Tuesday October 24 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 Langdon and Keaton, likewise making 2-reel comedies for Columbia at this time, he seems to have been given a relatively free hand. He wrote scripts for his own stories, borrowed liberally from his own past, directed on occasion, and surrounded himself from writers, directors and players from his silent period. The Keaton & Langdon films were spotty; no first-rate ones emerged, at best they were amusing echoes of the past, and at worst they were abysmal. Chase was rather more fortunate, and although he looked older, his screen personality did not depend on youth or innocence, so it hardly mattered. Surprisingly, his Columbia talkies, as a group, are much superior to his earlier Roach talkies for MGM. Admittedly there are many routine films in his Columbia series (just as there were many routine Roach silents), but all of them benefit immeasurably from the Chase personality so that even the weakest of them succeed far more 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 2-reel comedies of their period, since Laurel & Hardy had by this time abandoned shorts. And apart from "South of the Border" (released between them) these were Chase's last films before his death in 1940, and it's pleasing (and unfortunately rare) that a great comic's movie swan-songs should be such good ones. (Thanks to the labors of George Geltier, we will be issuing, probably in January, a detailed check-list of all of Chase's films.)


Chase affects a decided change-of-pace here, playing an outright nuisance. It's a hilarious performance, with some wonderful throwaway lines (a standout is his 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) and the same kind of endearing bombast that characterised the earlier Doug Fairbanks. Story and sight gags are both good, and the film is a minor comedy classic that has been absurdly unrevised, but it's the Chase personality that puts it all over -- as witness an excruciatingly unfunny later remake with Shep Howard.

"His Bridal Fright" (Columbia, 1940) Director: Del Lord; story, Harry Edwards; 2 reels With Charlie Chase, Iris Meredith, Bruce Bennett, Richard Fiske, Vernon Dent, Bud Jamison, Stanley Brown.

For his last film, Chase is back on less subtle and more familiar ground, a comedy of marital misunderstanding in the tradition of such silents as "Limousine Love". It's charming and fast-paced, well worthy of comparison with his best silents.

----- Intermission ----- 

"THE SPIELER" (Pathe, 1928) Dir: Tay Garnett; Produced by Ralph Block; Camera: Arthur Miller; Scenario, Hal Conklin; Titles, John Kraft; 7 rls With Renee Adoree, Alan Hale, Fred Kohler, Clyde Cook, Kwesie Morgan.

Like so many of those hybrid films of 28/30, designed for both silent and sound release, "The Spieler" (at least in this wholly silent version) falls between two stools. Here the occasionally stylish photography of the old school seems ill at ease with the lethargic editing of the new; a concentration on rarely varied closeups of heads might pay off in the sound version, but is here monotonous, as are the excessively detailed titles. Attempts at photographic variety are sometimes ill-advised, and extreme closeups of portions of bodies or objects are only confusing. The basic problem of course is the script, which could have been told comfortably in two reels, and is padded to seven. Nevertheless, much of the internal tension is compensated for by a dramatic opening, and an extremely powerful final reel. Cameraman Arthur Miller, whose credits ranged from "The Perils of Pauline" to "How Green Was My Valley" and well beyond, gets a few really interesting effects and the continued movement of handfuls of extras against the skimpiest of carnival backgrounds does, rather cunningly, convey an effective atmosphere of crowds and constant activity. Fred Kohler as always steals the whole show with his superb villainy, and the basic plot - with sundry killings taking place in broad daylight amid carnival crowds - wouldn't make a bad remake. "Disneyland, Confidential" perhaps!

----- William K. Everson -----