Tonight's program is frankly the kind of show that we like doing best, and that is the raison d'être for our existence. We certainly are delighted when we can unearth the occasional prestige classic, and we enjoy the raw and rancous pre-Code early talkies as much as anyone, especially since this seems to be the new "boxoffice" area for film societies, and helps to subsidize programs of primitives and other "non-commercial" fare. But it is the good-quality programming of the silent-era films that has always been our first love — films like "Smouldering Fires," "Skimmer's Dress Suit," "The Michigan Kid," "The Right Cry," "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" — films that deserve to be shown, films that are often far superior to accepted "classics" in many ways, and films that remain pointedly ignored by the established archives for the most part. We think that tonight's films fit very much into this pattern of the real essence of popular silent cinema, and we're doubly pleased that they are all such fine original prints so that you can enjoy them on the same level as that afforded their original release.

"ODDAP" (Pathe, 1924) Produced by Mack Sennett; directed by Del Lord With Billy Bevan, Helen Behrman, Yorke Sherwood, Kathryn McGuire, Andy Clyde. One reel.

This minor Sennett classic passed through our hands unexpectedly this week, and since it is many years since we last ran it, it serves to get tonight's comedy program off the ground with a bang. The first third actually is the best; a surprisingly sophisticated (for Sennett) routine is "Bashmash", in which the same incident is recounted three times, and which probably derives from some old and well-polished vaudeville routine. Thereafter it switches to traditional Sennett slapstick, but on a genuinely inspired level. It's quite one of the best Sennetts of the 20's.

"EAST PAYMENTS" (Fox, 1926) Directed by George Marshall & Thomas Buckingham; based on the series "The Married Life of Helen and Warren" by Rabel Herbert Urner; With Allen Forrest, Kathryn Perry, Grace Goodall, Arthur Houseman, Charles Seaton. 2 reels.

From the handful that have survived, there are indications that the Fox 2-reel comedies of the 20's may well have been some of the funniest and most creative shorts of these years. Unlike the comedies of Bosc and Sennett, there appears to have been no overall formula or even an overall supervisor. The subjects ran the gamut from kid and animal comedies to bathing girls, domestic family situation comedies and straight slapstick. They had good directors and writers, interesting casts often featuring non-comic performers (Bill Elliott, Harry Woods, Richard Wallace) and even the odd bad one that we've seen still had top production qualities and were made with care. How many were made in the Helen and Warren series I don't know — certainly there was a plethora of short story material to choose from, and this one is so thoroughly filmic that it probably used only the characters and no original story — but one must assume that "Easy Payments" is one of the best, for it is certainly one of the most delightful comedy shorts I've ever seen. Although there's no wasted footage, the first half is devoted to establishing characters, situations and a general framework not unlike that of "Skimmer's Dress Suit" — then — when — the second half launches into one of the funniest and longest sustained sight gags that I've ever seen. To describe it would be to spoil all the fun, so I'll say only that it's such a natural for Keaton, or even for Laurel and Hardy, that it is amazing that it was never picked up and exploited as the major comedy sequence of a feature. If it ever was, it has escaped me, and the nearest parallel that I can recall was a far less effective (though similar) Marx Brothers sequence in "Room Service". Quite apart from this marvellous sequence, "Easy Payments" is also a very charming and pleasing little film anyway, with likeable characters and fine street exteriors.
"FLUTTERING HEARTS" (Pathé, 1927) Produced by Hal Roach; directed by Leo McCarey; With Charlie Chase, Martha Sleeper, Eugene Pallette, Oliver Hardy; 2 reels.

One of the best Chase comedies, this one has such a good little story, so many changes of venue and so many key comedy sequences, that it's hard to realize that it is all encased within two reels. Chase is at his breezy, debonair best, and if one sequence is really a complete steal from "A Dog's Life", it is done with such relish and embellishment that one feels no sense of plagiarism at all. Here, with expert hand performance, Chase successfully transforms a store dummy into a seductive vamp. Oliver Hardy's facial grimaces make him a superb foil in this sequence, especially in one deathless moment when the "vamp" seeks to flatter her nose invitingly, and instead with one unmittingly obscene movement exposes an entire thigh! The print is a rich toned original, seemingly projected only once or twice -- would that more silentews were in such pristine condition! The rich gloss also serves to enhance the now familiar streets and sidewalks in the Culver City environs. Strange that it seemed such a thriving metropolitan centre while today, without any basic structural changes, it seems so run-down, rural and gone to sea. But of course, these days one doesn't see Charlie Chase and Laurel and Hardy -- or pursuing crowds -- jostling along those pavements. All one can hope for -- at most -- is a Dick Chamberlain or an Yvette Mimieux, and it definitely isn't the same!

*** INTERMISSION ***

"CONDUCTOR 1492" (Warner Brothers, 1923/24) Directed by Frank Griffin and Charles Hines; story and scenario by Johnny Hines; camera: Charles Gilson; Technical Director, Lewis Gelb; Electrical Effects by F.M. Murphy; Art Titles by Victor Vance; 6 reels.

With Johnny Hines, Doris May, Dan Mason, Dick Sutherland, Al Cooke, Bryan Sage, Frederick Kemmler, Michael Dark, Robert Cain, Ruth Renick, Ed Brady.

Johnny Hines (still very much alive incidentally) was one of those comedies who perhaps wasn't tremendously funny in himself, but had an engaging personality and knew exactly how to put his pictures together to please his audience. His career dates back to early World-Fort Lee days, and most of his films were made here in the East. The majority of his comedies, produced for his own company, went out through First National, but "Conductor 1492", something of a special, was made in Hollywood for Warners. It thus has more money behind it than most of his films, but the formula, though slicker, is basically unchanged -- a simple plot, a mixture of comedy and action, a thrill at the midway point, and a spectacular climax. In a sense this formula somewhat paralleled Harold Lloyd's, except that Hines' films had a little more spontaneity. Some of the very best bits in "Conductor 1492" have a charming off-the-cuff quality -- the collar-stud gag and the impromptu acrobatics in the street -- which totally sidestep the plot, but are so brief that they never detract it.

On its own merits, the film is still so thoroughly entertaining that one has to think a bit to realize how even greater its appeal must have been in 1923, especially for youngsters. Its formula is sure-fire, true, but imagine how the kids must have anticipated this, leaping it up, and then talked about it -- in those days when there were no comic books and tv sets to divert them, and when movie news really was the entertainment event of any week. Even in the thirties I can recall getting a charge out of this kind of material -- midget cars, fires -- and of course there was less of it then, and not so expertly done.

Today's youngsters, whose time is occupied for by number of live and canned forms of entertainment, just can never know the thrill of going to the movies per se, or of being caught up in the cunning magic of an unpretentious little film like this one.

Some of "Conductor 1492" is a little abortive. The roller-skating-rink sequence never really gets anywhere, and seems to have been written in to use the location, and loose ends remain untied at times. But what matter? The nostalgic outdoor shots (streets, newsstands etc.) are charming, the art titles a constant delight and the cast (including Dan Mason, star of the old "Hammerville Trolley" series) full of old reliables. There are the expected Irish-Jewish gags, and a curious dinner sequence when everybody apparently is being eaten by a scorpion although I suppose they are either giant shrimps or midget lobsters. The print is nicely toned in amber and blue, with of course a Fleming red for one of those rousing if logically contrived (a monkey playing with matches!) fire scenes with which so many movies of the 20's catered to the dormant anarchist tendencies present in all of us. All in all, "Conductor 1492" is a minor work but a major enjoyment.

William K. Everson