NOTE: Many members have a quite sensible habit of reading these notes only after they have seen the film. We suggest that you abandon that rule this evening, at least insofar as "A Little Girl in a Big City" is concerned, or you're liable to wonder what hit you in reel five.

"Two Paths" (Biograph, 1911) Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by G.W. Bitzer; With Florence Auer, Stephanie Longfellow, Charles Mailes, Wilfrid Lucas, George Nicholls, Alfred Paget, Donald Griep (playing butler and also the landlady (!) in the final scenes), Gertrude Norman, Gertrude Bambrick. One reel.

An interesting little morality play which hardly lives up to its Biograph synopsis (the mildly wild party is termed "a bacchanalian orgy" and Mailes is referred to as "an unconscionable profligate") is nevertheless a good and certainly lively Griffith bread-and-butter item. Florence Auer's acting, especially in the scenes of her final degradation, is really extremely good considering the simplification of the presentation, and the photography offers a striking firelight fadeout. The titles reflect the poetic and literary quality that was becoming more and more dominant in Griffith's work.

"The Magic Glasses" (Pathé, 1905) ½ reel.

A brief, but charming and amazingly accomplished little French trick film.

"Twas the Night Before Christmas" (Edison, 1914) Story by Annie Hamilton Donnell; director not stated; with Harry Lyttinge as Santa Claus, and Edith Peters, Kenneth Lawlor, Janet Dawley, Marie Abbe, Searle Dawley, Andrew J. Clark, Harold Drews and Maurice, Loel and Eldine Steuart as the children. One reel.

In 1906, the Edison Studios made a lovely little trick fantasy, with some incredibly polished and slickly-photographed tabletop cutout miniatures, called just "The Night Before Christmas". We ran it some years ago. This film of eight years later is less imaginative as a trick film, but it's still rather enjoyable. Its trick effects are well done, the lighting is excellent, and it has a likeable, almost James Barrie, charm to it all. Presumably this is from a British negative, since a title refers to Americans as living "in a foreign land". In any event it seems to settle once and for all that Santa Claus is an Englishman, since his travels seem to start there.

"Through the Breakers" (Biograph, 1909) Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by Bitzer; with James Kirkwood, Marion Leonard, Adele de Garde, Kate Bruce, Grace Henderson, Florence Auer, George Nicholls, Owen Moore, Mary Pickford, Arthur Johnson. One reel.

One of the best, though least known, of Griffith's 1909 films, "Through the Breakers" is a most touching and skillfully made little work. The tempo of the cutting, though less spectacular than in the same year's "The Lonely Villa", is quite remarkable, and even the "sets", simple flats and routine decor regardless, seem to be more carefully arranged than usual and are both atmospheric and convincing. Admitting that other 1909 Griffith films had perhaps more important content or style, I can't off-hand think of one - not even "A Corner in Wheat" - that holds up better in terms of the effectiveness of its dramatic story. Despite the lack of closeups to help in facial expressions, the acting is skillfully underplayed throughout. Kirkwood, by the way, with his severe black suit and brand new hat, seems to bear an astonishing resemblance to D.W. himself in this one. The closing scenes were shot in the Bronx Cemetery, a popular (and readily available) location for early movie-
makers. Griffith actually preferred a cemetery in New Jersey, but the locals there were far more particular and indeed downright hostile. D.W. had to shoot fake scenes in department stores to sidetrack the townspeople, while he and Biter sneaked out unseen to shoot their tombstone scenes! Kirkwood and Marion Leonard, who play so well together here, preceded Griffith by two or three years in leaving Biograph to join Reliance-Majestic.

A Reel of CHARLIE CHASE

To lighten a rather heavy program, we're concluding the first half of the show with some good footage of one of our favorite comedians - Charlie Chase. First, under the title "Bargain Day", are a couple of sequences that play well out of context, with Eugene Pallette and Martha Sleeper. I believe that the original two-reeler from which this was excised was "Fluttering Hearts". Following these excerpts, a quite well condensed one-reel version of "Accidental Accidents" (1924), directed by Leo McCarey, with Ena Gregory, Earl Mohan, Billy Engle and Joe Cobb. This has some very funny stuff to offer, and Charlie is on top form.

-- INTERMISSION --

"A LITTLE GIRL IN A BIG CITY" (Burton King-Gotham Productions, 1925)
Presented by Sam Sax; distributed by Lumas; directed by Burton King; Asst. Director, Jack Hyland; based on the play by James K. MacCurdy; scenario by Victoria Moore; photographed by G.J. Davis and Jack Young; Titles by Randolph Bartlett; editorial supervision - Lon Young; 6 reels
With Gladys Walton, Niles Welch, Colt Albertson, Sallie Crute, Tammany Young, J. Barney Sherry, Dore Davidson, Morgan Jones, Mary Thurman, Helen Shipman.

The 20's were full of exploitation films warning of the apparently unavoidable pitfalls that awaited young ladies in big cities in general, and New York in particular. Probably more young ladies ventured into the cities eagerly seeking out those pitfalls than were ever trapped into them, and it's doubtful if many country innocents steered clear of New York as a result of these films. Most of them - "The Road to Ruin", "The Red Kimono" - offered far more in their posters than on the actual celluloid, and inadvertently painted the big cities as rather boring, and vice as being dull - and infrequent. "A Little Girl in a Big City" however is rather an exception to this rule -- it is anything but dull, and seems to suggest that New York life simply revolves around vice in one form or another. The worst den of all would seem to be on East 51st Street, which makes it rather handy for a little sinner after the Museum's 5.30 show.

Make no mistake about it, "A Little Girl in a Big City" is no neglected masterpiece or an important milestone in movie history. It's the 1925 equivalent of the kind of thing that Messrs. Brenner and Mishkin offer every few weeks at the Rialto, except that being 1925, it's more fun, more accomplished, and far less distasteful. Most film societies - probably rightly - would look aghast at it. But it is typical of a very prevalent breed of film from the 20's, and it happens also to be one of the most enjoyable of its species that we've seen. "The Film Daily" reported, "The old play that our fathers saw brought up to date ... they left in all the lurid stuff, and added some. Sensationalism travels on all six cylinders in this one. Thrill fans will find it lots of fun, but it's not good for fussy audiences". That seems to sum up both the picture - and our audience - rather well. Incidentally, the Film Daily went on to suggest that exhibitors publicise it by working a tie-in with their local newspapers since there was bound to be a story about a current local missing girl who had probably headed for the big city, never to be heard of again!
The picture gets more and more outrageous as it progresses. Every new character, even minor roles, gets a long title card that hints of past misfortune and future problems -- none of which materialize! Indeed, some of the characters - J. Barney Sherry and Tammany Young for example - are introduced, get their titles and one scene, collect their pay and go home! It was very common practice with independent producers in the 20s to hire "has-been" yet still "prestige" names, shoot their scene or two in a couple of hours, and then use their names prominently as part of an "all-star" cast. The use of Sherry here is typical, and indeed a couple of the trade papers commented on the waste of this fine player in just one scene. The titles themselves are a joy; the villain's rooms are never apartments, but always "a den", "a lair" or "a hell-hole". Some of the purple prose about the crushing and despoothing of innocence has to be read to be believed, and it resembles nothing as much as the titles in Sennett's "His Bitter Pill" which, a decade earlier, were already lampooning such titles!

But the biggest shock of all is reserved for the end section of the film, when from out of nowhere, we are treated to some marvellous and quite unexplained bordello footage. This footage is nowhere referred to in any of the original reviews that I have read, and it seems that it must have been added after the previews, to spice it up in lax censorship areas. It would appear to be from some slightly older German film; perhaps those members who know German silents - and bordelloes in general - better than I, may be able to identify it. It's wild stuff, with hints of the deepest depravities, and one almost expects Louise Brooks to turn up among the white night-gowned girls. It has absolutely no connection with the rest of the film, but it is presumably meant to be taken as some kind of annex to the villain's 51st street hangout. The lush marble interiors hardly jell with the wooden frame exteriors, but after we've been treated to some of this European footage, a title tells us "Mary enters this Hell Hole", and we're back with American vice again. There's always the chance (and the hope, for the sake of 1925 audiences if for nothing else) that this material was better integrated originally. This 16mm print is copied from an original 35mm release print, which may well have been subjected to local censurships -- although what remains is so strong that one shudders to think of what else may have been there! Whatever the full story, it's an astonishing example of fantastically careless editing with an exclusively "fast buck" motivation.

A few comments about the rest of the print: the film was one of those that we come across periodically that was stored in small rolls of unlabelled film -- well over a hundred of them. It had to be very laboriously put together, a task not made easier by the rather dark quality of the film, the fact that the climax has three different women all rushing to the same place from different directions, and that one of these women had a town house and a Long Island estate and was continually flitting from one to the other, and phoning from one to the other. Fitting this jigsaw together has resulted in a certain jerkiness at times, for which blame us rather than Sam Sax or Burton King. One or two odd shots may well be in the wrong specific spot, though right in basic sequence, and I suspect that one or two transitions and other brief scenes are missing entirely, due to decomposition, wear on the original print, or simply through the rolls having been lost. It seems fairly certain that there must have been a scene showing the villain embolting the hero in his scheme in reel one. But in actual running time, the print is only a couple of minutes shy of the original, so not too much can be out. Some titles are badly placed too -- the hero's sister isn't identified until long after her appearance -- so even originally it may have been a bit uneven.
However, I don’t think we need be overly critical of this kind of film, nor overly concerned about the missing scene. But I am a little concerned about some missing identification — can anyone tell me who plays the wonderful Madame Cora, and what else we’ve seen her in?

There are some rather nice exteriors of New York by the way. Vice Kings it seems keep their sinister assignations on East 51st Street, but live in ritzy Riverside Drive mansions, while their victims earn their money soliciting in Central Park! Oddly enough, Niles Welsh, who plays the clean-cut hero, played a white slaver or two in his time as well, and was actually better as a villain, keeping at it right through the early and mid-thirties. (He was particularly vile towards Gene Autry in “The Singing Vagabond”, and had very lecherous intentions towards Ann Rutledge in that film!) Actually, all that mysterious German footage apart, the villain’s main activities here are blackmail for profit, and lechery for fun. White slavery per se remains one of those dimly hinted at vices, which became more and more dimly discerned as the silents moved into the talkies. A minor Paramount horror film “The Monster and the Girl” had a plot revolving entirely around a white slave ring, with Joseph Calleia as one of the kingpins of course, but nothing was EVER said about it, and one literally had to read between the lines to find out about it all. And even in “Lured”, with Joseph Calleia energetically shipping girls down to Buenos Aires, Scotland Yard’s Charles Coburn handled it all very diplomatically. The girls were, quote, “Apprentices in crime”.

We await with bated breath the identification of both the German footage, and of Madame Cora … any suggestions??

--------- Wm. K. Everson ---------

NEXT SHOWS:

Friday December 28 -- THE STUNT MAN

Sunday Dec. 30th -- New Yorker Theatre, 9:30 a.m. We still anticipate running King Vidor’s THE JACK KNIFE MAN, but as yet the print has not arrived from the coast. Final confirmation will be made on Dec. 28 notes; if you are not at that show, please check with me on the 27th or 28th at MU.3-6300.

Tues. Jan 15 -- Paul Fejos’ THE LAST PERFORMANCE with Conrad Veidt; (1929) Rod la Rocque and Lillian Rich in BRAVEHEART (1925)