September 13 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Early Sound Films: 1929

"PEACOCK ALLEY" (Tiffany, 1929) Director: Marcel De Sano; story by Carey Wilson; screenplay by Frances Hyland; 2 reels of highlights;

With Mae Murray, George Barrard, Jason Robards sr., Billy Bevan.

These two reels of (in sequence) highlights really tell one more of the plot than one needs to know, and since it has a beginning, middle and end it is quite a representative cross-section of the entire 9-feature. Mae Murray, despite an unwise attempt at costumes and makeup, is still rather appealing and manages to triumph over the stilted and Victorian dialogue rather more easily than any leading men. Like most of the bigger Tiffany films of the period, it is quite a handsome little film and in its way a credit to an independent company in a transition period. Sound recording is a little harsh and uneven and when Mae turns on a radio, both she and George Barrard have to shout to be heard above it. With its theatrical dialogue and playing, it's a real period piece and an interesting curiosity. Mae, like Gloria Swanson, bursts into song with the slightest encouragement.

PARAMOUNT ON PARADE (Paramount, 1929) Directors: Several

Despite some labored sequences, "Paramount on Parade" was still the best and most cinematic of all the 1929 all-star revues, and we've selected two enjoyable highlights from it. First is the Lubitsch-directed episode with Maurice Chevalier and Evelyn Brent, followed by the lively "True to the Navy" number with Clara Bow, Jack Oakie and Skeets Gallagher.

SUNNY SIDE UP (Fox, 1929) Produced and directed by David Butler

Story, dialogue, words and music by DeSylva, Brown and Henderson; continuity by David Butler; camera: Ernest Palmer; Musical Numbers staged by Seymour Felix; costumes by Sophie Wachner; settings by Harry Oliver; editor, Irene Morra; 12 reels;

With Janet Gaynor, Charles Farrell, El Brendel, Marjorie White, Sharon Lynne, Mary Forbes, Frank Richards, Joe Brown, Peter Osgood, Mary Gordon, Henry Armetta, Jackie Cooper, Ivan Linow.

While "Sunny Side Up" can't really be considered an eye-opener in the sense that that other 1929 film "Applause" was, it can nevertheless shake us up quite a bit - primarily in the amazing mobility of its camerawork. When one recalls the static set-ups used throughout such films as "The Show of Shows" and other big musicals of the same year, it is a real surprise, and a very pleasant one, to see the camera moving so much here, and not just in simple tracking shots either. Camera are brought into play on several occasions, and we get some very vertical movements that remind us of "Broadway" and even - in the opening sequence, with the camera lazily surveying a New York block and peeping into windows, is an incredibly exacting surveying of the sound problems of the day - that must have brought joy to the heart of Mr. Ophuls, if he ever saw it.

Advanced camera movement alone can't make a picture of course, but "Sunny Side Up" has a lot more going for it, including two charming stars and four block-buster song numbers, three of which ("I'm a Dreamer", "If I Had a Picture Of You" and the title number are still standards). Its plot admittedly is wide open to criticism - for the slight story it tells, it goes on for far too long, and almost all of the twists and turns are telegraphed well in advance. It's the kind of plot that DeSylva, Brown and Henderson used rather often - and that Fox were still using in the 40's for their Orphe and Faye musicals. However, it seems unfair to criticise for their Orphe and Faye musicals. However, it seems unfair to criticise it too heavily on that score, since in 1929 it was a lot fresher, and the novelty of sound and the appeal of the stars prevented it from becoming a bore. Even now this kind of plot hasn't entirely vanished either - Anna Neagle's current musical show in London, "Charlie Boy", has more than a few points in common with it.

*(Erratum: title is "Charlie Girl")

The songs, tuneful and wistful, are as pleasant to listen to as they ever were, and the big production number, "Turn on the Heat" ("...get hot for poppa, or poppa will freeze...") is a stunner. Although it doesn't have the editorial finesse of Busby Berkeley, in content and imagination and size, it's well up to his standards, and considerably better than some of his more common-place numbers (such as the Slave Market scene in "Roman Scandals"). Also, like the best Berkeley production numbers (and "By a
Waterfall" from "Footlight Parade" is the closest parallel, it is a Freudian's delight. If one gets bored watching the lingerie-clad chorines writhing on the ground, a possible diversion is counting the different phallic symbols that manage to find their way into the set. The only real weakness of the whole sequence is that it is staged at a Long Island mansion for a charity bazaar — and I suspect that the orphans could have been set up for life if the whole number had just been scrapped, and the production costs turned over to them instead.

The supporting cast is small, and Bir Brendel's material a little too generously supplied. However, there are some surprises among the bit players, including an unbidden Jackie Cooper. Another surprise is finding British character actor Peter Gawthorne in a large role as the butler. 1929 was apparently a good year for British-trained-actors to get jobs in American movies, viz Basil Rathbone in "Seven Days' Leave" and David Nutter in "Fast and Loose". This before any of these players were really well-known in England either. Gawthorne became best-known in the mid-30's and early 40's as a kind of male Margaret Dumont, and a specialist in stuffed-shirt comedy foils for comedians Will Hay and Arthur Askey.

Charles Farrel and Janet Gaynor play pleasingly together, with Janet getting more than a little of Clara Bow into her playing. I must admit to never having been won over by the Gaynor personality, but this may be due to having met her several times in later years and finding that she has rather irritatingly adopted a coy innocence and a phoney humility as being her off-screen "image", and it is patently artificial. This is no criticism of her screen work, but it can prevent one from enjoying it to the full. Somehow it's much easier to separate - and enjoy - the personalities of a player who is one thing on screen, and perhaps an acknowledged s.o.b. off screen (Fields perhaps!) than it is to appreciate someone who is putting on an act all the time. However, perhaps personal prejudices have no place in program notes and more rightly belong in Film Festivals.

Despite the slowness of plot development, and a rather unnecessary switch to a slapstick chase at the very end, "Sunny Side Up" is generally as pleasing and nostalgic an item as we've come across in a long time. The fashions are quite marvellous, Charles Farrel's limousine - with its mounted flood-lights - is a knockout, and everybody talks in that tinny, brittle fashion so typical of 1929 sound recording. The sound on the whole is quite adequate; levels vary, but on the whole it is loud enough, though sometimes in competition with surface noise and that frying-bacon effect so prevalent in early talkies - or on old and scratched negative tracks.

"Show Boat" a few weeks back was done a disservice by being shown in a room triple our normal size, which made for comfortable seating but the lack of the silhouettes, so that some of the quieter dialogue scenes were partially lost. At this stage, we're not absolutely sure how we'll proceed tomorrow night. I think this particular track will survive using a single screen, although the smaller the room, the better. Much will depend on how big the turnout is, since presumably we'll lose quite a few to the Festival. However (and this comment is being made primarily so that it can be passed to the door if we are compelled to put up a "House Full" notice), IF we get an outsize crowd that we cannot comfortably accommodate, then we will re-schedule "Sunny Side Up" for a repeat in December. Obviously it is better for late arrivals to wait a while and see it in comfort, than for us to enlarge our quarters to their detriment of the film's sound reproduction. If there should be those of you who do not get in tonight - our apologies, and a guarantee that there'll be another showing.

William K. Everson