Next Tuesday: Two William Wyler films: "These Three" (1936) with Joel McCrea, Merle Oberon, Miriam Hopkins; "Tom Brown of Culver" (1932) with Tom Brown, Richard Cromwell, H.B. Warner, Tyrone Power.

Tuesday April 20th 1965 The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"Pathways of Life" (Triangle 1916) Directed by Christy Cabanne
Story by Mary H. O'Connor; supervised by D.W. Griffith; 3 reels
With: Lillian Gish, W.E. Lawrence, Spottswood Aitken, Olga Grey, Alice Rae, Alfred Paget, William H. Brow, Porter Strong.

Although released in 1916, this curious little allegorical fantasy was made a couple of years earlier, and seems rather like a far less mature extension of one of the last Gish-Griffith Biographes, "The Mothering Heart". It's certainly a naive and loosely constructed little work, but not without charm. Lillian Gish looks lovely, and the rules of thumb by which morals are measured are an interesting reflection on the mores of the times. Lillian, as Pure-of-Heart, is opposed by one of the subtletest and most delectable of early vamps, Olga Grey, appropriately named Live-Loose. (Most of her loose living consists of smoking in one of the rooms of Tavern Abandon!) As in "The Mothering Heart", where the vamp was Viola Barry, sin is never really spelled out, but its chief proponent manages to look far more exciting than the dutiful and loving wife! Flowers too are used for their symbolic value as identified with various virtues and vices, and a typical title in the Flower Garden reads "The Red Rose of Passion -- crush it!" A hundred years hence, historians and philosophers can have quite a time for themselves puzzling out the American psyche by running "Pathways of Life" and "Kiss Me Stupid" side by side! Director Cabanne rarely again dealt in such pretentious material; although reputedly his "Enoch Arden" with Lillian Gish and Wallace Reid was quite a picture, he is best known for the scores of expert little "B" action pictures of the thirties and forties, ranging from "Mutiny on the Blackhawk" to "The Mummy's Hand".

--- Intermission ---

"Suds" (Mary Pickford-United Artists, 1920) Directed by John Francis Dillon
Adapted by Waldemar Young from the Charles Frohman stage production, "Op O' My Thumb" by Frederick Fenn and Richard Frye; photographed by Charles Rosher and L.W. O'Connor; Asst. Director, William A. Crinley; Art Director, Max Parker. 6 reels.

With Mary Pickford, Albert Austin, Harold Goodwin, Rosa Dione, Darwin Karr.

Largely through her own efforts, Mary Pickford vehicles are scarce indeed, and thus it is cause for rejoicing when one does become available.

However, with a film like "Suds" one's enthusiasm is accompanied by a few doubts -- it is so "untypical" of Pickford; will it do her a disservice with those who don't really know her films; will it indeed seem like an anti-climactic deflating of an image that really is all that it's cracked up to be, even though most of the proof is locked away in Pickford's own vaults and at Eastman House?

Luckily in the past we have been able to show some fine and typical Pickford films, including "The Foundling" and one of her very best, "Sparrows". Of course, the charm of Pickford is that there really is no "typical" Pickford film. "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" and "Pollyanna" are what the historians have told us are the standard Pickford vehicles, but against these one has the sheer vigor and guts of films like "M'iss", the rugged beauty of "Pride of the Clan", the sophisticated comedy of "My Best Girl". Pickford could don the mantle of Doug Fairbanks or Charlie

--- Erratum: correct title: "My Best Girl". "My Best Girl" was a Jane Withers vehicle. ---
Chaplin as readily as that of "America's Sweetheart", and there was poignancy and melodrama as well as sentiment in her work. Aware of the need to avoid being just the little girl with golden curls, Mary strove for variety from the very first — and her best films are those between 1917 and 1920 in which audiences had a happy mixture of quantity, quality, variety and spontaneity.

By 1920, Mary, like Doug, was as much producer and impresario as personality, and "Suds" is somewhat of a parallel film to "The Mark of Zorro" of the same year. It is not yet a super-production; the old personality is allowed to dominate and not be submerged by length, decor and trimmings. Yet (and this was more marked with Mary than with Doug) the producer half of the star is well aware of the value of the personality half, and is beginning to exploit it rather too mechanically. Mary's mugging through "Suds" is often distinctly irritating and graceless; more over, it is totally devoid of the spontaneous charm that she brought to many earlier and similar slavey roles. (Despite type-casting, Mary Miles Minter managed to avoid mugging and mannerisms, as did Betty Bronson in "A Kiss for Cinderella", with a slavey role remarkably akin to that of "Suds"). Oddly enough — and fortunately too — it is only in the deliberately and amusingly exaggerated fantasy sequence of "Suds", wherein Mary dreams of herself as one of the nobility, that she relaxes, and allows the old sense of fun and easy charm to show through. It is perhaps the highlight of the picture because of this, and does much to counteract the rather unflattering and heavy-handed picture of herself that Mary has otherwise built up.

"Suds" is based on a one-act play, a curtain-raiser originally played by Maude Adams. Obviously its original content was slight, and Mary has expanded it skilfully — by playing the dramatic scenes at what must have been the original stage tempo, and including a lot of extra material of Sennett and Griffith derivation. There are any number of fast-paced sight gags, and there is a very real Griffith feeling to the rescue of the horse from the glue factory. However, by padding and expanding without really re-shaping, Mary tends to lessen the effect of the slight (but in original form, probably quite satisfying) ending. Expected complications with a secondary boy friend, always hovering in the wings, come to nothing, and the climax leaves one with the feeling of both too little and too much. Such a slight ending should either have been arrived at earlier — or been used as the jumping-off place for a whole new plot-line. One feels much the same way about the contrived and fixed-up ending for "Queen Kelly".

However, perhaps we are judging "Suds" too much by the standards of "M'liss", "Sparrows" and "Heart of the Hills". If we were to judge it instead by some of the lesser ones — "The Little Princess", "Less than the Dust", "Amarilly of Clothes-Line Alley" — we would probably come to totally different conclusions and rate it among her better films! Certainly if not typical Pickford, it is good Pickford — right from the Fairbanksian opening titles, through the first establishing shot of London (the sailboat silhouette gliding along is too similar to Griffith's in "Broken Blossoms" for it to be merely a coincidence!) and through all the lovely, meticulously lit photography of Charles Rosher, who was probably the finest pictorialist of all Hollywood cameramen. If the plot itself rarely offers surprises, then individual incident certainly does — including a couple of high-toned society horses chatting casually together — and one of the biggest surprises of all is finding Chaplin's old comedy stooge Albert Austin playing the nominal hero. It's not easy to accept, and dear Mary never had a less imposing swain, yet it's a pleasing touch of honesty. When Mary failed in her movies, it was usually from want of trying too much rather than not enough, and so it is here. But it's a flaw one can easily forgive, especially in the face of evidence that most of the time she didn't fail.