November 24, 1964

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

-1924-

Two Sophisticated Comedies

Both of tonight’s films are old Huff Society favorites, and we repeat them regularly every five to six years. However, this is the first time that we have shown them on the same program, and they supplement one another rather well.

"The King on Main Street" (Paramount, 1925) Produced, directed and adapted for the screen by Monta Bell, from "The King", adapted by Leo Dietschlein from the play by G.A. de Caillavet, Robert de Flers and Emmanuell Arène. Sets by Douglas Z. Doty; photographed by James Wong Howe; original length: 6 reels; this edited version, 5 reels.

With Adolphe Menjou, Bessie Love, Greta Nissen, Edgar Norton, Oscar Shaw, Joseph Kilgour, with Losc Wolm as a "guest" extra in the hotel lobby scene.

Reviewing "The King on Main Street", the trade paper "Film Daily" advised exhibitors: "Yes, yes, by all means ... sure-fire boxoffice values ... the Menjou fans will eat this up ... it is mighty fine entertainment, and they will like it!" In terms of commercial potential, Film Daily was certainly right. The film was a great success, particularly in the small towns where the idea of a European king with democratic ideas descending on Coney Island and New Jersey, was very sympathetically received. The film is something of a mixture of "The Grand Duchess and the Waiter" (shown here in September) and "The Student Prince", with neither plot element dominating the other. A smooth and sophisticated comedy, it has quite a few surprises, some tantalizing near-vamping by Greta Nissen, and a really charming and appealing performance by Bessie Love, who is quite the best thing about the film. And a real bonus is Miss Love's spirited rendition of the Charleston, which prompted "Theatre Magazine" in January of 1926 to remark: "This is modern dancing ... for the fact that Bessie Love gives a perfect exhibition of the Charleston, proving that it can be danced with extreme grace and agility, and yet without a single hint of wriggling vulgarity. We hereby award Miss Love the palm as the greatest Charleston expert on the screen -- if not on the stage -- which is by way of being a miracle, for ordinarily a film dance looks as silly as the capering of goats".

"The King on Main Street", with its pleasing performers, its authentic New York, New Jersey and Coney Island locations (it was made at Paramount's Astoria, Long Island studios) is so enjoyable that one hates to be usually critical, but alas it never does quite fulfill its promise. Its plot always proceeds in a nice direct line, without the subtle diversions that Mal St. Clair would probably have given it. It certainly doesn't have the wit that Preston Sturges or Lubitsch would have given it, and this wit is especially needed in the climax, which fizzes out in a most unsatisfactory manner.

One doesn't have to have a happy ending of course, but the bitter-sweet solution is singularly apt here, and far from logical -- even by Hollywood and Lubitschian standards. However, before that happens, there is much to be entertained by, including the king's first encounter with a Coney Island hot dog. Democratically, he takes a bite -- but then, sensibly, he discards it as would any normal person trying one for the first time, and especially from a Coney Island stand! Incidentally, originally the film had a Technicolor sequence. Our print has no such finery, but is a good toned print.

Monta Bell achieved his best results in slight, sophisticated films of this nature, though lacking the taste and invention of his contemporaries at Paramount, Mal St. Clair and Herbert Brenon. He didn't specialize, but handled -- competently -- anything he was given, ranging from Garbo's first American film "The Torrent" to "The Bellamy Trial" with Betty Bronson and Leatrice Joy. His last film was "China's Little Devils" for Movieland in 1945. I must confess however to not having seen many of the Bell films that are considered his best, so let me quote some notes by George Patterson of the Toronto Film Society, who is more familiar with his work: "Originally considered for "The Little Firey Dragon", Lubitsch got a great critical reception for his first film "Broadway After Dark" with Menjou and Norma Shearer, which contained a classic scene of Menjou as a bon-vivant bachelor sitting in his tub sailing little paper boats made out of letters from his various amours! Another Shearer vehicle that was a failure was "Lady of
"ARE PARENTS PEOPLE?" (Paramount, 1925) Director: Malcolm St. Clair
Scenario by Frances Agnew from the Saturday Evening Post story by Alice Duer Miller; Camera: Bert Glennon; 5 reels
With Betty Bronson, Adolphe Menjou, Florence Vidor, Andre Beranger, Lawrence Grey, Emily Fitzroy, Mary Beth Milford, William Courtright.

"Are Parents People?" is a fine example of the light, charming, social comedy that has completely disappeared from the screen today. With a plot that is admittedly no more than pleasant trifle, it sparkles from the first scene to the last, wagging an admonishing yet friendly figure at the audience throughout for being possessed of the same human foibles that motivate the story.

After years as a Sennett director, and then on Rin Tin Tin and other melodramas, "Are Parents People?" marked St. Clair's directorial debut at Paramount, end on the film's success hung his future there. It was a success, both critically and at the boxoffice, and like all future St. Clair films was brought in quickly and economically. The following year he made no less than six top-liners for Paramount, and newspaper film critics voted him one of the top directors of the year, with only Ernst Lubitsch and Von Stroheim ahead of him. The film also helped consolidate the career of Betty Bronson, who had been such an overnight sensation in her first major film, "Peter Pan,". Scheduled to do "The Little French Girl" with Bronson (who used Mary Brian instead), Bronson was sidetracked into St. Clair's film, thus proving that she was as adept at modern comedy as at pathos and whimsy, although it was in another Barrie-Bronson film, "A Kiss for Cinderella", that she was to give her finest performance.

Together with Pola Negri's "A Woman of the World", "Are Parents People?" is probably the St. Clair film that holds up best. Its absence of moving camera shots and apparently "straightforward" technique is misleading, for via intelligent cutting and pacing, and the very sparse use of titles, St. Clair tells an essentially talkie story in completely visual terms. An appealing little sequence has Betty Bronson passing through several stages of determination and indecision merely by a closeup of her ankles in differing attitudes. And the ambiguous parental questionings concerning an innocent night spent in the hero's apartment, is likewise told purely in casually underplayed pantomime. One of St. Clair's greatest virtues was his ability to build minor incidents into riotous comedy sequences, and the episode here with Andre Beranger as a satirised Barrymore (from "Beau Brummel") is typical. (For more of a career run-down on St. Clair, we refer you to our notes on "Crack Up" and "Grand Duchess And the Waiter").

But notwithstanding the smoothness of St. Clair's direction, the slick and clean photography of Bert Glennon ("The Ten Commandments", "Wagonmaster") with its well-lit interiors and sharp Pasadena exteriors, and the polished playing of Menjou and Vidor, a good deal of the film's wholly engaging appeal is due to the warm and delightful performance of Betty Bronson. A unique product of her period, she was in her late-teens when the film was made, and was on the threshold of a brilliant career that, due to studio mishandling, never really materialised after the two Barrie films. Her seemingly perpetual novelty attaches itself to every scene in which she appears, and yet, with the slightest alteration of a facial expression, she switches effortlessly to a mood of absolute gravity. It is a pleasure to record that Miss Bronson, now making occasional movies again (she retired officially in 1932, made one film in 1937, retired again, but has recently been back on television, on the Hollywood little-theatre stage, and in such movies as "A Pocketful of Miracles" and "The Naked Kiss") has retained all of her charm and sparkle, and a little less than two weeks ago had an invited Emerson House audience eating out of the palm of her hand when she made a moving and gracious little speech following a screening of "Peter Pan".

Incidentally, collectors of unimportant movie trivia may care to note that the hat and dress used by Betty Bronson in the last reel of the film were subsequently re-used by Clara Bow in the last reel of "Nanstrap"!

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William K. Everson