The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

February 18, 1964

"The Light That Came" (Biograph, 1909) Directed by D.W. Griffith; photographed by C.W. Bitzer; one reel
With Florence Auer, Mary Pickford, Marion Leonard, Francis Grandin, Kate Bruce, Mack Sennett, Arthur Johnson, George Nichols.

Made when Griffith had been directing for little more than a year, "The Light That Came" is a rather touching and quite underplayed variation on the Cinderella theme. The two beautiful sisters don't flaunt their beauty in the face of the ugly one, as many a writer or director of the period would have had them do, and the ending too, while a happy one, doesn't go overboard. There are a couple of sequences in which it is quite important to understand the thoughts and motivations of the characters, and Griffith - and Florence Auer - manage this surprisingly well with pantomime that is eloquent (for the period) yet never grotesque. Incidentally, it is interesting to see Marion Leonard and Mary Pickford as sisters of approximately the same age, and to recall that the same year Mary convincingly played Marion's young daughter in "The Lonely Villa".

"The Iron Claw" (Pathé, 1916) Episode 7, "The Hooded Helper". Directed by Edward Jose, Two reels
With Pearl White, Creighton Hale, Sheldon Lewis.

The 10-episode "The Iron Claw" was Pearl White's fourth serial, and pre-dates "The Lone Ranger", "The Masked Marvel" etc., in that it has a masked mystery-man on the side of law and order. It's always unfair to judge any serial on a single episode, but this one chapter certainly doesn't have quite the pace or the imagination of "The Exploits of Elaine", although of course it is incomparably superior to "The Perils of Pauline". In its direction, editing and camerawork, "The Iron Claw" is rather polished, but its melodramatic content seems a little tame. However, maybe the other 19 chapters were a little livelier!

"The Daredevil" (Mack Sennett-Pathe, 1924) Directed by Del Lord; 2 reels
With Ben Turpin, Madeleine Hurlock, Harry Gribbon, Kewpie Morgan, Jack Richardson.

One of the fastest of all the Ben Turpin comedies, this gives Ben far less plot than he was accustomed to, and much more action. The sight gags come thick and fast, and the whole thing is a genial spoof of the improvisational nature that had characterised Sennett's Keystone comedies in the 1914-17 years, but really wasn't so prevalent any more in the 20's. Parts of this short were used in both Robert Youngson's "The Golden Age of Comedy" and the Silents Please "Fun Factory".

- Intermission -

"Broadway" (Universal, 1929) Presented by Carl Laemmle; directed by Paul Fejos
Based on the Jed Harris stage play by Phillip Dunning and George Abbott, scenario by Edward T. Lowe Jr., Associate producer, Carl Laemmle Jr. Score by Howard Jackson. Asst. scenarist: Charles Furthman; editors, Edward L. Cahn and Robert Carlisle; supervising editor, Maurice Pivar. Silent version: 7 reels: Caution: Hal Hol
As we indicated in our Bulletin, this print of "Broadway" is a bad one, of a physical quality that we normally wouldn't even consider playing, although it is an original toned print, and the picture quality is excellent, despite the many splices and a three-minute butterfly scratch. However, it appears to be the only print that has survived of either the silent or sound version of this 1929 film, and so about once every eight years we coax it through the projector for its academic interest. Because of the print quality, we didn't try to put it through a viewer for scoring purposes, and in any case we'll be devoting more time to holding the film in the gate than in flipping records, so if the ad-lib scoring is a bit erratic, please bear with us. A note of mild consolation: "Broadway" is interesting largely for its photographic fireworks and for its wild sets. By today's standards, its dramatic content is mild and fairly ordinary, so the excessive splices and jump cuts don't really ruin the enjoyment of the elements that do remain interesting.

The end of the silent era was Hollywood's richest, lushest, craziest period - and at no studio was the aura of extravagant insanity more apparent than at Universal, where Uncle Carl Laemmle was wont to import European and primarily German talent to be welcomed by wholesale stoppage of work all over the lot and accompanied by the noisiest Germanic brass bands. "Broadway" was a product of this wonderful and awful period - an enormous, sprawling picture, filled with Technicolor production numbers (not in this version) and featuring a surrealist nightmare of a night-club set that was at least as big as Grand Central, and seemed to use architectural motifs deriving from the night-club in the first "Dr. Mabuse". Universal neither knew nor cared that New York hadn't a single night-club a tenth of this size -- all that mattered in '29 was that it be the biggest in Hollywood, and that it certainly was!

As an adaptation of a play, "Broadway" has many of the faults of the genre. Most of the physical action takes place off stage (e.g., gangster activities in the streets) and is merely talked about. Initially, the intention seems to have been otherwise. The script for the film (it was written as a 9-reel sound film, this silent version being edited from it and not in any way shot differently) is itself a monumental and unwieldy affair, full of stage directions to the actors, explanations of motivations, and suggestions to "Dr. Fejos" as to how certain photographic effects could be gained. Presumably much of this proved impractical, and was jettisoned. The original script calls for far more exterior action in the streets, and for an opening montage which, as written, would have run for at least a reel, being a kind of "city symphony" introduction taking in young love, factory hooters, traffic accidents, bootlegging, shootings, robberies, drug addiction, pawn-shops opening for business, and what have you. However, there are also endlessly talkative scenes -- an interrogation at police headquarters for example. So despite the cutting down on the giant musical scenes (enough of which remain to be impressive) this silent version undoubtedly had a faster and more cinematic pace than the wholly sound version -- especially of course in a print which didn't have one foot in the grave, as this one does.

"Broadway" is the film for which Fejos and cameraman Mohr designed the fantastic cranes which more resembled an ancient scaling tower than a piece of photographic equipment. But the results achieved with it, even if the moving camera does run riot - are staggeringly impressive, and sometimes even creative. Rarely well, the camera charged in for closeups, sneaks around behind players, and zooms aloft like a suddenly liberated balloon, so that the already bizarre decor becomes a jumble of diagonals and angles. Once in a while however it stands still long enough to catch a shot more impressive for its composition than its movement -- as in the scene of the detective viewed through the diffused violin bows! Incidentally, Universal's great crane continued to be used down through the years, suddenly leaping into spectacular prominence in such diverse films as "Nagana" and "A Hundred Men and a Girl".
For its size and importance, "Broadway" seems today to have a strangely unimpressive cast. Other than Evelyn Brent, perfectly cast, the stars seem to be very much second-string — but at the time, in Hollywood if not in the rest of the country, they were considered top-liners. Glen Tryon is a decidedly liability as the bumptious hero, and judging from his dialogue in the script, he must have been even harder to take in the sound version. But Robert Ellis is excellent as the villain, some of the lesser gangster performances (Leslie Fenton especially) are good, and Thomas Jackson and Paul Forcasi, recreating their roles from the stage version, were to remain in those roles for the rest of their careers. Jackson’s “Little Caesar” performance seems almost a parody, though only two years later, of his Dan McCorn here. Merna Kennedy, Chaplin’s leading lady in “The Circus” was here seen in one of her last important roles. She soon drifted into B quickies.

The length of the sound version was 9330 feet; it came out first, with this shortened silent version following. ”Film Daily” reviewed it as “Real box-office ... rich production values and unusual photographic effects ... the night-club covers acres — while never true, certainly impressive ... an intelligent film and a fine popular attraction”. It opened on Broadway at the Globe, following Universal’s “Show Boat”. Sold on a combination of sex and size, it used ads that were frankly erotic, and were accompanied by such catchlines as “Nothing but the biggest sets could be big enough for the biggest moments the stage has ever known — a million candle-power picture”.

Universal’s film was not alone in the gangster-cum-musical field, and films like First National’s “Broadway Babes”, an Alice White vehicle directed by Kervyn LeRoy (and due here soon) were playing in direct competition. This prompted Universal to insert the following line in their trade ads: “Use of the word Broadway in other film productions is unauthorised, and has no connection with this, the original play”.

Universal remade the film in the early 40’s as a competent enough minor gangster film, but one with little distinction. Pat O’Brien was the cop, Janet Blair the hoofee, Brod Crawford the heavy, and Anne Gwynne in the Brent role. George Raft played himself in a reshuffling of the Glenn Tryon role. There were the expected nods towards the newer censorship. In the original, the murderer gets off scot-free. In the remake, events lead up to that, but (telling the tale in flashback) Raft explains that afterwards she gave herself up anyway, and was let off with a light sentence.

Most amusing (unintentionally) moment in the remake was when Raft, in the 40’s, goes to the stage door of the night-club where he had been a hoofer in the 20’s. Walking into the decidedly economically constructed night-club he muses, “Funny, I remember it as being bigger than this!”

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**NOTES:**

**There will be a film group meeting this coming Friday. No details yet, but I believe that Julius Fostal has a mailing out.**

**There will be no show at the New Yorker this coming Sunday.**