Tuesday next, August 22nd: "HEARTS OF HUMANITY" (Universal, 1918, directed by Allen Holubar) with Dorothy Phillips, Erich von Stroheim, Lloyd Hughes; and "The Ghost of the Canyon" (1920) with Helen Gibson.

August 15 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"You Can't Win" (MGM, 1944) Produced and narrated by Pete Smith; screenplay by Joe Ansen and David Barclay (Dave O'Brien); Camera: Alfred Gilks; Directed by David Barclay; 1 reel With: Dave O'Brien

The Pete Smith miniatures have been missing from theatrical screens for so long that it's good to see one again. The lack of music and dialogue -- but the emphasis on sound effects -- was always (to me at least) a rather bothersome and clumsy technique, though doubtless an economical one, but the Dave O'Brien "how to ..." and "how not to ..." comedies were always fast enough for it to be less apparent than in the other Smith shorts. This is a good typical entry from O'Brien, whose career ranged from hoofer in Busby Berkeley musicals to stunt double in serials and leading man in cheap westerns.

"No News is Good News" (MGM, 1943) Directed by Will Jason; written by Robert Benchley; Camera: Alvin Wyckoff; one reel With Robert Benchley, Lon Poff.

Although none of Benchley's later shorts quite measured up to those very early talks that he made for Fox, his MGM series maintained a generally high standard, and was vastly superior to the curiously flat and unfunny one-reelers that he had made for Paramount in the late 30's. The MGM shorts were perhaps a trifle too slick in terms of production values, and a shade too cautious in not letting Benchley offend anyone, but nevertheless they're a good group of gently satirical commentaries on human foibles and current events. In "No News is Good News" Benchley is once again the modest "expert", double-talking his way out of every question. These MGM one-reelers of the 40's also gave us our last glimpse of gaunt-faced Lon Poff, the "Father Joseph" of Doug Fairbanks' "The Three Musketeers". The track on this particular print is a little harsh incidentally, but quite audible.


Although quite a way below the top Chase/Columbia standard represented by "The Heckler" and "His Bridal Fright", this is still a most enjoyable comedy, dominated as always by the breezy Chase personality (his early scenes with the doughnuts on his nose are typical of the extraneous yet delightful comedy vignettes with which he peppered his movies) and with nostalgic roots in the silent comedy field. The whole plot is basically Fairbanks' "Flirting with Fate" all over again; one attempted suicide gag is a direct steal from Harold Lloyd's "Never Weaken", and other gags are borrowed from Chase's own silents. It's fast and snappy, and with a minimum of the pointless slapstick that marred so many of the Keaton and Langdon two-reelers at Columbia over the same general period.

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It seems both criminal and inexplicable that a film of this stature should not be receiving theatrical release in this country. Quite apart from -- and for the moment discounting -- its obvious merits, one would have thought that it had sufficient star value, and certainly enough sex content, to make it commercially a most exploitable film. Apparently this was the intention at one time, since a re-edited version (with several scenes and some raw music hall jokes deleted) was screened around for the Legion of Decency and other viewing boards of equally dubious value. However, a theatrical release is now out, and the film has been sold directly to tv -- where doubtless, much of it will be cut to shreds. Our print, happily, is entirely and absolutely intact -- complete even to the British Board of Film Censors' "X" certificate. (Presumably, since I am still a British subject, this makes me liable to extradition and...)
appropriate punishment under British law if there are any children under 16 in the audience tonight!"

"The Comedy Man" bears a vague parallel to Laurence Olivier's "The Entertainer." But while the Olivier film was a brutally accurate study of a no-talent has-been (rather too obviously and mercilessly patterned after Vio Cliver), "The Comedy Man" is much richer, warmer, more humorous, and certainly broader. The actors here are not the has-beens or even second-raters, but rather the non-stars and the who-has-mad-it, but not to whom acting and the theatre is a religion, and the only way of life possible. Anyone who is an actor - or who has known actors well - will recognize far more truth in this film than in the glossier and more romanticised Hollywood equivalents such as "Stage Struck" and "Stage Door," wherein star-doom rather than acting is the goal.

Aided by some first-rate location work, "The Comedy Man" rings true all the way. The climax admittedly is a partial cop-out; I don't want to spoil it by discussing it, but suffice to say that the "sacrifice" involved is hardly that at all, and the hero remains rather nicely fixed. If it rings false however, it is only because the rest of the film seems honestly concerned with all actors, while the climax offers a logical but exceptional solution for one individual actor. It's not a compromise, and dramatically one would be hard put to suggest an alternate ending, but it does seem a mild let-down after the intensity and honesty of the rest of the film.

The title and Kenneth More's name as the star tended to be misleading to British audiences, who expected a comedy pure and simple, and were disappointed. But while essentially a drama, and often a very heavy one, the film does have a rich leavening of humor. The dialogue is bright and pithy, and the honest vulgarity of some of the music-hall jokes is quite refreshing. The cinema is so full of pseudo-sophistication these days that it's rather odd to find that jokes intended to sound corny and old-hat actually seem very funny indeed.

The bedroom scenes, involving some mild nudity at times, are straightforward, non-erotic, and decidedly non-sensitisationised. But it is the realistic coverage of all phases of the acting profession in England - from the equivalent of Summer Stock to tv commercials and a frighteningly real squabble between union factions involved in the making of a cheap movie - that gives the film its intrinsic interest; that, and the first-rate acting. More's performance is possibly his best. Dennis Price is fine as an unpleasant agent, and Edmund Purdom is flawlessly type-cast. The girls are most effective too, the more so for being unfamiliar in this country.

Structurally the film is a bit uncertain. Now director Alvin Rakoff is never really consistent about style, and like Richard Lester (though to a much lesser degree) tries a bit of everything. One becomes a little too conscious of technique at times in the climactic wild party with its fast cuts and hand-held cameras. But on the whole, script and performances are so good that they, rather than a directorial style, dominate, and for the most part Rakoff keeps his mixed styles fairly unobtrusive and subservient to players and story. On the basis of this film alone he would seem to be quite one of the most interesting of the newer British directors, but his career thus far hasn't lived up to the promise of this film. One of his quite elaborate British thrillers, "The Treasure of San Teresa" with Egie Constantine and Dawn Adams (here retitile "Hot Money Girl" and likewise due only for tv exposure) was quite badly received by British critics. (Personally I quite liked it, perhaps because it was just a good old-fashioned, uncomplicated thriller). More recently he was fired from the new Beete Davis vehicle - largely because she lost patience with his methods and his penchant for shooting a maximum of cutaways and protection shots. However, a lot of interesting directors have taken their time getting their sea-legs, and on the strength of "The Comedy Man," it would seem that Rakoff is definitely a director worth watching - and encouraging.

Incidentally, in these days when so many movies start off with pre-credit "teaser" scenes (mainly designed as attention-getters when the films hit tv), it's worth noting that this film's pre-credit sequence works perfectly, and is one of the most effective and legitimate uses of that now much over-worked device since it was introduced in 1939 in "One Man and a Camera." Incredibly, its punch-line is a real attention-grabber, and is almost sure to be excised by most tv editors!

William K. Everson