Next Tuesday: The Sound Films of Malcolm St. Clair: BORN RECKLESS (1937); CRACK UP (1936, with Peter Lorre) and ARTHUR TAKES OVER (1948, excerpts)

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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Nov. 26 1963

THE LESSAGE OF THE VIOLIN (Biograph, 1910) Dir: D.W. Griffith
Photographed by G.W. Bitzer; with Stephanie Langellor, Charles West, Grace Henderson, Dell Henderson, Alfred Paget, Lily Cahill. One reel

One of the lesser-known Griffith Biographs, and understandably so, "The Message of the Violin" is a run of the mill pot-boiler for D.W. He made it in only two days, as against the ten days he devoted to "A Corner in Wheat" the year previously, and cameraman Bitzer photographed two other one-reelers for Biograph that same week. But even the routine Griffith Biographs retain an academic interest, and this little drama, incorporating two favorite Griffith themes -- lovers kept apart by differing social strata, and the evils of drink -- is at least well photographed and quite efficiently edited. Charles West, as always, looks ill at ease in an obvious wig, and it is strange that this particular actor -- effective enough in modestly unassuming hero roles -- so often essayed roles involving makeup. Incidentally, this film should not be confused with the better-known "Voice of the Violin" (a 1909 anti-Communist melodrama). This is standard soap opera, pure and simple; its original subtitle right after the main title was -- "True love is always triumphant".

ANDY'S LION TALE (Universal, 1925) Director: Francis Corby. A Samuel Van Ronkel Production, based on the cartoons by Sidney Smith; camera: Jerry Ash. Edited by Desmond O'Brien. Two reels
With Joe Murphy, Fay Tincher, Jackie Morgan

Huffians are now more than familiar with the racial gags of outrage perpetrated in the 20's and early 30's. As a Britisher, I have certainly never felt offended by Hollywood's traditional Claude Allister stereotype of the British for comedy purposes. (Indeed, I know a few countrymen EXACTLY like Claude Allister!) And I doubt that Jews, Negroes, Italians or Greeks were likewise seriously offended by similar caricatures -- of which last week's marvellous "Blessed Event" had quite a kindly supply. The complaints have usually come not from the minority groups themselves, but from "disinterested" groups representing those minorities. Dashingly, it all comes down to taste. One can easily forgive dubious taste if the joke itself is funny. That is where "Andy's Lion Tale" doesn't really come off. Most of the Negro racial stereotypes here are outrageous, but for the most part they are not funny. An occasional gag pays off on its sheer bravura audacity. Why, then, are we showing it? Partially because it's the first of the popular Andy Gump comedies that we've come across, and thus it has a certain historic and curiosity value, and mainly because its tasteless stereotyped comedy also has a certain academic and historical value too. Inter-racial gagging on the screen was so widely accepted in the 20's that even material such as this would hardly raise a stir; and on the whole, it was a healthy state of affairs, despite such deplorable lapses as this one. Needless to say, if this particular film turned up in a theatre or on television today, the picket-lines and agitators would have a field-day!

THE TRYOUT (Capital Films, 1919) Directed by William Bertram; story by Al Jennings; scenario by H.C. Warneck; two reels
Starring Al Jennings, with Tom Ashton and Vivian Gayne

A month ago, we hadn't seen a single Al Jennings western -- although we'd certainly heard about them. Now, unexpectedly, we have unearthed a whole half-a-dozen of them; and two have already been shown on our Sunday
morning shows. Al Jennings was the last of the old-time Western outlaws. He apparently had a nodding acquaintance with the James Boys and the Daltons and tried to make the most of it. Somewhat of a hot-wind expert and a blowhard, he decided to go in for banditry too -- as a train robber -- but bungled his profession so amateurishly that he was captured almost at once, and sent to prison -- for a long term. However, the Governor of Oklahoma pardoned him later and he found himself at liberty. What does an outlaw of limited talents do? Then, as now, he breaks into the movies. The curious thing is that Jennings, a real outlaw if an inept one, decided to shape his screen image after William S. Hart. Thus in his films he paints banditry as a harsh, unglamorous and rather sad life, but rather a gallant one too. Like Hart, Jennings, in his movie adventures -- seems perennially to be putting young guns on the straight and narrow, espousing the causes of lonely widows, and being kind to infants and horses. Beneath all of the personal whitewash however, a certain kind of documentary realism does emerge. The costumes all seem just right. The people, and the way they live, have the ring of truth to them. This may have been partly because Jennings and his company obviously didn't have much money to spend on these ventures, and thus recorded the drab truth of the West instead of creating a more glamorous vision; or it may be that Jennings, whatever his personal foibles, was trying to put a certain amount of truth on the screen. Whatever the reason, these Jennings two-reelers have an authentic feeling about them, and are consequently far more interesting than many of the other two-reel westerns (with Ed Cobb, Leo Maloney etc.) of the 20's. Jennings incidentally, died only quite recently -- within the past few years. His "story", very much hoked-up, was put on the screen a few years back by Columbia as "Al Jennings of Oklahoma." Now that we know what he actually looked like, Elissa Cook jr. might have been the ideal person to play Al on the screen -- but Dan Duryea didn't do so badly!

-Intermission-

LEATHERNECK (Pathé, 1929) Directed by Howard Higgin; a Ralph Block production; original story & scenario by Elliott Clawson; camera: John Mescall; titles by John Krafft; edited by Deane Harrison; 5 reels.


"Leatherneck" is an impressive and unusual action-drama, by far the best of the several films made by the Block-Higgin-Boyd combination for Pathé in the late 20's. But like many good programmers in that confused period of the changeover to sound, it was somehow lost in the shuffle and never heard of again. It was one of sixteen films reviewed by "The Film Daily" on April 7th., 1929. It, and three other films, were part-talkies.

Reginald Dennis' "Clear the Deck" was one of the others. The remainder consisted of five completely silent films (mainly independents and westerns), four synchronised films (including Garbo's "Wild Orchids") and three all-talkies. These latter included Clara Bow's "The Wild Party," reviewed as being so wild in spots that it was not the sort of film that "nice boys and girls" would want to see.

"Leatherneck" was released in part-talkie, synchronised, and entirely silent versions. Our print is of the latter version. Unlike many films in its category, it gives no impression at all of being merely a silent print of a part-talkie. The pace never slows for talk, and the camera is constantly mobile. The plot it told in images and movement rather than in
dialogue. It is true that this print is about a reel shorter than the original sound release print, and thus long talkie sequences may and probably have been deleted. Careful scrutiny of many stills however, and an extremely detailed synopsis in the original press-sheet, suggests that no actual sequences or plot elements have been deleted. It would quite certainly be easy to expand this film as is merely by padding certain sections with dialogue rather than using to-the-point subtitles.

The Film Daily called it "A surefire money-maker ... the best Marine picture yet filmed ... has color, guts and action". It also commented on Boyd's fine speaking voice, and added that the heroine hummed pleasantly. Photoplay however, remarked that her voice was quite poor; a pity, as she (Diane Ellis) was a lovely girl and too accomplished a player to be discarded.

In many ways, "Leatherneck" is quite off-beat, and full of surprises. It starts off dramatically with a format obviously suggested by "Beau Geste". Three Marines -- one dead, one barely alive, one insane -- are discovered in the desert and taken into their fort. The big mystery of what happened is then told in flashback. At one point in the film, it looks as though a rollicking Flagg and Quirt style may develop, but this mood is soon dispelled, and the plot reverts to strong red meat again. Its melodrama -- international criminal Fred Kohler covets the White Russian heroine, and plots to abduct her as well as stealing her father's potash mine in Manchuria -- is backed up by some good revolution scenes and touching romantic interludes. The sets are solid and elaborate, the photography strong and dramatic (particularly in a mass execution sequence) and throughout there are constant reminders of scenes in established classics -- "Greed" and "The Love of Jeanne Ney" in particular. This is no lazy borrowing however, but rather the careful application of real style to a film that might otherwise have been just another programmer.

"Leatherneck" is hardly a great or important movie -- but it still represents darned good movie-making at a time when, thanks to the coming of sound, there wasn't so much of that brand of movie-making around. The print, a toned original, is in fine shape and a pleasure to behold.