

Next Tuesday: Marcel Carne's "LE JOUR SE LEVE" ("Daybreak", 1939) with Jean Gabin, Jules Berry, Arletty; plus "Journey into Time", a recent Russian color documentary combining live action with Disneyish cartoon work, "Fire, Wind and Flood", Bob Youngson's exciting "disaster" reel, and a collection of fascinating excerpts of later top stars in some of their earliest roles -- including Gable, Vivien Leigh, Sophia Loren.

A reassurance: the previous tentative booking of Jolson's "The Singing Fool" for August 31st has been positively confirmed.

Tuesday August 10, 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"A Daughter of the Wilderness" (Edison, 1913) Director: Not stated
Story by Frank McGlynn; one reel
With Mary Fuller, Harry Beaumont, Bliss Milford, Frank McGlynn.

A typical little Edison drama, this doesn't generate too much excitement because of its lack of basic film grammar, and because the titles telegraph all the plot situations. However, it's a pleasing reel, with sharp and clear photography of good outdoor locations, and the usual robust performance from Mary Fuller.

"Moscow, Russia, and Its Environs" (Keystone release, 1913) 1/2 reel

Presumably released on a split reel with a short comedy, this odd mixture of documentary and travelogue has some stunningly good and well-preserved camerawork of the Russian scene. The streets are cold and wintry, the people largely out of work and lining up an masse for potatoes. Altogether it does not present a terribly enthusiastic picture of pre-Revolutionary Russia! The reel concludes with a sequence showing Russian hounds being trained to kill wolves -- footage that fortunately never gets as savage as it seems to be threatening to do!

"His Mother's Hope" (Edison, 1912) Director: Not stated One reel
With William Porter.

This is the kind of film that so many people so erroneously take to be "standard" silent film fodder -- a richly melodramatic tale of a long lost son raised by gypsies, all leading to a dramatic re-confrontation. There are no titles at the beginning, where they seem to be needed most, and a plethora towards the end, where everything is fairly explicit anyway. Photographically it is quite slick, and the lighting is good.

"Frogland" (France, 1928) Produced by Ladislav Starevitch.

We've played some of Starevitch's doll-fantasies before, and this one is well up to standard -- bizarre, sadistic, and with a wry sense of humor. Along with the Melies trick films, these Starevitch fantasies retain all their freshness and ingenuity.

- Intermission -

"SEVEN YEARS BAD LUCK" (Max Linder-Robertson Cole, 1921)
Written and directed by Max Linder; camera: Charles Van Enger
Starring Max Linder, with Alta Allen. 5 reels

Since there is a superb article on Max Linder, with a description of his films and his influence on and dealings with Chaplin, in the May 1965 issue of "Films in Review", I won't even try to fill in any background information on Linder in these notes. Jack Spears' article does it all magnificently, and

if you don't already have that issue of FIB, it's very much to be recommended.

Our print comes from France, replete with French titles. Since the opening reel is very much in Linder's established French tradition, and none of the supporting players are familiar, it comes as somewhat of a shock when the story moves outside and we see the familiar Hollywood and Santa Monica streets. The titles alas, are sometimes so dark (the print as a whole is rather harsh) that it is impossible to read them, but seldom was any comedy so completely visual so that a translation of the titles really isn't needed. Even when they're witty, they don't really add to what one is seeing, and much of the time they are very straightforward and elementary. For example, at one point Max asks his valet to get him a horse -- then, in his mind's eye foreseeing disaster, cancels the order and announces that he'll walk instead. The whole plot really needs titles no more than Keaton's "The Navigator", which it mildly resembles, and is merely a series of long visual gags. Max plays a superstitious playboy who decides to run away from his girl friend and forget her, when she returns his ring. He leaves, and his best friend steps in. There follows a lengthy session in and around railway trains, where Max is robbed and uses his wits to travel sans money or tickets. At a station, he impersonates the station agent, and saves the man's job since he had been off-duty without permission. Finally Max lands in court, to find his best friend about to marry his fiancée -- and steps in just in time.

In terms of plot, there is no more to it than that, and the story is just a thread on which to suspend Max's sophisticated comic and pantomime routines. They stress wit and drollery far more than slapstick, and in this sense are perhaps as akin to Keaton as to Chaplin. These lengthy routines include that now-famous gag with the broken mirror, Max suspiciously "testing" his reflection -- a gag that has been used endlessly since. But not even the Marx Brothers in "Duck Soup" carried it off as well as does Linder in his long-sustained version. There's a gem of a sequence on the train where Max masquerades as a colored porter by pulling a black sock over his face. The quite inoffensive race gags include a title referring to an ample negress as "une jolie blonde"! Some of the prison scenes remind one a little of "Modern Times", and the whole sequence in the lion's cage calls "The Circus" to mind, but the whole Linder-Chaplin relationship has been gone into so thoroughly elsewhere (though conspicuously absent from Chaplin's book!) that it is perhaps futile to call attention to it again.

Today "Seven Years Bad Luck" is a delight. Max is graceful and charming, the gags inventive and witty, and many of the individual groupings of players have a visual wit too. But how much more enchanting this must have seemed in 1921. Recall that Chaplin was only just moving into features, and that except for the Fairbanks films on a very different level, the only other major comic starring in feature length vehicles was Patty Arbuckle ("The Travelling Salesman" etc.). Keaton and Lloyd were still doing shorts, and Harry Langdon hadn't yet arrived. So the slickness and speed that we tend to take for granted today, accustomed as we are to the Keatons and the Lloyds of the mid and late 20's, was far from common-place in a 1921 feature-length comedy. It was never a very long film incidentally - its release length was 5070 feet, and this print seems to correspond exactly. We're sorry the print isn't a little less dupey, but for such a prize we're grateful for anything we can get. Let's hope it won't be too long before the Linder compilation put together by his daughter gets into release over here.

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