Next Tuesday: Roy del Ruth’s "Employees’ Entrance" (1933) with Warren William, Loretta Young; "The Voice of Hollywood" (1929), "Inki at the Circus", and Laurel and Hardy in "Them Thar Hills" and its sequel "Tit for Tat".

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Harold Lloyd program 1925-1947

January 14 1964

"The Freshman" (Pathe, 1925) Directed by Sam Taylor and Fred Newmeyer; story by Sam Taylor, Tim Whelan, Ted Wilde and John Gray; camera - Walter Lundin and Henry Kohler; 8 reels


"The Freshman" is Lloyd’s own favorite film, and it’s not hard to see why. Not only was it a huge success in the mid-20’s, when “going through college” was very much “the thing”, and when any collegiate film - realistic or otherwise - just couldn’t miss, but also it presents the traditional go-getting All-American Boy Lloyd hero without the thrill trimmings of skyscraper-climbing or wild chases. If ever Lloyd’s screen character succeeded on its own merits, it was in this film. Hence it is the one film that Lloyd has always sought to reissue, and while previous reissue tryouts have always proven unsuccessful, he’s now trying it again in a slightly different format. "The Freshman" forms the bulk of Lloyd’s new compilation-film, and follow-up to "Harold Lloyd’s World of Comedy".

Even allowing for the fact that "The Freshman" no longer has the collegiate fervor pulling for it, I must admit that I have always found it a lesser Lloyd in which the party sequence, with the disintegrating tuxedo, is the only bit of really creative comedy -- for all the charm and consistent chuckles of the rest of it. "Safety Last", "Doctor Jack", "The Kid Brother" and others have always seemed much funnier. However, this slightly let-down reaction always stems from screening the film alone. Lloyd, more than any other comic, needs an audience. Keaton, Chaplin, Langdon, better as they are with audience reaction, nevertheless still pay off for the solitary viewer. But with Lloyd, the pure mechanics become too obvious. A repeated gesture or mannerism with Langdon becomes rather endearing; the repeated mannerism with Lloyd becomes merely calculating. All of which is merely to say that no criticism of a Lloyd film is justified when it is based on a viewing without an audience. I have been left comparatively cold by "The Freshman" several times that way; yet with an audience, seeing Lloyd’s mechanism work so beautifully, it springs to warmth and life. What had seemed routine before then becomes funny; what had always seemed funny becomes hilarious.

It is, however, a surprisingly leisurely-paced film for Lloyd, with four basic big comedy segments -- or one to every two reels. However, its overall charm and the loveliness of Jobyna Ralston (as "Peggy ... the kind of girl your mother must have been") more than overcome the lack of rapid-fire sight gags that so many other Lloyd films offered. Keaton’s "College" certainly was a far more inventive comedy, and a wittier one, but it’s easy to see why it didn’t have the enormous popular appeal of Lloyd’s film. (Its macabre Charles Adams climax, for one thing, must have alienated a lot of fans!) But it’s good to see "The Freshman" again. This society has never played it before, and it has been many years since there was a Museum showing. Since Lloyd is now using it in his theatrical compilation, the chances are that the complete film will all but disappear from now on. Incidentally, notice how Tate College is ingeniously suggested rather than shown; there isn’t a single shot of a college exterior or of typical campus scenes. The interiors of assembly hall and dance floor could be any interiors; the football stadium obviously is real, but

Lloyd's "comeback" picture is an unofficial sequel to "The Freshman" (by pure chance, Harold doesn't actually get the girl in that earlier film, although one assumes he might, and that ties in rather well with the sequel) and starts where the earlier one left off, by repeating much of the football game climax. The matching up is remarkably skillfully done, aided no little by Lloyd's almost unchanged appearance. "Mad Wednesday" was produced the same year as Chaplin's "Monsieur Verdoux" (and was in production 25 days longer, surprising in view of Sturges' normal speed, and the complexity of the Chaplin film) and was earlier known as "The Sin of Harold Diddlebock".

Fraught with typically Howard Hughesian problems from the beginning, it finally went into release - briefly - in 1957, only to be withdrawn almost immediately. It's surprising how many people missed it, and it has not yet appeared on TV. (It probably won't. Hughes' films seem permanently witheld. Plus which Lloyd's success-phobia so strongly parallels that of his screen character that anything of his that isn't assured of a 100% success he prefers not to experiment with!) This is certainly the first New York showing of "Mad Wednesday" since our own last showing some five years ago.

In the early 50's, "Mad Wednesday" seemed funny, but no more. Screen comedy has gone downhill so fast however that only a dozen years later it already seems quite wonderful, though some of the Sturges satire pays off better than the Lloyd slapstick. The building-climbing climax is funny, but since its clever but obvious technical tricks make it obviously studio-based and unreal, it doesn't have the thrills backing up the laughs as "Safety Last!" did. However, as in most Sturges films, the pace is frenetic, and when one gag doesn't quite come off, there's always another right on its heels to do. Outstanding moments include Lloyd's second drink, his invasion (with a lion on a leash) of a banker's office just as said banker is gleefully dictating a hypocratically regretful eviction notice, and best of all Al Bridges' dry and matter-of-fact description of the feeding habits of lions. Throughout there are some real dillies of comic sequences, put over with all the frenzy and noise characteristic of Sturges, and with of course most of his troupe of regular stock players. It is probably a better Sturges film than a Lloyd vehicle (without Sturges' characters, pacing and bits of business it would fall a little flat). But just as Sturges got more out of Dick Powell in "Christmas in July" than any other director had managed hitherto, so here does Lloyd reveal a hitherto largely unexploited talent for pathos and serious acting. He has some genuinely moving scenes with the heroine, which curiously rather parallel those of Chaplin with Marilyn Nash in "Verdoux" -- not only in their emotional content, but in the way that these attractive but not very experienced girls manage to turn their lack of polish into a rather spontaneous warmth. Coincidentally, there's a lovely, Chaplinesque score by Werner Heymann.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---

COMING IN MARCH OR APRIL -- THE BEGINNING OF A LANEOCYCLE OF BRITISH FILMS FROM THE THIRTIES, MAINLY OF SO-CALLED "FORGOTTEN" FILMS. Films by Tim Whelan, Victor Saville, Carol Reed, Asquith et al. -- films with John Loder, John Mills, Arthur Askey, Jack Hulbert, Will Hay, Clive Brook, etc.