March 28 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"IS MARRIAGE THE BUNK?" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1925) Director: Leo McCarey With Charlie Chase; one reel version of a two-reeler.

We had this in memory as being a minor Chase, but still a most enjoyable one by virtue of his personality - a delightful personality that always came to the rescue of routine comedies. Considering the great number that he made, his batting average was remarkably high, with only one or two really poor ones among them. "Is Marriage the Bunk?" is just an average Chase - which normally would be quite enough - but it's hurt here by quite abysmal print quality (it's one of the few films, like "Name" also, that we had no chance to pre-screen prior to booking) so that the subtle facial pantomime of Chase is often washed-out completely, or at best minimized. There are some good sight gags and Chase's imitation of Chaplin is amusing, but it's the kind of run-of-the-mill comedy that needs a far better print than it has here to really come to life.

"SHE" (Thanhouser, 1911) Director: Not stated; 2 reels Based on the novel by Rider Haggard With James Cruze, Marguerite Snow.

More often referred to as a 1913 production, "She" was actually made in late 1911 and released in early 1912 - for which positive information we are indebted to the always-reliable Gerald McDonald. Since Cruze is generally associated with Thanhouser only from 1912 on, this was clearly one of his first films for that company. It was also the first of half-a-dozen versions of the Rider Haggard classic, the best of which was the Schoedsack-Cooper film of the mid-30's. Thanhouser, located at New Rochelle, always seemed to turn out rather crude and unimaginative work in comparison with the contemporary films of Biograph and Vitagraph, and their films did not even have the photographic polish and good lighting of the Edison. However, so few of their films have survived that it is perhaps unfair to pass sweeping judgment; "She" in any case is an interesting and fairly typical example of their product. Its story-line is rather clumsily constructed, so that the "prologue" actually consumes about half of the running time, and there is thus no time left to do more than run through the story proper in a series of tableaux. Too, it commits that ancient sin of the less inventive film-makers of telling you what is going to happen before it does (via titles) so that the most is never made of the modicum of excitement that it has. However, the New York Dramatic Mirror was rather less critical - in a review that seems as lacking in judgement as Bosley Crowther's insane diatribes against "A Countess from Hong Kong", it praises "She" for its careful and convincing staging, its artistic merit and its beauty of setting and background, limiting its criticisms to the shortcomings in the interpretation of "She" herself. Regardless, it's an interesting little film, and since we've already shown the second Betty Blythe silent version, let's hope it won't be too long before we round up the one from the 30's.

"THE SOILDERS" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1923) One reel With Stan Laurel, James Finlayson

Laurel's satires of current movie hits - first for Metro, then for Roach - were extremely variable. Some, like "Mud and Sand", had brilliant individual gags but much tedious and little genuine satire in between, Others like "Under Two Jags" were funny only if one had seen the original. "The Soilders" works rather better than most, since it was not only spoofing Max Roach's "The Spolders" (and specifically the Lambert Hillyer version of 1923, the second of five movie versions) but the Western genre as a whole. It's fast and very funny, with a running homosexual gag working rather effectively as counterpoint to the he-man virility of it all. The big fight, as well as being funny, is also quite effective in its own right, and is rough enough to require the use of a double for Laurel on occasion. The titles, reconstructed, seem to be largely but not wholly in the idiom of the originals, and are probably translated from titles in a French or other Eurpean print. Since the action so often matches exactly that of "The Spolders", it is difficult for Laurel not making some use of the classic line "I Broke him with my hands". The print quality is very good, and while the film is 90% slapstick, there are some subtler gags too.

--- Intermission ---
"NANA" (Renoir Films, France, 1926) Produced and directed by Jean Renoir Scenario by Pierre Lestringuez from the novel by Emile Zola Art Direction by Claude Autant-Lara; camerawork by C.E. Corwin, Asselin, Raleigh, Peric. 10 reels With Catherine Hessling, Werner Krauss, Jean Angelo, Valeska Gert, Pierre Philippe, Claude Moore, Jacqueline Forzane.

We assume that most of you who are here tonight were also at last week's program, and thus are aware of the drawbacks in this print of "Nana" which - due to being such a rare and interesting film - we snapped up greedy without the usual precaution of screening the print first. Actually the pictorial quality of the film isn't bad at all, and it certainly seems to be substantially complete, but the lab work is unforgivable since there is a pronounced jiggle - sometimes minor, occasionally frenetic, always irritating - through about 50% of the picture. Presumably the negative is badly shrinken, or the print from which the negative was made is shrunk - but either way, there are methods to overcome such hopping, and for a lab to release such a print is unethical to say the least. Basically, the condition of the print lessens its value to the purely academic level, which is a pity for it is a very good film. Students and those who feel they have to see this important early Renoir will doubtless find it rewarding; but it is not a print that one can relax with, and we hope that our forewarnings last week managed to divert those of our members who are only casually interested in the history of the silent film and seek entertainment first, and academics second. Because, presumably we will now attract a smaller and more specialised audience, the French titles become less of a drawback however. The story is certainly fairly grim and the film is surprisingly visual anyway; minor motivations are sometimes a little complex, and one doesn't always know who is who right away, but on the whole a familiarity with French isn't essential to a following of the story.

Renoir is somewhat of an acquired taste, and too many of his films fall short of the subtlety, beauty and humanity of his one genuine masterpiece - "La Grande Illusion" - a film that seems more rewarding with each viewing. Nevertheless, despite some tedium in many of his earlier films, he is always interesting, and "Nana" is an extremely sophisticated film. It captures the period effortlessly and convincingly, in a few deft strokes, and the photographic treatment is rather reminiscent of Stroheim. It is meticulously planned, unadventurous perhaps, certainly non-aerobatic in a camera sense, but it is always aware of what the camera can do, and when the camera pans or dollies it is always to a purpose. The sets, largely one assumes, the work of Autant-Lara, are extraordinarily handsome, and the film is certainly good enough to make one wish for the inclusion of the superb, non-hopping Eastman House print in the current Museum of Modern Art cycle.

The one big drawback for me (and I may well be wrong, for Herman Weinberg disagrees strenuously) is the rather important one of Catherine Hessling. Even admitting that she is playing in parody, and that Renoir must have been in agreement with or responsible for her performance, she is so grotesque, transparent and unappealing - even in an animalistic sexual sense - that one just can't believe in her dominance over the French male. Even the rather bizarre French maid, who looks for all the world like Stan Laurel in one of his dame masquerades (her spectacular exposed bosom notwithstanding), seems to offer rather more excitement. When one can't believe in "Nana", one finds her victims stupid rather than pitiable, and thus the whole neatly stacked house of cards tends to collapse. One yearns to see the whole production turned over to Pabst and Louise Brooks, or to Sternberg and Dietrich — although in a sense Sternberg and Dietrich did do it in the thoroughly parallel "The Devil is a Woman". There it worked, even though Dietrich too was playing in parody.

Nevertheless, this "Nana" is probably still the best movie version of Zola's novel. The 1934 Hollywood version with Anna Sten was handsome but inept—perhaps one should never expect an honest and objective portrait of a woman from another woman (Dorothy Arzner directed). The more recent French color remake with Martine Carol and Charles Boyer was surprisingly good, although Nana was far too sympathetic, and in much of the audience's interest in the dramatic proceedings was diverted to the more immediate concern of how Martine Carol could possibly get through another reel without disaster overtaking her incredible cleavage.

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William K. Everson ---