Next Week, Wednesday May 31: Two off-beat Westerns: BLUE BLAZES RANDEM (1918)
directed by and starring William S. Hart; THE AVENGER (1931) with Buck Jones.

May 23 1967
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

A Silent/Sound Comedy Program -- with the emphasis on Buster Keaton

"SAN DIEGO, I LOVE YOU" (Universal, 1944) Written and produced by Michael
Fessier & Ernest Pagano; directed by Reginald LeBorg; original
story by Ruth Mckenney and Richard Brennan; camera: Hal Rohr
Music: Hans J. Salter. 8 reels
With Jon Hall, Louise Allbritton, Edward Everett Horton, Eric Blore, Buster
Keaton, Irene Ryan, Rudy Wissler, Gerald Pavao, Charles Bates, Don Davis,
Paul Boone, David Vine, Chester Clute, Sarah Selby, Fern Emmett, Clarence Muse,
William B. Davidson, Jack Rice, Matt McHugh, Tom Keene, Eddie Dunn, Dewey Robinson,
Gene Stutenroth, Lloyd Ingraham, Richard Talmasre, Dale Van Sickle, Vernon Dent,
Hobart Cavanagh, Sarah Padden, Amtrea Sessions, Virginia Horne, Arthur Hoyt,
Milton Kibbee, Edward Gargan.

When "San Diego I Love You" appeared, unheralded, in late 1944 it was acclaimed
as something of a sleeper. It was especially acclaimed in England where its
geniuniy and lack of pretension made it a pleasant change from the endless
grind of service comedies (Betty Hutton in "A" budgeters, Elyse Knox in the
cheapies), the aggressive knockabout of Red Skelton and Abbott & Costello,
the heavy-handedness of "The Canterville Ghost" and the showmanship and noise of
even such good comedies as "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek" and "A Night at the Old Lace". Perhaps because it was such a pleasant change, it tended to be
over-rated by the critics, although it caused no great stir at the boxoffice
and was soon forgotten again.

I must admit that it no longer seems quite as good today, but this reappraisal,
seen without the benefit of an audience, may not be valid. Comedies have a
habit of really springing up and of having the mechanics suddenly work
perfectly, when they are shown - as they are intended to be shown - before an
audience. So the lasting values of the film - or the lack of them - cannot
really be determined until our showing.

However, we can generalise a little. Films of the mid-40's are automatically
under a big disadvantage, and especially the comedies. Films of just two or
three years earlier - 1940,1941 - still really have their roots in the
thirties, and thus comedies like Sturges' "Christmas in July" and "The Palm
Beach Story" are really the products of a decade. But films of 1944 are
films of the peak war years, and are locked in to those years specifically.
George Stevens' "The More the Merrier" seems abysmally unfunny today, because
most of its jokes are not really funny or meaningful out of their immediate
milleu, and since Stevens milks them at far too great a length anyway, they
decome doubly tiresome today. To a degree, "San Diego I Love You" falls into
this trap, its jokes about wartime housing shortages and priorities no longer
seem really funny, and the pace and gusto that kept them all on the go in 1944
today translates into too little energy and noise. However, fortunately the film
transcends its wartime framework - especially in the second half, when
the mechanics and the establishing plot is shutted aside, and we settle down
to genuinely comic and often charming sequences that still work because they
are basically timeless. Admittedly, the screwball family has its roots in
"You Can't Take It With You", but Ruth ("My Sister Eileen") Mckenney manages
with some adroitness not to make this too obvious.

Perhaps the real pity of "San Diego I Love You" is that - whether it deserved
it or not - it was praised so highly by the critics. Fessier and Pagano were
a promising writer-producer team, who had earlier made some engaging comedy
trifles like "Her Primitive Man" and "Fried Wife". They obviously dominated
their films personally, since they rarely used really good directors -
Reginald LeBorg for example was a cut above Christy Cabanne, and cheaper to
hire than Arthur Lubin. Actually he doesn't do a bad job on this film, which
only makes one wonder how much better it might have been if perhaps William
Seiter had directed it.

Pagano rather spoiled the spontaneity of their work; the off-beat elements in
"San Diego" arise naturally from the plot and characters, but their later
films forced the off-beat and the philosophical. They were unfortunately prone
to repetition, not in the way that Laurel and Hardy would build a gag by
repetition and anticipation, but in the assumption that if a gag is funny once
its unchanging repetition throughout the film will be as funny each time. There
are signs of this flaw in "San Diego", though it became far more objectionable
in such later and more expensive comedies as "That Night With You". Apart from
the highly entertaining and unappreciated Western spoof, "Frontier Gal", their
later work was disappointing, and all in all, "San Diego I Love You" can be
regarded as their best. If Buster Keaton's famous sequence - wistful and
charming - tended to be over-rated, much as was the Fields episode in "If I
Had a Million" - it's still the highlight of the film. The first time around it

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works beautifully; on repeated viewings it loses some of its impact. Keaton incidentally was quite shamefully wasted by the producers in the follow-up "That's the Spirit" (1943). Unoriginally, he followed up his philosophic bus-driver by playing a philosophic lunch-wagon attendant. The director was on the same LeBorg level -- this time Charles Lamont! For all its flaws and occasional cheapness of humor, "San Diego Love-Town" has its charm. It also has the infallible Edward Everett Horton in a major role, and pretty Louise Allbritton doing her darnedest to be another Carole Lombard -- although as she showed us in "Son of Dracula," she was really much better suited to being another Gloria Holden! Always.

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"SO YOU WON'T SQUAWK" (Columbia, 1941) Directed by Del Lord; 2 reels
With Buster Keaton, Eddie Feasterstone, Matt McHugh, Bud Jamison, Hank Mann, Vernon Dent, Edmund Cobb.

Keaton's Columbia 2-reelers of the late thirties & early 40's were extremely variable; this is a generally above-average specimen, too often taking the easy way out by settling for cheap slapstick and pratfalls, but withal quite interesting. Del Lord re-uses many of his old Bennett gags (the telephone gag for example, reworked from "The Lion's Whiskers") and Keaton's agile and quite spectacular falls are quite remarkable for a man of his years. Most of the climactic stunt and car-chase material is lifted from the old George Raft-Jean Bennett comedy-thriller "Woman Tampered," itself a steal from "It Happened One Night.

"SHERLOCK JR" (Metro, 1924) Directed by Buster Keaton
Story by Jean Havez, Joe Mitchell and Clyde Bruckman; Camera: Elgin Lessley and Byron Houch; Art Direction, Fred Gabourie; 5 reels
With Buster Keaton, Kathryn McGuire, Erwin Connelly, Ward Crane, Joe Keaton, Jane Connelly, Ford West, John Patrick, Horace Morgan, George Davis, Ruth Holley.

Curiously, we never have shown "Sherlock Jr.," and since it has been many years since it was afforded a NY exhibition, we are glad to rectify that error. So much has been written about Keaton in recent years -- and by Keaton himself -- that it would be both presumptuous and pointless to launch here into a dissertation on his screen character, his unemotional treatment of women, and his perennial battle with the universe. Oddly enough, there really is no "definitive" Keaton film. "The Navigator" is probably the funniest, purely in terms of the number and variety of the gags. "The General" is the most carefully and beautifully constructed, and "Our Hospitality" probably the best all-around Keaton. But "Sherlock Jr." must surely rank as the cleverest and wittiest of all his films, and perhaps the one film by which one can most accurately judge both his screen image and the dry-wit content of his sight gags. Audiences rarely react to even its most brilliant gags with anything more than chuckles (or bursts of applause for specific scenes), but Keaton never went after those burles, he gave them a belly-ripping. While a Lloyd film can drop down the benefit of audience response and participation, Keaton doesn't rely on the steady building of audience laughter, and indeed his kind of wit does not require a mass audience at all. One can be just as amused by "Sherlock Jr." seeing it alone as in a packed theatre. And while it is certainly full of elaborate and brilliantly staged gags and fast chases, it is the smaller, almost inanimate gags that are the funniest: Buster and his girl-friend stealthily reaching for each other's hands, and then frozen into immobility by the sweep of grand passion when their fingers touch; or most especially the brilliant fadeout gag (which we won't spoil by describing) which more than any other single Keaton gag establishes him as the innocent from another world, totally bemused by fact and logic which would seem alien to a Martian! The dive through the window is a magnificent gag because we see it work in every detail; the dive through the man's stomach more bizarre, but less effective because we know there is trickery. Similarly, the brilliantly conceived sequence in which Buster enters the film he is projecting seems quite as funny as it should be because we are too busy marveling at its skill. Buster's films all had a curious, dream-like quality, so it is appropriate that most of "Sherlock Jr." is a dream; even more appropriate that there are no clear definitions between dream and reality, and that Buster reacts to all obstacles in the same direct-line manner whether he is asleep or awake. In terms of elaborate slapstick, subtle pantomime, inventive gags, and as a showcase for the most creative of all director-clowns, "Sherlock Jr." is quite one of the richest and most rewarding of all silent comedies; a permanent classic by any standards.

--- William K. Everson ---