CURSED BY HIS BEAUTY" (Mack Sennett-Keystone, 1914) Director: Mack Sennett With Charlie Murray, Slim Summerville, Charlie Chase, Phyllis Allen, One reel.

Although it's as shapeless as many of the early Keystones, and resolves itself via a knockabout brawl rather than a genuine plot solution, "Curse by his Beauty" is rather more interesting than most of the Sennett of its period. Murray's work was always amusing and far more than a series of pratfalls, and the supporting cast includes a lot of familiar faces. There are some quite fascinating trucking shots of Los Angeles streets too. Set and location continuity however is not one of its major assets, and it's a little hard to believe that the rural bungalow visited by Murray in the opening scenes is the same dwelling that has the citified fire escape in the closing scenes.

"THE TELEPHONE GIRL AND THE LADY" (Biograph, 1913) Supervised by D.W. Griffith; directed by Tony O'Sullivan; with Kae Marsh, Claire McDowell, Harry Carey, Alfred Paget, Dorothy Farley, Kate Bruce, Tony O'Sullivan, Gertrude Bambrick, Lionel Barrymore, Bobby Harron; I reel.

Directed by Tony O'Sullivan while Griffith was away on the coast, this neat little thriller has all the surface appearance of a Griffith film - cross-cutting frequent use of closeups and travelling shots etc. - but lacks the old maestro's touch in pulling all these elements together. The many story threads are quite rambling and even confusing, but nevertheless the film is a useful object lesson in how his methods were being followed by his sub-directors. It's a fast and polished little film, with well-chosen New Jersey locations, and a curious bit of cinema-verite reportage in which the camera accidentally picks up a rather effeminate young man in the middle of a rather florid florid greeting! Incidentally, some of the film has already been shot down optically, this resulting in fluctuating camera speeds - or rather, projection speeds - which we can only partially overcome by varying our own projection speed.

-Intermission-

"LA BOHÈME" (MGM, 1926) Directed by King Vidor; adapted by Fred de Gresac from Henry Murger's "Life in the Latin Quarter"; photographed by Heinrik Sarto; Continuity by Ray Doyle and Harry Behn; sets by Cedric Gibbons and Arnold Gillespie; editor, Hugh Wynn; Musical score for original release arranged by Major Edward Bowes, William Art and David Mendoza; 9 reels.

The Cast: Mimi (LLILLIAN GISH); Rodolphe (JOHN GILBERT); Musette (Reene Adoree); Count Paul (Roy D'Arcey); Colline (Edward Everett Horton); Marcel (Cino Corrado); Schaunard (George Hassell); Alexis (David Mir); Bernard (Gene Pouvet); Benoit (Karl Dane); Madame Bcesoit (Matilde Comont); Loulou (Catherine Vidor); Phenie (Valentina Zimina); Theatre manager (Frank Currier); Factory supervisor (Bianche Fazeon).

"La Boheme" was made primarily as a studio prestige picture, a follow-up for Vidor and Gilibert to "The Big Parade", and as a showcase for Lillian Gish as her initial film under the MGM banner. ("The White Sister" was merely released, not produced, by Metro). It came out as part of a group of films representing MGM's lustiest era, the others including "Ben Hur", "The Big Parade", Chanel's "The Black Swan", Garbo's "The Torrent", and "His Secretary" with Norma Shearer. Metro, in a big sales push, contrived to have all of these films playing simultaneously in Chicago, New York and other key cities. It was a happy period for moviegoers, with "The Black Pirate", "The Johnstown Flood", "Irene", "Untamed Lady", "The Bat" and "Dancing Mothers" among the sundry other delights concurrently on view from the other companies.

"La Boheme" made many of the "Best 20" lists at the end of the year, but didn't quite generate the excitement MGM hoped for after the ecstatic press reviews. The Motion Picture Herald termed it "a credit to the screen", an "exquisite masterpiece" and "a monument to the industry". It opened at the Embassy in New York, succeeding Stroheim's "The Merry Widow", to solid but not outstanding
business. It really caught on as a boxoffice attraction only in Germany, where it is still fondly remembered. Perhaps, like Griffith's films, it was too out-of-step with those jazzed-up times to have much universal appeal. Frankly what it seems to lack most today is good honest "schmaltz" of the tastefully stylised kind that makes Ophuls' "Letter from an Unknown Woman" work so well. This is not to criticise Vidor for taking his work seriously and trying to create a film of artistry rather than showmanship. But after all, and especially without the operatic trappings (incidentally Metro's special score used note a melody, but, oh well, "Poinciana" is sentimental). "La Boheme" is a trivial and artificial story, despite its basis in fact. Its delicacy and beauty need stylised handling to be completely realised; Miss Cish gives it that style in a superb performance, but Vidor doesn't; his direction is imaginative and intelligent, but somehow always rather aloof. Once when we screened this film for Miss Cish, she drew a comparison between its style and that of Vidor's "War and Peace". And it's an apt comparison, although not a conclusive one. Generally, Vidor's style was not cold and aloof - witness "The Crowd" and "Hallelujah!" - but somehow his feeling for humanity seems to extend only to contemporary themes; period pieces and spectacles appear to create a barrier for Vidor which keeps genuine warmth submerged beneath pageantry. Not that "La Boheme" is devoid of warmth and beauty, but these qualities seem to derive principally from Miss Cish herself, and from her cameraman Sartov, who had been her favorite and protège since "Way Down East" days. His photography here is quite stunning; at times so much so that one is uncomfortably aware of the hours that must have been devoted to setting up specific lighting effects. (Compare it with other cameramen, who found his pretensions and time-wasting, and too full of Nitrate, a little too much.) Miss Cish came through his hash by putting him to work with W.S. Van Dyke on a quickie dog actioner, and when he couldn't conform, he was out! One incredible two-shot contrives to have Lillian's face softly filtered, and Gilbert's resting in shadow; Sartov also gets some particularly striking effects in the final sequence of Mimi's dying flight through the cobbled streets of Montmartre. Incidentally, this sequence was undoubtedly the most physically taxing for Miss Cish, since the ice-ferce sequence in "Way Down East". Other than for the much later "Duel in the Sun" this was her only film with actor obviously she had tremendous respect for her, and her many contributions to the film, and if you haven't read it we suggest a reference to his description of "La Boheme" in his autobiography "A Tree is a Tree".

For such an expensive film, "La Boheme" is quite economical in many ways. Use is made of standing sets, and apart from the Montmartre streets, no other big sets were constructed specially for the film. This is of course is no criticism, since the film doesn't need size, but it is surprising to find such economies on a major film at a time when MGM seemed to spend money almost for the sake of spending it. However, Mr. Sartov's demands - such as that fantastic glass shot with the huge wall, occupying only a few seconds of screen time - must have eaten up enough of the budget to have made a year's supply of the studio's Tim McCoy westerns! The script is not above a little plagiarism either - and the whole "free dinner" sequence has been lifted boldly from Fairbanks' "The Three Musketeers". Mimi of course could have been written for Lillian in either of the few popular comic comedy movies she plays in; as she is in scenes of drama and tragedy. John Gilbert, hampered by a none-too-sympathetic role, is hardly at his best as Rudolphe, although he is a fine choice physically, and Rene Adoree, hidden behind a black wig and ugly clothes, is sadly wasted. Roy D'Arco merely repeats his "The Merry Widow" villainy; an incredible (but enjoyable) display of dazzling teeth and unrestrained lechery. Edward E. Horton seems already to have perfected the comic mannerisms that we now know so well. Of course, he had already achieved more than mere "supporting player" stature, and a starring vehicle, "The Nutcracker", was playing at the theatres simultaneously with this film. The Catherine Vidor who appears in a minor role is King Vidor's sister. Incidentally, the original publicity material for the film states that Rosa Bonheur, Guy de Maupassant, Charles Beaudelaire and Sarah Bernhardt "are all portrayed on the screen for the first time", and can be seen mingling with Mimi and Rodolphe in the cafe groupings. If this is so, they are certainly - and perhaps mercifully - not so identified. Despite its admitted shortcomings, this "La Boheme" is certainly the best of the several versions - both operatic, street帷幕 even modernised - that have been made, even not having a "Pony Express" plot, for a totally up-to-date story, with mixed-up teen-agers of today's generation supplanting the classic lovers, from the standpoint of artistry and quality, the film seems to stand at exactly the mid-way point of Miss Cish's MGM films: "The Wind" and "The Scarlet Letter" were certainly better, and "The Enemy" and "Annie Laurie" of decidedly lesser merit. It is some 8½ years since we last ran it, and somehow in the interim its flaws seem less jarring, while its merits seem substantially richer.

Wm. K. Everesson