

Tuesday next, January 24th: BEETHOVEN (Abel Gance, 1936) with Harry Baur, Jany Holt and Jean Louis Barrault (original, not a narrated version) and CLUB DE FEMMES (Jacques Deval, 1937) with Danielle Darrieux, Josette Day.

Tuesday January 17, 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

MARY PICKFORD, 1908-1933

Directors include: D.W. Griffith, Edwin S. Porter, Marshall Neilan, Maurice Tourneur, Cecil B. DeMille, Ernst Lubitsch, William Beaudine, Sam Taylor, Busby Berkeley, Frank Borzage. 9 reels
With Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Harry Carey, Marshall Neilan, Elliot Dexter, Conway Tearle, Wallace Beery, Harold Goodwin, John Gilbert, Holbrook Blinn, Anders Randolph, Buddy Rogers, Johnny Mack Brown, Reginald Denny, Douglas Fairbanks, Ned Sparks, Leslie Howard, Lloyd Hughes and others.

Outside of Eastman House, Pickford films are scarce indeed, and in our some 15 years of existence we have only ever been able to show three of them - "The Foundling", "Sparrows" and "Suds". This compilation, covering her first film and her last, and most of the big ones in between, may help to fill in the gap a little, though it must be admitted that the Pickford personality doesn't really lend itself to the compilation treatment. Too many of these excerpts, most of which stress comedy or sentiment, only seem to confirm the preconceived image that many people erroneously have of Pickford, while her own sometimes irritating mannerisms, inevitably emphasised in a collection of basically similar sequences, tend to minimise her charm. And of course, the always flawless photography in her films - usually the work of Charles Rosher - is at less than its best in these duped excerpts. So while we're sure you'll find this compilation interesting and entertaining, at the same time we suggest that you don't use it as a yardstick to judge her pictures ... wait until you've seen the fresh charm of "Pride of the Clan" or the gutsy and rugged melodrama of "Miss" (neither of them represented) -- or "Sparrows", which is a superb horror film, and far from the sentimental tear-jerker that the excerpt herein suggests.

The never-stressed but always present religious element in Mary's films is fairly reliably illustrated here however, most notably in the scenes from "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" and "Sparrows". Her screen image seemed to have a private hot-line direct to God, and Mary's wise and knowing glances heavenwards every so often seem to indicate not so much understanding as a rather condescending approval!

This collection of scenes is of course intended only for record and study purposes, and thus it hasn't been possible to title every single excerpt for identification purposes -- the cost of so doing would be better deployed in printing up more film from old negative, as it would pay for a couple of features! A few odd titles have been inserted here and there, and if it seems necessary I will identify the sequences orally as we go along. In the meantime, here, for reference, is a list of the films in the order of their appearance:

HER FIRST BISCUITS (1908); A MEMBER OF NETS, FRIENDS, A FEUD IN THE KENTUCKY HILLS, MY BABY (all 1912); TESS OF THE STORM COUNTRY (1914) TESS OF THE STORM COUNTRY (same scene, 1922 version); RAGS (1915); MADAME BUTTERFLY (1915); LESS THAN THE DUST (1916); POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL (1917); ROMANCE OF THE REDWOODS (1917); THE LITTLE AMERICAN (1917); REBECCA OF SUNNYBROOK FARM (1917); STELLA MARIS (1918); JOHANNA ENLISTS (1918); DADDY LONG LEGS (1919); HEART OF THE HILLS (1919); POLLYANA (1920); THROUGH THE BACK DOOR (1921); ROSITA (1923); DOROTHY VERNON OF HADDON HALL (1924); LITTLE ANNIE ROONEY (1925); SPARROWS (1926); MY BEST GIRL (1927); COQUETTE (1929); THE TAMING OF THE SHREW (1929); KIKI (1931); SECRETS (1933).

Even in these excerpts, I think it is possible to see how remarkably her career paralleled Douglas Fairbanks', and how her best and most appealing work is to be found in her shorter and almost mass-produced 5/6 reel features of the 1917-1920 period, despite the added production values of her big prestige "specials" of the later 20's.

Intermission

"DOMBEY AND SON" (Cosmophoto Film Co.-Ideal Films, Britain, 1917)
U.S. release by Triangle; Directed by Maurice Elvey; 6 rls
With Norman McKinnel as Paul Dombey, Lillian Braithwaite as
Edith Dombey and Douglas Monroe as Solomon Gills.

Maurice Elvey is something of a British William Beaudine in length of service and all-around versatility, with a little of Germany's Richard Oswald thrown in in that he had a penchant for rather heavy-handed period and historical dramas. His directorial career began in 1913, and he spawned films prodigiously right through the twenties, thirties and forties, undoubtedly turning out more films than any other British director. His silents included "Dick Turpin's Ride to York", "The Hound of the Baskervilles", "The Amateur Gentleman", "The Passionate Friends", "The Elusive Pimpernel", "The Suicide Club", "At the Villa Rose" and dozens of others, with a marked emphasis on literary adaptations. His best films: "The Flag Lieutenant", "Balalaeva", "High Treason", "Roses of Picardy", "Sally in our Alley", "Clairvoyant", "Transatlantic Tunnel", "Under Your Hat", "Beware of Pity". In the fifties his prestige lessened somewhat, and he was reduced to working more and more for the independents - on such films as Diana Dors' "Is Your Honeymoon Really Necessary?" - but even so, he kept active.

Elvey was going through a real historical and literary-adaptation period when he made "Dombey and Son"; the films immediately surrounding it included another Dickens, "Bleak House", together with "Hindle Wakes", "The Life of David Lloyd George", "The Life of Nelson", "Florence Nightingale" and "When Knights Were Bold". While "Dombey and Son" is hardly a remarkable film, it is interesting as an example of Elvey's earlier work, and especially as being illustrative of British films of the period, very sparsely represented in the archives. Even the British Film Institute only has two films from 1917, and one of those is a short. (The one 1917 feature that they have isn't "Dombey").

"Dombey and Son" is a "modern" adaptation of Dickens, which makes sense since its story is not dependent on period for detail or incident; indeed, the only other feature-length adaptation of the story was likewise done in contemporary period, this being an early Paramount talkie, "Rich Man's Folly", starring George Bancroft. However, 1917 England was still sufficiently Victorian for this modernisation to pass almost unnoticed today; the décor of the rooms and offices, the street exteriors (devoid of automobiles) and the behaviour of the principals, all seem authentically Dickensian and one would hardly realise that it was all taking place in a then-contemporary England were it not for the very occasional anachronisms, such as the heroine's slightly modern raincoat. The florid, almost Griffithian titles, also help to keep it in period; I particularly like the one about the "Demands of an active brain on a feeble body", after which schoolboy Dombey, mastering some difficult mathematics problem such as the addition of three plus two, collapses from the strain after first clasping his hand to his forehead in true Barrymore fashion!

As an adaptation of a Dickens story, "Dombey" admittedly leaves something to be desired. More than most of the other Dickens works, it revolves almost primarily around the colorful characters. (Not that "David Copperfield" et al weren't constructed in a like manner, but they did have more substantial story lines to fall back on). Far too many of the characters have been totally dropped, and others simplified, so that the story dominates far more than it should. Dombey himself is far less three-dimensional and sympathetic than in the book, and at times approaches the brutality of a Bill Sikes. The villain, Carker, even referred to by the titles as a "slimy scoundrel", is little more than a lazy reworking of Uriah Heep. Cinematically, it is competent but no more. The camera pans, but never really moves, and dramatically it is all rather like an overlong Biograph one-reeler, though occasionally it does come to life, odd moments are quite touching (due mainly to the sensitive performance of Lillian Braithwaite -- who much later played one of the two old ladies of "Arsenic and Old Lace" on the London stage), and the staging of the hero's homecoming in the last reel is quite inventively thought out. The lighting however, would appear to have been exceptionally good, though much of its beauty is lost in this rather harsh print. Apparently they also had weather problems while shooting the film, hence the preponderance of interiors. There seems to be a gale blowing in almost all of the exteriors, although it seems to have stopped long enough for them to shoot a few tranquil feet to dump in the middle of an otherwise very windy garden scene! Another minor faux pas -- a legal document that contains the curious and ungrammatical phrase "...the money will be doubled to twice the amount..."! Critics of the time were fairly kind, but indicated that Elvey had done better work; they agreed with the modernisation, but also suggested a change of title feeling that it would fare better as a straight drama rather than as Dickens. The one universal rap: they found the villain's death too much like a Chaplin comedy pratfall -- and this seems even truer today, for it is exactly like Chaplin's fall from the window in "Monsieur Verdoux"! --

Wa. K. Everson