

Tuesday Next: Fritz Lang and Jean Renoir at Fox, 1941: MANHUNT with Pidgeon, Bennett, Sanders; SWAMP WATER with Huston, Anne Baxter, Dana Andrews, Brennan.

Tuesday July 19 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"The Dome Doctor" (Educational Film Exchanges, 1925) Director: Larry Semon
Camera: H.F. Koenekamp; edited by Sam Zimbalist; 2 reels
With Larry Semon, Dorothy Dwan, Frank Alexander, Fred Desilva, Earl Montgomery, Grover Ligon.

Through the years we have run most of the available Larry Semon comedies, all consistent in that (with one exception) the prints have been third generation dupes and that the comedy content was more a matter of tremendous energy and patient acceptance of extreme discomfort than wit or inventiveness. But make no mistake about it, the Semons were tremendously popular comedies and big money makers. How funny they seem today depends very largely on the size of the audience. They were all constructed with speed and mayhem as the prime ingredients, and they relied on a large audience that would start laughing right away and would get no chance to catch its breath. In the 20's, happily, exhibitors usually had that kind of audience and took them for granted. "The Dome Doctor" has all the typical Semon ingredients - super-scale prat falls, dives, and sets piled high with boxes and other props that could come tumbling down at any moment. There is the inevitable mess and goo too, since Semon loved to have his fat fall guy smothered with mud, cake mix, whitewash, or what have you. Here it seems to be a kind of chocolate syrup, and Frank Alexander once more really earns every cent of his salary! It would be an understatement to call "The Dome Doctor" unsubtle, but it's fast, ingenious, rowdy slapstick, and though a lesser Semon, still a most enjoyable one -- and one that we haven't run before.

"I Never Forget a Face" (Warner Brothers, 1956) Produced and written by Robert G. Youngson; 1 reel

It has been quite a few years since we ran this engaging Bob Youngson short. One of his most enjoyable, and with universally top-notch print quality, it's a light-hearted roundup of personalities in the worlds of politics, show business, exploration and headline news in general, in the 20's and early 30's.

"Day Dreams" (First National, 1922 -- EXCERPTS) Directed by Buster Keaton & Eddie Cline.

Since Bob Youngson's fourth comedy compilation, "30 Years of Fun", had comparatively sparse distribution in the New York area, this wonderful hunk of Keaton, which was one of its highlights, may be new to many of you. Even if not, it's such a joy that it'll be no hardship to see it again. "Day Dreams" was a 3-reeler, and looks quite wonderful from these excerpts, which offer more terrifying persecution of Buster by hordes of cops, and a nightmarish sequence in which Buster, like a mouse on a treadmill, is trapped by the paddlewheel of a steamboat -- the kind of sequence incidentally that could have done much to liven up the middle sections of "Steamboat Bill Jr".

- INTERMISSION -

LES MISERABLES (Société Cinématographique des Auteurs et Gens des Lettres - S.C.A.G.L., 1912) Directed by Albert Capellani; Distributed by Pathe; released in the U.S., April 1913. From the story by Victor Hugo; 12 reels. (This print, 10 reels -- see notes that follow).

The Cast: Jean Valjean (Henry Krauss); Javert (Henri Etiévant); Fantine (Marie Ventura); Marius (Gabriel de Gravone); L'Abbye Myriel (M. Bernard);

Thenardier (M. Milo); Cosette as a child (La Petite Fromel);
Eponime (Mistinguett).

Firstly, I hope that everyone here this evening has either read or heard about our descriptive announcements on this film in our last two sets of program notes. A rare and in its own way rewarding film, it is still very much of a "primitive", and we have carefully recommended it for those of you who are interested in the study and history of film per se. It is an "academic" rather than an "entertainment" item, and its rather harsh print quality, which seems to have been processed originally from a 28mm print, helps to make it a little rough going unless one approaches it as a study-piece. In line with this, we have decided to abandon our plans (announced before we had seen the film) of translating the French titles via a microphone. For one thing, there are so many of them that it would amount to a continuous narration which could only be disturbing. Secondly, the film does tell its story well, and it is in any case such a universally known tale, that it is never very difficult to follow the action. If you do miss a point here and there, it is not likely to affect your reaction to the film itself, since it is being shown as an example of early French feature production rather than as a showcase for Victor Hugo!

"Les Miserables", along with "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "Resurrection", is one of those hard y literary classics that has never been off the screen too long. Whether as a one-reeler or a monumental epic designed for showing over two evenings, these classic novels have such solid story values (inane and condescending though such a remark may seem) that the basic audience familiarity with their themes never seems to matter, and each new version follows the traditional pattern without changes, allowing the novelty to come from a change of directorial style (Autant-Lara and "The Count of Monte Cristo" for example) or showcasing of actors. The French naturally repeat their own classics rather more frequently than other countries have done, and some of their better versions -- e.g. a two part "Count of Monte Cristo" with Aime Clariond stealing all the thunder as de Villefort - are quite unknown in this country. Various versions of "Les Miserables" have offered such diverse players as William Farnum, Harry Baur and Michael Rennie as Jean Valjean; though not wholly successful, Boleslawski's version in the mid-30's, with Frederic March as Valjean and Laughton as Javert, was probably the best all-around version of them all.

This 1912 version, made in 12 reels, divided into four sections, and designed so that it could be shown in two or more parts on successive evenings, is obviously, in this print, a little shy of some footage. Measuring a film by reels instead of feet is always misleading, and the ten full reels that we have tonight might well correspond to twelve reels of less generous proportions. However, the chances are that footage is missing. It is odd, for example, that we are not shown Valjean's trial for the theft of a loaf of bread. Too, the print from which this one was made had obviously been through the mill somewhat. We should be thankful however, that the bulk of it has been preserved; since each of the four segments is roughly equal in terms of footage, we can assume I think that nothing has been deliberately cut or edited, and all we have lost are the inevitable odd scenes that are always sacrificed to the ravages of time and clumsy projectionists.

In recent years, we have seen a number of early full-length features at this society; Helen Gardner's "Cleopatra", Edison's "Vanity Fair" and Porter's

"The Count of Monte Cristo" to cite three of them. "Les Miserables" is quite certainly more ambitious than any of them, and on all counts quite superior to them. If it is lacking in the sustained grammar of the earlier one and two reelers, it still has sufficient technique to spread its story over substantial footage without padding and resorting to theatrical posturings. "Les Miserables" tells its story very well indeed. For one thing, it is extremely well cut; the right screen direction is always maintained, no little thing in assembling so much footage at such an early period, and there is no holding of scenes before the essential action starts, or after it finishes. The prison escape sequence in the first section is a good example of this; very tautly edited, and a spectacular contrast with the stagnant cutting in Porter's "Count of Monte Cristo". Cutbacks and parallel action are sometimes ingeniously created by superimpositions within the frame, and there is an interesting use of a "breakaway" set at one point -- a familiar device in later years, a kind of cleaving of the walls to facilitate tracking of the camera -- but here used rather differently so that Fantine's story can be told, as a kind of photographic aside, on the right of the screen without interrupting the general flow of the narrative.

Flaws there are in plenty, if one looks for them. Apart from a few pans, the camera is relatively static. Sometimes the continuity is a bit lacking in objectivity, as when the emphasis is suddenly shifted from Valjean to the priest who will befriend him, before there has been any happening to justify such a switch. The sewer highlight, in a sense understandably, is there only because it has to be, and is hardly exploited to the full. The grown-up Cosette is so unattractive that she is not even listed in the cast, and at least once (the scene in the garden, with the letter under the rock) one almost feels that a gag situation is being built up whereby her lover will hail her, only to have her turn around and reveal herself as a Gallic Margeret Hamilton rather than a charming ingenue. The lack of closeups makes it hard to distinguish Cosette some of the time, although it becomes even harder to accept her when one can see her! The titles, curiously, are ALL narrative and expository -- dialogue and thoughts are conveyed only via inserts of hand-written letters, which are often extremely difficult to read. But the one major drawback, and it's a surprising one, is the total lack of closeups. One closeup of Javert's face in the scene where Valjean's broad shoulders support the coach would add immeasurably to the dramatic punch of that scene -- and indeed a few closeups throughout could convey in seconds what is described at much greater length in subtitles. Were the film punctuated by these closeups, the performances would be done fuller justice too, for -- a few isolated posturings by Javert apart -- the acting is restrained and even underplayed. Jean Valjean is of course a bravura role for any player -- a mixture of every emotion and gamut, with some of Daddy Warbucks thrown in for good measure -- and Henry Krauss does very well with it. A distinguished actor and director of the French stage, he had also done "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" for Capellani in 1911. Later he was an assistant to Gance on "Napoleon", and in 1934 played a supporting role to Harry Baur's Valjean in a talkie "Les Miserables". Appearing in a small part is the young Mistinguett, star of the Folies Bergères and partner of Maurice Chevalier. Capellani, curiously ignored by Sadoul in his book on the French cinema, was one of the major directors of early French cinema, famous for his utilisation of top French actors in adaptations of literary classics. At the outbreak of the war he came to America and directed Nazimova, Marion Davies, June Caprice, Alice Brady and most especially Clara Kimball Young. He returned to France in 1923, and died in 1931. "Les Miserables", especially in this rather hard-to-take print, hardly establishes him as one of the major filmmakers. But read between the scratches and splices -- and remember Porter's "The Count of Monte Cristo" -- and you'll agree I think that this is quite a remarkable film for its period, and certainly an unusually deft example of smooth feature-length story-telling in those years before Griffith's "Judith of Bethulia" pointed the way.