The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"FEET FIRST" (Paramount-Lloyd, 1930) Directed by Clyde Bruckman
Scenario by Felix Adler, Lex Neal and Paul Gerard Smith from a story by John Grey and Alfred A. Cohn; camera: Walter Ludyin and Henry Kohler; 7 reels
With Harold Lloyd, Barbara Kent, Robert McKade, Lillian Leighton, Alec B. Francois, Arthur Houseman, Sleep 'N Eat (Stepin Fetchit), James Finlayson, Leo Willis.

The basic weakness of "Feet First" is that it is all so much of a remarking of earlier Lloyd silents, and specifically "Safety Last". The Lloyd screen character remains constant, and nothing has been added in the way of new plot material, so that it lacks the element of surprise, while the slow and rather uncertain pacing, typical of so many early talkie comedies, makes the stretches between gags rather hard at times. Too, sound, with its added dimension of realism, detracts from rather than enhances all the building-climbing stuff, and the grunts, groans and exclamations of fear take it out of the fantasy world that made it all so much easier to accept in "Safety Last". Even allowing for that though, it is not as well done as before; the camera keeps in close to Lloyd far too much, there are few of those allessential dizzy downward shots, and only occasionally is the impression of real peril preserved. Nevertheless, it certainly has its moments, and Lloyd - helped out occasionally by double David Sharpe, so skillfully edited in and out that one hardly noticed the switch - goes thru his paces with his usual gusto. The print, a reissue version, is slightly trimmed, the casualties including Noah Beery's scene. But the abysmal slow pace of the original film is rather helped by the cutting in this case; no particularly good gags are gone (the nauseating but very funny seasick gag remains) but the film's sense of geography is set all awry, since one is sometimes just where Harold is, or why, and the references to "the mainland" are occasionally confusing. Picture however, the continuity is unimpaired by the substantial but well-handled cuts.

INTERMISSION

"STEAMBOAT BILL JR." (United Artists-Joseph N. Schenck, 1928)
Directed by Charles F. Reisner; story by Carl Harbaugh; Technical Director, Fred Gabourie; Asst. Director, Sandy Roth; photographed by Dev Jennings and Bert Haines; 7 reels
With Buster Keaton, Ernest Torrence, Marion Byron, Tom Lewis, Tom McGuire, Joe Keaton.

To classify "Steamboat Bill Jr." as one of Keaton's weaker features is perhaps accurate, but as misleading as calling "The Circus" a lesser Chaplin. While I can think of only "Go West" as being below the standard of this particular Keaton, the criticism is relative. Any Keaton feature is bound to be a delight, and I suspect that this one will seem even more so when backed up by audience reaction. Nevertheless, it's a curious Keaton. It has far less plot than any of his other already filmily-plotted films, and at times seem to exist even more than they did in a dream-like vacuum. There are moments, particularly in the middle of the film, that are so comical that one has to believe that Buster, like Langdon in his later films, seems to be relying almost solely on audience response to his screen character for a laugh reaction. Disappointingly little use is made of the steamboat at all, and while he does them brilliantly and with an energy that makes one shudder, Keaton indulge in too many falls and tumbles. One misses the usual stupidity of the typical Keaton heroine too and the breezy flapper here seems quite out of place and much more a disappointment: the film opens beautifully and there's a wonderfully bizarre meets awful comic with hats shortly afterwards. And if it gets rather labored in its mid-sectons, with stunning effects and sight gags, more than makes up for it. Keaton, in his autobiography, explains that originally this climax had been intended as a flood sequence, but Schenck was alarmed that relatives of flood victims would find it distasteful. At a cost of an extra $25,000, Keaton re-rigged his props and constructed new sets, turning the fence into a hurricane -- only to find out later that statistics showed there were far more hurricanes than flood deaths every year! This climax contains some of the most elaborate night gags ever filmed and one readily forgive the lack of attention to one detail -- the wind machines are employed only in the foreground, background trees remaining quite unwhipped! Most of the river scenes by the way were shot on the Sacramento River, right opposite Sacramento. And -- free plugs -- in the climactic hurricane watch for intriguing posters for "The Temptress" and other (HM) releases, Buster possibly wanting to butter-up his next employers!