

Tuesday next, February 1st: First showing in a couple of decades of the elusive Marx Brothers film "ANIMAL CRACKERS" (1930) with Margaret Dumont and Lillian Roth; plus a fine National Film Board of Canada documentary, "Churchill's Island", and a collection of musical numbers (non-Busby Berkeley) from the 30's.

Tuesday January 25th 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two late Jazz Age Films

"WALKING BACK" (Cecil B. DeMille Productions-Pathe, 1928) Dir: Rupert Julian
Scenario by Monte Katterjohn from the story "A Ride in the Country" by George Kibbe Turner; photography by Joseph Mescall; sets, Anton Grot; editor - Claude Berkeley. 5 reels.

The Cast: Patsy Schuyler (Sue Carol); Smoke Thatcher (Richard Walling); Beaut Thibaut (Ivan Lebedeff); Thatcher sr. (Robert Edeson); Mrs Thatcher (Jane Veckley); Mrs Schuyler (Florence Turner); Gyp (James Bradbury sr); Pet Masters (Arthur Rankin); Thibaut's henchmen (George E. Stone, Billy Sullivan).

"Another melodrama of the jazzy younger generation" reported Photoplay in July of 1928. "They were making these two years ago on the same pattern" added The Film Daily, and went on "This one is made for the flapper and college vote. Sue Carol looks like a real comer. Richard Walling does well as the youthful hero and creates a really fine part of the typical youth of today. Night club scenes give the usual jazz stuff with youth running riot".

Seeing this fast, exciting, often very imaginatively photographed film today, it is hard to understand the casual reviews of 1928. Everybody seemed to like the film, but to feel that Hollywood had overdone the jazz-age cycle -- and this was several months before the advent of MGM's "Our Dancing Daughters", one of the biggest and best flaming twenties sagas.

Admittedly, the film has inexcusable lapses. There's a slam-bang, gutsy sequence in which two kids in jalopies fight a "duel" until the cars are wrecks -- marvellously cinematic stuff, marred by cheap cutaways to comedy reactions. And after refusing to pull its punches all the way, it suddenly lapses into formula happy-ending for the close. But the film has such vitality as well as academic interest that one can readily forgive these flaws. In a way the film heralds both the end of the flapper era and the beginning of the gangster epic. The closing reels bring in a bank hold-up and car chase sequence which anticipate by a year or two the bullet-ridden bonanza of crime pictures from Warner Brothers. (Indeed, Anton Grot, who did the sets for this film, worked also on "Little Caesar" and others, and similarities of style are obvious). True, the clipped repetitive speech of the gangsters (rather too time-consuming when translated into titles) is mannered and dates badly today - due of course to nearly 40 years of imitation. The dialogue exchanges between gang boss and henchman are so identical with those between the two assassins in Hemingway's "The Killers" that obviously there is some plagiarism involved!

Another point of interest lies in comparing the film with more recent "delinquency" subjects such as "The Wild One" and "The Blackboard Jungle" - although in a sense these are now "history" too, since Hollywood's teeners have abandoned muggings for making-out on the beach! Then, as now, Hollywood softened the punch with a weak-sister solution. "Godless - or graceless?" asks a subtitle during an orgy of destruction. The closing reels tell us that it was all high spirits however, and that these "Sons and Daughters of the American Evolution" are really the salt of the earth. However, this facile forgiveness seems more acceptable in a film of the 20's than in one of today; then at least reckless youth seemed bent on destroying only itself and not the innocent bystander! Anyway, as a movie "Walking Back" is still full of zing and pep, nostalgically engaging in its flippant use of advertising slogans of the day. Sue Carol reminds us what a delightful and assured player she was, and makes

us regret all the more that so few of her films have survived. Director Rupert Julian ("Phantom of the Opera", "The Cat Creeps", "Merrygoround", "The Yankee Clipper") remains an enigma - a director always on the verge of turning out important films, but never quite making it, something of a 20's equivalent of Robert Florey. The opening montage by the way makes little sense, but includes flashes from "Chicago", "The Road to Yesterday" and other Pathe films of the late 20's. No really good prints of this subject seem to exist today, but ours has been overhauled and repaired to the best of our ability; it should perform well, but we ask your indulgence should there be an occasional break.

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"LADIES OF LEISURE" (Columbia, 1929/30) Directed by Frank Capra
Scenario by Jo Swerling from the play by Milton Herbert Gropper entitled "Ladies of the Evening" and presented by David Belasco; camera: Joseph Walker; Released in sound and silent versions - sound, 10 reels; silent, 9 reels.

With Barbara Stanwyck, Lowell Sherman, Ralph Graves, Marie Prevost, Nance O'Neill, George Fawcett, Johnnie Walker, Juliette Compton.

After a stunningly visual opening, "Ladies of Leisure" turns almost at once (though not permanently) into a kind of object lesson in the follies of trying to cut silent versions from sound pictures in those early days of the talkies. It was a common practice, and it rarely worked. "Ladies of Leisure" is really no more of a "talkie" than many full-fledged silents; but it is paced as a talkie, its whole grammar built around the fact that dramatic situations will be presented and solved orally rather than visually. For a while, even though camera speeds are normal, one has a kind of slow-motion effect and one senses an invisible barrier. Fortunately, at the half-way mark, the film decides to be an updated "Camille" - from then on it moves in a filmic way, the spoken word becomes incidental, and the climactic sequence is genuinely tense, exciting and visual in the manner of the best silents. Throughout too, it is always well-served by cameraman August. The sets are interesting, the compositions often striking, and some of the closeups of Miss Stanwyck are quite lovely. The roof garden atop a New York skyscraper isn't 100% convincing, but it makes a fascinating backdrop to much of the action too.

Stanwyck, with her customary hysterical scene even in those days, is extremely good and shows a marked improvement from her prior film, "The Locked Door" (which we ran quite a few years ago). Lowell Sherman does his Lennox Sanderson from "Way Down East" all over again, and it's always a pleasure to watch him glide through a scene, taking over so effortlessly. Quite obviously this titled version (all that has survived apparently) doesn't do full justice to the film, but it's still good, stylish Capra, and clearly - if one can read between the frames accurately - an extremely accomplished and able early talkie, even if it doesn't quite come off as an equally accomplished late silent.

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For the benefit of members not present at last week's show: programs cancelled because of the transit strike will be re-scheduled in early March, and dates announced on our March-May News Bulletin.

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