June 13th: Two charming films from the late 30's: MAD ABOUT MUSIC (1938, Norman Taurog) with Deanna Durbin, Herbert Marshall and Gail Patrick, and LOVE AFFAIR (1939, Leo McCarey) with Charles Boyer, Irene Dunne.

A Program of Comedy & Melodrama: 1919-1927

"STEEL SHOD EVIDENCE" (Malobee Productions - Pathé release) 1923 Dir: Ford Beebe
Camera: Vernon Walker; Story: Leo Maloney, Ford Beebe
With: Leo Maloney, Josephine Hill, Bud Osborne, Bill Paton, "Bullet". 2 reels

Leo Maloney was a very popular second-string western star of the 20's, patterning his films after the light-hearted style of the Hoot Gibson. Prone to occasional drinking sprees and general playing around, he was often absent from his unit during much of the shooting, with the result that his films tended at times to be top-heavy with comedy or plotting or other devices that enabled Beebe to shoot around him and keep his character off-screen. However, he seems to have been on his best behaviour with "Steel Shod Evidence", since he is on hand the whole time. The result is one of his livelier little westerns, with a couple of really good scraps and some good chases. Cheerily made, without the benefit of a camera truck for the riding scenes, it is nevertheless quite a tidy little production. Panel shots and iris-effects help to make up for the lack of mobility of the camera, and the scenario serves well enough to link the action, although Leo's girl-friend and his boss display a curious lack of faith in him, even preparing to string him up at one point on the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence!

"FIDDLESTICKS" (Maek Semnett-Pathé, 1927) Directed by Harry Edwards
With Harry Langdon, Vernon Dent; 2 reels
Print: courtesy of Cinematheque Belguique.

Released late in 1927, this was Harry Langdon's last for Semnett, and of course by the time it was put into distribution he was already well established in his first National features. It's a curious little work, rather similar in some ways to Laurel & Hardy's bizarre "Below Zero", and perhaps the only one of all Langdon-Semnetts that is pure Langdon, without even a nod to the obligatory Slapstick sequence that could be found, however unsuitably, in such earlier Langdon-Semnett as "His Marriage Wow" or "Saturday Afternoon". Some sequences are so charming - e.g., Harry's threadbare flophouse room, where even the worthless fly-swatting and water jug are chained down to prevent theft - that they could well have been exploited at greater length. One is used to Andy Clyde playing two or three different roles in Semnetts, but here it is Vernon Dent who plays two roles - literally walking on in his new guise after his first character has been disposed of. (Dent #2 is a rather blatant Jewish stereotype, complete with phoney nose which, charitably, we'll assume is there more to disguise Dent's features than for purposes of caricature). The print, from Europe, has no titles whatsoever - but it is all pure pantomime, and no titles at all are needed except possibly in the final episode, which certainly makes perfect sense, but which has quite a bit of back and forth conversation so that we can assume that the two titles may have contained quite funny gags. It's a film that we otherwise haven't seen around over here, and in many ways it is one of the best, or at least one of the most typically Langdon, of all of Harry's shorts for Semnett.

--- Intermission ---

"THE LEOPARD WOMAN" (Associated Producers, 1920) Directed by Wesley Ruggles
Presented by J. Parker Read; scenario by H. Tipton Steck and Stanley C. Morse from an original story by Stewart Edward White; Camera: Charles Stumar; edited by Ralph Dixon; Art Titles by F.J., Van Halle, Leo Braun, Carl Schneider. 5 reels
With Louise Glaum, House Peters, Noble Johnson, Cesar Graquina.

A less serious essay than "Sex", the Louise Glaum vehicle we ran a month or two back, "The Leopard Woman" is a wild and woolzy rehearsal of vampirry, espionage, regeneration and jungle adventure which really has to be seen to be disbelieved. Any discussion in the realms of film history or whatever is surely pointless. It is exactly the kind of silent film that is so often and so cruelly parodied (in contemporary movies like "Dreamboat") by people who really know nothing about silent movies. In disgust and indignation we cry "But silent movies were never like that!" We admit to these being BAD silent movies along with the good ones, but never to there being absurd ones. Well. "The Leopard Woman" is the proverbial exception to prove the rule - and it also shows why such parodies are always felt, because its unintended humor often reaches such heights of unintended wit that deliberate attempts to recreate it could only be heavy-handed and lugubrious. Nor is THE LEOPARD WOMAN exactly a bad movie. Even if it doesn't make much sense, it's well enough put together, extremely well photographed, and as a star vehicle presumably a fans. It's just that it's such a bizarre and pointless movie that one just can't understand
how it ever came to be made. The most logical explanation is that the producers wanted to get some extra benefit from the extremely handsome and elaborate sets created for some other film. Like "Sex", it rather shoots its basic dramatic thrust at the very beginning and then half is all wrap-up, and none of the many possibilities for action or plot (if the heroine really dies? is she testing the heroine's loyalty?) are explored at all. It is all tied up rather blandly, and the basic plot just shoved aside. But nobody has any right to voice ANY complaints against a movie which contains so many glorious titles. The Teutonic trio who wrote them seemed - successfully - to be waging a campaign to eclipse even the superbly florid titles of Griffith, Hart and C. Gardner Sullivan. No simple "Dawn" or "Noonrise" here -- each event warrants Tolstoyan flights of prose. Fate is always "Fate -- the Jester", and most amusing of all is a scene where the hero, having been subjected to titles referring to patriotism, love of Empire and the meaning of love, and subjected to problems ranging from Edgar Rice Burroughs to Freud, a marvellously simple title tells us that "There were many things he wanted to know!" Equally delightful is the grim sentence he utters out (200 lashes ... followed by hanging) to a native, not for having murdered a native porter, but for attempting to kill him! And for the benefit of all the illiterates, every time Louise invites guests up to her soirées, the titles also stress the words "this evening" and/or "party", so nobody will get the wrong idea! With its patenty phony Rhino, Victorian characters and marvellous literary grandeur, "The Leopard Woman" (the title is never really explained by the way)! is grand fun. Obviously we don't want to recommend laughter or a levity uncomprising to Huffian traditions; on the other hand, the film neither warrants nor needs deep respect. We suggest you just sit back and enjoy it!


Note: We are repeating this review for the benefit of members who may have missed it due to its non-arrival for the announced date. This is a new and improved print; better quality, less dirt and rain, and containing fragments of a special, larger and more national output. (In recent years a portion of it did turn up as an inserted dream flashback in an illegal British reissue of "Shoulder Arms"). Since it has never had a very great reputation, it neither surprises nor disappoints, but manages to be consistently amusing on the level of the lesser Mutuals. Much of its gagging is rather untypically Chaplin, but must have seemed much fresher in 1919 before some of its routines were exploited on a more ambitious level by Keaton, Fields and Laurel & Hardy. Chaplin seems to have devoted less attention to it than to the Mutuals; the seashore gags are amusing (and of contemporary interest for comparison with the seashore gag scenes in "A Countess from Hong Kong") but far less well timed or as eloquently pantomimed as the similar but subtler and briefer scenes in the earlier "The Immigrant". Rocking the camera is also a much cheaper and less effective device than constructing a rocking set, as he had done for "The Immigrant". Another instance of economy; doubles can be spotted throughout, some of the key faces - Babe London, Tom Wilson - being used for medium and closeup shots, and their roles being played by a single actor. Some of the dialogue doesn't come home "off the hero really dies? Is he just

Coming mid-way in Chaplin's First National group, "A Day's Pleasure" has been an extremely elusive film, for years the only one of Chaplin's entire Mutual/Keystone period to have been lost. In recent years a portion of it did turn up as an inserted dream flashback in an illegal British reissue of "Shoulder Arms"). Since it has never had a very great reputation, it neither surprises nor disappoints, but manages to be consistently amusing on the level of the lesser Mutuals. Much of its gagging is rather untypically Chaplin, but must have seemed much fresher in 1919 before some of its routines were exploited on a more ambitious level by Keaton, Fields and Laurel & Hardy. Chaplin seems to have devoted less attention to it than to the Mutuals; the seashore gags are amusing (and of contemporary interest for comparison with the seashore gag scenes in "A Countess from Hong Kong") but far less well timed or as eloquently pantomimed as the similar but subtler and briefer scenes in the earlier "The Immigrant". Rocking the camera is also a much cheaper and less effective device than constructing a rocking set, as he had done for "The Immigrant". Another instance of economy; doubles can be spotted throughout, some of the key faces - Babe London, Tom Wilson - being used for medium and closeup shots, and their roles being played by a single actor. Some of the dialogue doesn't come home "off the hero really dies? Is he just

Then gag purposes.