Tuesday next, Dec. 6th: A program of World War One espionage: "THREE FACES EAST" (1930, dir: Roy del Ruth) with Erich von Stroheim and Constance Bennett; "LANCER SPY" (1937, dir: Gregory Ratoff) with George Sanders, Dolores Del Rio, Peter Lorre and Lionel Atwill.

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Tuesday November 29 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 sample of the entire 6-reel feature. Mae Murray, despite an unwise attempt to coquetish you, is still rather appealing and manages to triumph over the stilted Victorian dialogue rather more easily than her two leading men. Like most of the Tiffany films of the period, it is quite a handsome film and in its own way a credit to an independent company in that transition period. Sound recording is a little harsh and uneven, and when Mae turns on the 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 curio. Mae, like Gloria Swanson, bursts into song with the slightest encouragement.

"PARAMOUNT ON PARADE" (Paramount, 1929) Directors: several

Despite some laborious sequences, "Paramount on Parade" was still the best and most cinematic of all the 1929 all-star revues (possibly excepting Fox's entry, which we haven't seen) 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 Feiner; costumes by Sophie Machner; settings by Harry Oliver; editor, Irene Morra; 13 reels With Janet Gaynor, Charles Farrell, El Brendel, Marjorie White, Sharon Lynne, Mary Forbes, Frank Richards, Joe Brown, Peter Gawthorne, 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 "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. Cranes are brought into play on several occasions and we get stately vertical movements that remind us of "Broadway" and even - in a sense - "Intolerance"; while the opening sequence, with the camera lazily surveying a New York block and peeping into windows is an incredibly involved episode (the more so considering the sound problems of the day) that must have brought joy to the heart of Mr. Ophuls if he ever saw it. Apart from the camera's mobility, there are also one or two really skillful special effects - as in the scene of Charles Farrell singing to the picture of Janet Gaynor. Incidentally, none of the dialogue seems to have been post-synched, and one can even spot the shadow of the microphone in the climactic shots of the speeding motor-cycle, where one would certainly have expected the dialogue to have been dubbed later.

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 Talking Picture of You" and the title number) are still standards. And even some of the lesser numbers, slurred over with vaudeville gusto by Frank Richards, would seem show-stoppers in themselves if they weren't in such illustrious company.

The plot admittedly is wide open to criticism - for the slight story it tells, it goes on for too long, and almost all of the reels are telescoped well in advance. The traditional last-reel-wrap-up here takes about three reels, and the change-of-heart of that perennial aristocratic snob Mary Forbes seems to arrive at a snail's pace. Moreover, it's the kind of A-B-C plot that DeSylva, Brown and Henderson used rather often - and that Fox was still using in the 40's for their Crable 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 Girl", has more than a few points in common with it.

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 superior to 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 El Brendel's material perhaps a shade too generously supplied. However, there are surprises among the bit players, including an unbilled 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 actors to get jobs in American movies, viz. Basil Radford in "Seven Days' Leave" and David Hutcheson 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 Farrell and Janet Gaynor play pleasingly together in their first all-talkie, 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 or being convinced by her charm, but this may be due to having met her several times in later years and finding that she has irritatingly adopted a coy innocence and 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.

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 Farrell's limousine, with its mounted floodlights, 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.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---