Tuesday July 26: First NY showing of a fine British thriller - A PRIZE OF ARMS, 1961, with Stanley Baker and Tom Bell; and "A FIRE HAS BEEN ARRANGED", 1935, with Planagan and Allen, Alastair Sim.

July 29 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

GOOD OLD CORN (Warner Brothers, 1944) Two reels

We ran this short some five years ago to a small Film Group audience, but probably it will be new to many of you. It's a fine collection of old Sennett and Vitagraph slapstick material, with Billy Bevan, Larry Semon, Oliver Hardy, Monty Banks and others. The footage itself is first-rate, but please, PLEASE shut your ears to Saul Eikins' offensive, banal and insulting "humorous" narration.

WOOLEN UNDER WHERE (Warner Brothers, 1962) Directed by Philip Monroe and Richard Thompson; story by Chuck Jones; Technicolor; one reel

Warner's sheepdog-wolf series of cartoons started off magnificently with films like "Steel Wool" and "Double or Mutton", consisting of nothing but violently inventive Laurel & Hardy vs James Finlayson kind of gags. Inevitably, there had to be a decline in time, and this is it. The repetitive gags (without someone like Laurel & Hardy to redeem them) have become laughable while, and too much dialogue has been injected into this one, as opposed to the earlier entries which merely had a resigned "good night" at the end as the only spoken words. Nevertheless, "Woolen Under Where" is still fast and funny, and disappointing only when contrasted with the high standards of the rest of the series.

DEMILLE AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (Paramount 1956) Technicolor; one reel

We're not in the habit of playing industry commercials, and we haven't been bribed to run this one, but in its own way it is such an unwitting little gem, and such a piece of real film history, that we couldn't resist it. DeMille, giving out with some blatant blurbery for his new film, comes across as a combination Shakespearean ham and medicine show huckster, as he displays a hunk of rock allegedly "hewn from Mount Sinai in the Holy Land", assures us that Moses was a man of sin as well as holiness, thunders "Where else but in the Bible could you find SUCH drama?" as he cites a particularly vivid piece of Biblical history, and winds up like the end of chapter narrators on old Columbia serials as he asks us "Will Moses lead his people to safety?" and other similarly pregant questions. DeMille is grand fun to watch and listen to, and it's a great pity he never played major roles in any of his own movies.

------------- Intermission -------------

"FARRERIQUE" (France, 1945) Written and directed by Georges Bouquet for Boran Francois and Films Etienne Jaller; photographed by Andre Dantan, Marcel Fradelot and Jean-Jacques Rebuffat; stop motion photography by Daniel Sarreche and Maurice Delille; music by Henri Sanguet; titles by Charles Clement, 9 reels.

When "Farrerique" came to us first in 1946, backed by a Cannes Film Festival Grand Prize, and glowing reviews from all sides, many of us saw it, agreed somewhat reluctantly that it was a masterpiece, but pondered about its lasting values. We'd been so much cut off from the European films during the war that we were mistrustful of our reactions - and in some cases, rightly so. Italy's "To Live in Peace", another highly acclaimed work of those years, just does not hold up over the passage of years, and I suspect that many others don't either. What a pleasure therefore to find "FARRERIQUE" still very much of a masterpiece, as fresh and lovely as ever, and now a film to be enjoyed solely for its own merits and not just because it is representative of a school that then had been dented to us for so long.

In many ways "Farrerique" exercises much the same appeal, and has the same beauty, as Runtn's "Sunrise". Not that they have anything in common in terms of plot or film style, but they do share a love of life and people. Most films that come out to show us that "ordinary people" are the salt of the earth merely succeed in proving what dull and uninteresting oldies they really are. At the very beginning, "Farrerique" seems that it may follow this path too; but as we get to know the farmers involved, we get to understand and like them, even - for all their hardships - to envy them certain aspects of their life, such as their closely-knit family ties.

In one sense a kind of forerunner of the Cinema Verite films, "Farrerique", often subtitled "The Four Seasons", was filmed over the course of a year on the Farrer farm. Clearly the people had to be "guided" a little in terms of a cohesive plot-line (if one can call the linking motif of the rebuilding of the farm a plot-line) and equally clearly, so much footage must have been shot, much of it pre-planned, that it can't hope to have the naked (and often incredibly boring) honesty of the Cinema Verite films. For it does aim at that; for all its documentary values, "Farrerique" is as much a song or a poem as "Sunrise", and never hesitates to use poetic license in terms of stop motion photography and simple symbolism to achieve that poetry.
The use of stop-motion to show passage of time — a day's changing shadows compressed into a few seconds — is beautifully done, and since it becomes a kind of list-motif, its repetition is quite justified. The birth of the baby, intercut with the blossoming flowers of spring, and the plants shooting their stems through the earth, may seem on paper like a trite and obvious thing, but on screen, and backed by Henri Sauguet's sensitive score, it is quite overpowering.

Very little is conveyed by actual dialogue, which is just as well for the dialects involved are often local and difficult to follow. But the film is unusually well subtitled, and as long as one knows a few basic facts about what is going on, the visual quality -- in which faces and landscapes merge into a series of Van Gogh images -- takes over completely. The brief hints of dream sequences — the young man dreaming of things he will do in the future, the old man dreaming of the one big achievement of his past — are subtle and underplayed. The sequence in which the old man tells his grandchildren of the family history, and we are shown — via live action and a series of faded picture postcards — how sons and daughters went away, leaving the land to live in the city, marry, have children, die — achieves the kind of personal melancholy and twilight sadness which everyone feels at times, in which it is difficult to translate into words, and more difficult still to recreate in filmic terms. One can do it more easily with a photograph or a painting; here it is done, superbly and seemingly without effort, in a thoroughly cinematic sense. The constant identification of the old man with the soil, the bark of a tree, or the rough surface of rock, is another beautifully developed idea. When a tree is cut down, and he is forced into unwanted idleness — stands by watching mutely the identification is strengthened, and then climaxced by the ultimate shot of his death, in which the sound of the tree falling is synchronised with the last weak throbbing of his pulse.

Frequently the use of landscape reminds one of Griffith, and Rouquier may well have been influenced by the Griffith films. Quite certainly, and he admitted this without hesitation, he was influenced by the work of Carl Dreyer. This is especially apparent in the film's one (though minor) flaw: the funeral sequence, done largely in the subjective camera style, and clearly borrowed from Dreyer's "Vampyr". It even closes in the same way, with the forlorn little procession dissolving into the air, a sequence that is here ambiguous, and leaves one searching for one of several symbolic interpretations, the only disconcerting moment in a film that is otherwise free from pretensions. Not that one shouldn't think about meaning; but "Farrebique" is an emotional rather than an intellectual film, such other symbolisms as it uses being clear-cut in that only one interpretation is possible.

"Farrebique" is deliberately, and wisely, not too orderly a film. Family problems and quarrels are not always reasonable, and not always disposed of. The loose ends not only provide a note of added reality, but also leave one wondering about these people — and how they made out — long after the film is finished. Adroitly it sidesteps what might have been a rather sticky romantic interest. One of the loveliest pastoral films ever made, it is I think a film that can only increase in beauty and value through the years, as the kind of life it depicts becomes more and more a thing of the past, and the "Farrebique" families of the world succumb to automatic washing machines and television sets, achieving so much of the "instant communication" that the news media bombard us with today, and losing so much in terms of family tradition in the process.

— William K. Everson —