wedding night) it has quite a bit of Victorianism too. All in all, it's a confused little work, but not an uninteresting one.

Surprisingly again, the critics were unanimous in raving about the train wreck, hailing it as the greatest thrill ever screened. This again is hard to stomach, as the bulk of it is done exactly as it must have been done on stage. Its absurdity and theatrical flavor is wonderful, but its conviction is nil, and it can't hold a candle to the very real train wreck in 1915's "The Juggernaut". Certainly if the critics had gone back only 2 years to deMille's own "The Ten Commandments", they would have found greater thrills, and if they had gone back further to "Way Down East", "Intolerance" and "The Birth of a Nation", they would probably have collapsed from the excitement of it all!

DeMille's publicity stunts included the expected screenings for the clergy and tie-ins with insurance companies. Two of the more diverting catchlines were: "DID YOU LIVE 300 YEARS AGO? WHAT EFFECT HAS YOUR PAST HAD ON YOUR PRESENT LOVES AND HATES?" and "MERRIE ENGLAND - WHEN INTOLERANCE RULLED AND MAIDS WERE BURNED AT THE STAKE AS WITCHES". The latter seems a little dubious historically; both phases may have existed, but surely not at the same time?

--- Wm. K. Everson ---

COMING PROGRAMS:

THE FILM GROUP meets this coming Friday at 7.00 p.m. Come along and take your chances on the, as usual, unplanned collection of transient silent and sound material.

Next Huff shows:
Tuesday next, Dec. 18, 10-C, 7.30
"A LITTLE GIRL IN A BIG CITY" - one of the vice-den exploitation films of the 20's; plus two Griffith Biographies - THROUGH THE BREAKERS and TWO PATHS - and Edison's THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS.

Fri., Dec. 28th, 10-C, 7.30. THE STUNT MAN --- Richard Talmadge in "LET'S GO" (1923, 5 reels); followed by a two-hour compilation of outstanding stunt sequences from aerial thrillers, melodramas, serials, spectacles, etc. - with Yakima Canutt, Dick Talmadge, David Sharpe, Fred Graham, etc.

January 15th - Paul Fajoe THE LAST WARNING (1929) with Conrad Veidt, Mary Philbin, Leslie Fenton; and BRAVEHEART (1925) with Rod la Rocque.

Coming: WHITE WOMAN with Laughton & Lombard