
July 5 1967
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Charley Chase at Columbia

Charley Chase's association with Columbia through the late 30's and into 1940 seems to have been a particularly felicitous one. Like Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton, likewise making two-reel comedies for Columbia at this time, he seems to have been given a relatively free hand. He wrote many of his own stories, borrowed liberally from his own past, directed on occasion, surrounded himself with writers and directors from his silent period. The Keaton and Langdon films were spotty; no first-rate ones emerged, at best they were amusing echoes of the past, and at worst they were abyssmal. Chase was rather more fortunate, and although he looked older, his screen image did not depend on youth or innocence, so that he made his mark. Surprisingly, his Columbia talkies - as a group - are much superior to his earlier Roach talkies for MGM. Admittedly, there are many routine films among his Columbia comedies (just as there were many routine Pathe silents), but all of them benefit immeasurably from the Chase personality, so that even the weakest of them succeed far better than the weaker Langdon and Keaton films, which were sometimes such misfires as to be downright embarrassing. Tonight's two comedies are certainly representative of the best Columbia Chases, and indeed of the best two-reel comedies of their period, since Laurel & Hardy had by this time abandoned shorts.

"The Heckler" (Columbia, 1939) Directed by Del Lord; story by John Gray; 2 rls

Chase affects a decided change-of-pace here, playing an outright nuisance. It's a hilarious performance, with some wonderful throwaway lines (a petulant "I'll give it back after the game!" as he rips a plaster-bandage from a man's neck to cover a puncture in his air-cushion is a standout!) and the same kind of endearing bombast that charismatized the earlier Doug Fairbanks. Story and sight gags are both good, but it's the Chase personality that puts it over as witness an exquisitely unfunny later remake with Shemp Howard!

"His Bridal Flight" (Columbia, 1940) Dir.: Del Lord; story by Harry Edwards; 2 rls
With Charley Chase, Iris Meredith, Bruce Bennett, Richard Fiske, Stanley Brown, Vernon Dent, Bud Jamison.

Here Charley is back on more familiar ground; a comedy of marital misunderstandings in the tradition of such silents as "Limousine Love". It's subtle, charming and fast-paced, well worthy of comparison with his best silents.

--- Intermission ---

"THE DAWN PATROL" (Warner Brothers, 1938) Directed by Edmund Goulding; produced by Hal B. Wallis; screenplay by Seton Miller and Dan Totheroh from a story by John Monk Saunders; Camera: Tony Gaudio; special effects by Edwin DuPree; music by Max Steiner; editor, Ralph Dawson. 10 reels
With Richard Arlen, Fredric March, Basil Rathbone, David Niven, Donald Crisp, Melville Cooper, Barry Fitzgerald, Carl Esmond, Peter Willes, Morton Lowry, Michael Brooke, James Burke, Stuart Hart, Herbert Evans, Sidney Brearley, Edward Ashley, John Sutton, Ward McTaggart.

"The Dawn Patrol" was just about the last of an approximately decade-long cycle of World War One aviation films that had begun with "Wings". World War 2, which was less than a year away when "The Dawn Patrol" was released, the stress on all aviation films lessened. For one thing of course there were far fewer actual planes available, and films like "International Squadron", "Flying Tigers" and "Eagle Squadron" had to rely largely on expensive and not always convincing model work. Further, for propagandist purposes it was always more satisfying to see smiling young Nebraskans sticking evil-looking Japs in the gut with bayonets than to revert back to the gallantry and chivalry of the old aerial duels! A remake of Howard Hawks' early talkie, this version is amazingly good. As remakes go, it does not seek to establish an independent identity, yet alone intellectualise it, and the new crop of players are intelligently cast. Its length approximates that of the original release, but it has better movement and pacing due to camera mobility and improved sound recording, qualities not at their best in the earlier version. However, comparison of the two is really pointless, since the film's big stock in trade is the spectacular air stuff - duels, bombing raids etc. - of the 2nd half of the film, and here the majority is merely lifted in toto from Hawks' version, skillfully edited with new inserts. The juxtaposition of old and new works well. Other than for Rathbone's overly neurotic performance for shadowing the old, acting a few months later in "Son of Frankenstein" the film is somewhat restrained, an extremely interesting comparison with Henry King's thematically similar war world two film, "Twelve O'Clock High".

--- Wm. K. Everson ---