Tuesday, May 24th: THUNDER IN THE CITY (1937, dir: Marion Gering) with Edward G. Robinson, Ralph Richardson; and THE SPY IN BLACK (1939, dir: Michael Powell) with Conrad Veidt, Valerie Hobson. June Duruez.

Tuesday May 17 1966
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Three 1914 Keystone by Mack Sennett

Tonight's Sennetts are the first of a cålê of a dozen or so from the early Keystone period that we'll be showing over the next few months. Their interests and merits are for the most part academic, hence their "staggered" showings. With honorable but rare exceptions, the early Keystone are little more than crude knockabout, all of the French rhapsodies about "poetry" and "frenetic rhymes" notwithstanding. They are important and valuable because they served as training grounds for comedians and writers, and because they helped develop a comic language and style that has become a genre. The best Sennetts, generally speaking, come much later - and even the best Sennetts, scoring on the speed and inspiration of their sight gags, usually run a definite second to the more sophisticated and better constructed Hal Roach comedies. Tonight's three films however, all from 1914, do provide a good cross-section of the earlier Keystone work.

"BOMBS AND BANGS" has speed and exuberance, but not much else. Its main distinction is that in it the eagle-eyed Gerald McDonald, our foremost film historian, spotted Harold Lloyd as a prot-typical extra - the first film from his very brief tenure with Sennett that we've come across. One reel.

"HOGAN'S ANNUAL SPREE" (retitled "His Annual Bustup" on our print) is rather better, due mainly to the always pleasing comedy playing of Charlie Murray, and a better-than-average little story which incidentally seems to have inspired Mal St. Clair's 1922 2-reeler "Christmas". There's more situational humor and less pointless falls and assorted mayhem than in most of the succeeding 0f-the-cuff Keystone of this period, of which "Bombs and Bangs" is very illustrative. Josef Swickard and Edgar Kennedy also appear in this one. One reel.

"PATTY AND MINNIE HE HAW" is a quite elaborate Patty Arbuckle 2-reeler, with his wife Minta Durfee, Slim Summerville and Joe Bordeaux. There's still a bit too much mugging and unmotivated running around, but it is well above the average 1914 Arbuckle standard. It has more production value than most of them, and was probably shot while Inch was doing a western, thus making use of his Indian tepees and riders. Some of the quite charming little touches - such as the general and redcoat Indian squaw trying to kiss the equally rotund Patty - are almost blueprint ideas for ideas in the later and better Arbuckle Keystone ("Waiters' Ball", "Patty & Mabel Adrift") which Arbuckle directed - so there's a good chance that he directed this one too.

Projection speeds on the early Sennetts is always a problem. Run them at the physically correct silent speed and their flimsy story-lines become boring; run them at sound speed, and their frenetic cutting and action becomes almost too fast to follow. Tonight we'll try to work a compromise between the two.

--- Intermission ---

"CAPTAIN SWAGGER" (Pathé, 1928) Directed by Edward Griffith; a Hector Turnbull Production; scenario by Adelaide Helbrom from a story by Leonard Fraskins; camera: John Mescall; 5 reels

With Rod La Rocque, Sue Carol, Ulrich Haupt, Richard Tucker, Victor Potel, Maurice Black, Richard Neill, Charles Hall.

Although Rod La Rocque plays a Captain Hugh Drummond, a World War one aviation hero turned civilian adventurer, the name and character-likeness is purely coincidental, and there is no connection with the Bulldog Drummond of detective fiction. The film is minor but enjoyable, a light-hearted romp of the "lost generation" adrift in the 20's. But it's Hemingway and Fitzgerald in reverse, never for a moment meant to be taken seriously -- or remembered long after one has seen it.

It starts off during World War One, and an early title - "Von Stahl arrives for his daily strafe" - is a tip-off to the tongue-in-check approach to the whole thing. After a none-too-convincing dog fight sequence, we shift to the 20's. The mood remains light and frothy, the pace snappy. There are a couple of genuinely bizarre musical numbers, a wild gangster car chase, and a flock of generally rather likeable characters. However, its only real novelty is that that marvellous snoozing villain Ulrich Haupt ("Tempest", "Dulberry", "The Iron Mask") is here a "good badman" with a heart of gold. That, plus Sue Carol's charm and vivacity, almost alone makes it worth the price of admission! The print is a fine toned original, and while you'll have forgotten it by this time next week, we think you'll enjoy it while you're watching it. Which is more than one can say for a lot of current films!

-William K. Everson-