

Tuesday October 25th: Two British swashbucklers from 1937: The Pommer-Korda production of FIRE OVER ENGLAND, directed by William K. Howard, with Vivien Leigh, Laurence Olivier, Flora Robson, Leslie Banks, Raymond Massey, James Mason and Robert Newton; and Victor Seastrom's UNDER THE RED ROBE with Conrad Veidt, Raymond Massey, Annabella.

October 18, 1966

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

THE FULLMAN BRIDE (Keystone-Triangle, 1916) Produced by Mack Sennett; 2 reels
With Gloria Swanson, Mack Swain, Chester Conklin, Tom Kennedy, Phyllis Haver, Polly Moran

James Card up at Eastman House has a habit of deliberately scheduling troublesome items (films in need of repair or reassembly) on the theory that an approaching deadline will thus galvanize him into action and force him to do work which might otherwise be ignored for years. There is no evidence that this system has ever worked at Eastman House, and now on the much lower Eversonian-Huffian level we have proof that it doesn't work in New York either. This Sennett, acquired some months ago in a titleless form, was scheduled for tonight in order to force our hand in the matter of getting titles written, shot and inserted. Since it's a costly business, we'd want to make sure that they were good titles, as close to the original as possible, and this entails the finding of a complete original synopsis, with character names etc. All this preamble is by way of admitting that pressure of work has prevented this from being done. As Dick Kraft pointed out quite eloquently in The Times recently, apropos the Festival's screening of an inadequately titled print, a "complete" print minus titles just isn't complete. Not only is the audience deprived of information, but the whole rhythm and structure of a film is affected. However, rather than pull it and play it later, we decided in favor of playing "The Fullman Bride" as is; although it would be nice to know who is who, plot is hardly a major factor in this Sennett, which merely dumps bride Gloria and husband Mack Swain on a train, and involves them in a series of slapstick gags. Even the gags seem to spring out of such standard activities as sipping soup by an open window, or climbing into an upper berth, and are definitely not dependent on plot, so for the most part the film works in this version, even though the already frenetic cutting is emphasized by the lack of titular punctuation. Swanson has surprisingly less to do than in "Teddy at the Throttle", "Who's Baby?" and "Danger Girl", and is merely the pivot around which much of the action swings.

LOVES OF CASANOVA (France, 1927; US release by MGM, 1929)
Direction and original story by Nicholas A. Volkoff;
scenario, Norbert Falk and Ivan Mosjoukine; supervised
by Louis Nalpas; US release length; 7 reels. This
version, edited from the British version: 3 reels
With Ivan Mosjoukine, Diana Karenne, Suzanne Bianchetti, Rudolph Klein-Rogge,
Rina de Liguoro, Jenny Hugo, Paul Guide, Carlo Tedeschi, Olga Day, Albert
Decoeur, Michel Simon.

Although quite notorious for its nudity, this "Casanova" seems to have made little impression otherwise. Paul Rotha dismisses it with the shrewd observation that it is elaborate but unconvincing (!), and its US distribution seems to have been so sparse that most people take it for granted that it was never released in this country. It turns out to be a wonderfully handsome and stylish film, with qualities that can be admired even though the abysmal print quality. It is another blow-up from 9.5mm -- certainly not as good a job as can be done, far from being as bad as some previous attempts that we've shown ("Cinderella" by Berger being a case in point), but on the whole just about acceptable. Fortunately, the worst quality is at the very beginning, so that not only does it improve, but we also get used to it, and by the end it doesn't seem bad at all. Regardless, it's all that we're likely to see so we can be grateful for small mercies. Like all of the British 9.5 condensations, it is drastically cut, but one senses done with a certain amount of taste and affection (David Lean edited many of these versions) so that one is left with a reasonable facsimile of the story line, plus a good representation of the best sequences and the best individual shots, compositions, sets etc. Clearly influenced by Crosland's "Don Juan" in its construction and style, though a trifle grimmer and gutsier, it does rather lack the Barrymore bravura, Mosjoukine, fine actor though he is, seeming not too much at home in an essentially tongue-in-cheek role. Some of the eroticism remains, including a little nudity, but not enough to satisfy our two or three dirty old men - of varying ages - who have probably come tonight only because of the famous still (Casanova surrounded by some thirty delightful nudes) which, sad to say, is NOT represented in this condensation.

"CONFETTI" (First National-British, 1928) Directed by Graham Cutts
Original story by Douglas Furber; scenario by Reginald Fogwell;
Camera: Roy Overbaugh; Art Director, Norman Arnold
Original length: 8 reels This print: 2 reels

With Jack Buchanan, Sidney Fairbrother, Annette Benson, Robin Irvine, Audree Sayre, George Teroff.

Graham Cutts, one of the pioneers of British films, enjoyed his biggest vogue in the 20's with gentle romances and emotional dramas like "The Rat", "Woman to Woman" and "Paddy the Next Best Thing". Although active in film until the 1950's, his stock fell somewhat in the sound period, and his last films were "B" comedies and documentaries. His daughter, Patricia Cutts - later Patricia Wayne - has been in a number of British and American films from the 50's on.

"Confetti" is a curious film, something like a collaboration between Griffith and von Sternberg. It's the kind of film that was very popular all over the world in the late 20's - ultra-lavish, handsome, with great sets and photography, almost no plot, dashes of poetry, symbolism and philosophy to give them a quasi-intellectualism. Such films never really pleased either the public or the critics, they invariably lost money, and yet the studios kept grinding them out and selling them as big prestige specials. Visually, "Confetti" is both stunning and fascinating, and I am not knocking its emptiness or absurdity; in fact, its naive poetry pays off rather better today, when nobody makes this kind of film any more. This is not an "official" condensation, being rather a salvage job to save representative portions of the film from a decomposing print. Fortunately, enough of it remained - in sequence - to give a good idea of its size, its camerawork (by the usually rather stodgy Roy Overbaugh, who also photographed "The White Sister") and its story-line. I suspect that it may seem far better here than it really is; despite rather sudden jumps, the whole story is conveyed, and concluded, in these two reels, and there really seems insufficient substance for an eight-reeler. An intriguing rediscovery, it reminds us once again how many tremendously costly and ambitious filmic ventures have completely vanished into an obscure limbo. Let's hope that at least some of those limbos are air-conditioned and favorably disposed towards the preservation of old nitrate, so that delights like "Confetti" can continue to surprise us over the coming years.

- Intermission -

"THE DEVIL HORSE" (Hal Roach-Pathé, 1926) Directed by Fred Jackman
Camera: George Stevens; 5 reels
With Yakima Canutt, Rex the Horse, Gladys McConnell, Bob Kortman, Fred Jackman jr., Roy Clements.

The best and certainly the most elaborate of the several westerns that Roach made in the mid-20's, "The Devil Horse" is shy on anything but the sketchiest of story-lines, but strong on prolonged action sequences. Many of the wild horse sequences in this and the other Roach westerns were to turn up for years to come in sound westerns and serials, and still bring home the bacon for the stock-shot libraries servicing tv westerns today.

When we last ran this film, some years ago, we had a superb toned print; today's print is less handsome, being an ordinary black-and-white, but nevertheless the sweep and grandeur of George Stevens' photography is most impressive, and comparisons with his later "Shane" are inevitable. Yakima Canutt, always a better villain and stuntman than a western hero, fortunately has little real acting to do, but pulls off his various stunts, leaps and falls with aplomb. He's still active of course, having recently staged the battle and action scenes for "Khartoum", on which he was the 2nd Unit Director. Good old Bob Kortman makes a wonderfully sly and lecherous villain who doesn't beat around the bush when the heroine asks him why he is chasing her, and gives her an honest and direct answer - "Me Want You"! If the American Indians were somehow affiliated with the NAACP, films like this might well find themselves linked with "The Birth of a Nation"!

"The Devil Horse" is fast, spectacular and uncomplicated. And it really moves. It has been quite a while since we saw a modern western that fills all those basic requirements.

----- Wm. K. Everson -----