

Tuesday next, June 18th: "NICE GIRL?" (1941) with Deanna Durbin, Franchot Tone, Robert Benchley; and "THE BIG CAGE" (1933) with Clyde Beatty, Anita Page, Mickey Rooney, Wallace Ford and Raymond Hatton.

June 11 1968

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"ABEL GANCE: THE CHARM OF DYNAMITE" (Rath Films for BBC-TV, England, 1967)
Written and directed by Kevin Brownlow; produced by Barrie Gavin;
Narrated by Lindsay Anderson; 5 reels

Kevin Brownlow, writer-producer-director of "It Happened Here", and a long-time friend to the Huff society (several of our rarer silents have originated with him) has here produced a paen to his particular idol, Abel Gance. The Nelly Kaplan Gance compilation that we ran last year was only half as long, and covered more ground - with attention given to many of the technological innovations that Gance came up with in the 30's. Brownlow's dedication to the cinema has always remained firmly entrenched in the silent period however, so basically - and perhaps justifiably - this tribute never gets past "Napoleon". While the Kaplan film was a dutiful contribution to film history, Brownlow's is more of a labor of love, designed not just to re-establish Gance's major position in the hierarchy of film artists, but also to stress the permanent, not transient, value of the silent cinema as a medium unto itself. The narration is thoughtful, accurate and serious - a film society program note transformed into something far less condescending for the non-student who will view it over television. One might argue that Gance was a great enough artist to use sound as creatively as he used image (as moments of "Beethoven" certainly testify), but that is hardly a fair criticism since the film so openly and honestly concentrates on Gance as a master of the silent medium. Nor can one really quibble at the fact that the innocent tv viewer is likely to be bowled over by these glimpses of Gance's great bravura sequences without knowing of the reels of tedium that often came in between them. In any case, film has few enough Gods; as long as their miracles work, why examine them too closely to ascertain if, like the Emperor of Hans Andersen, they are really naked beneath their gauzes and travelling cameras? This Gance film anyway, with its excellent print quality and well-selected excerpts, is a text-book model of its kind; would that we had similar films on Ford, Renoir, Dreyer and Murnau. (Brownlow is currently working on such a film on Maurice Tourneur however). The film is not all compilation of old material; there is much newly-shot footage, including lengthy interviews with Gance and the star of "Napoleon". However, Gance's closing remarks about enthusiasm for the art of the cinema being what keeps him going are not altogether convincing in view of the buxom blondes who seem to surround him on all sides. Maybe, like the great D.W., he has supplementary forms of inspiration to keep his mind so agile and his countenance so youthful.

Our sincere thanks to Mr. Brownlow for making this print available for its first New York showing.

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"THREE CORNERED MOON" (Paramount, 1933) Directed by Elliott Nugent
Screenplay by S.K. Lauren and Ray Harris from a play by Gertrude Tokonogy; Camera: Leon Shamroy. 8 reels. A B.P.Schulberg Production.
With Claudette Colbert, Richard Arlen, Mary Boland, Wallace Ford, Tom Brown, Lyda Roberti, William Bakewell, Hardie Albright, Joan Marsh, Sam Hardy, Clara Blandick, Nick Thompson, John M. Sullivan, Fred Santley, Jack Clark, Margaret Armstrong, Joe Sawyer, Charlotte Merliam, John Kelly, Leonid Kinskey, George Le Guerre, Edward Gargan, Elliott Nugent.

"Three Cornered Moon" is one of those ill-fated films like "Laughter" which has no great artistic or boxoffice reputation, but which is remembered with fervent enthusiasm by a handful of people (usually discerning ones) who saw it when it was new and have never forgotten its impact. Like "Laughter", it is remarkably slick and polished for its period, the dialogue good, the performances all effective, the film as a whole totally undated. Yet it is no longer the same film; what is missing, and through no fault of its own, is its initial impact. Fresh at the time, it has since become a genre -- and a genre which veered more and more to crazy comedy as time went by. Without wacky slapstick, or brilliantly witty dialogue, it tends today to seem both stagey and even commonplace. But pause for a moment to consider by how many years it precedes all those depression era comedies about crazy families suddenly caught up in financial straights; it is three years ahead of "My Man Godfrey", four ahead of "Call it a Day", five ahead of "Merrily We Live" and "You Can't Take It With You". And too, those later films could call upon the expertise of Capra and LaCava, Powell and Lombard to disguise their basic dishonesties beneath a neatly wrapped entertainment package. What does survive - and survive remarkably well - about "Three Cornered Moon" - is its basic honesty, and this in a period when the general trend in

comedy was to sidestep most of the hard facts of the depression in favor of the elegance of a "Trouble in Paradise". Despite its comedy framework, "Three Cornered Moon" is a fairly sober little picture, with a realistic set of values about dollars and cents, and a happy but by no means hopeful ending, let alone the Cinderella ending of "My Man Godfrey".

Comedy does predominate of course, but opportunities for big laughs seem to have been deliberately soft-pedalled so that one never loses sight of the underlying seriousness. Mary Boland has some grand lines, but they are delivered almost as throwaways, and Lyda Roberti's comic maid is never allowed to dominate scenes as did Jean Dixon in "Godfrey". As a result, the tragi-comedy of life maintains a convincing even keel, and the few moments of high dramatics are all the more effective because the film doesn't have to shift gears to accommodate them.

Incidentally, the always-charming Joan Marsh - a kind of second-string Mary Carlisle - is quite delightful as a minor vamp, and gets the opportunity to reveal some quite spectacular cleavage, a talent that was singularly unexploited in her later days as a Republic serial heroine!

"KING KONG" (1933) Deleted scenes

A year or so ago we ran a few scenes from "Kong" that were present in the original release, but missing from the first reissue on. These additional scenes are from the same basic sequences, but are far more savage in detail. Kong tramples natives underfoot (an unconvincing effect, but a gruesome one); chomps them up between his teeth (on Skull Island and in Manhattan), and undresses Fay Wray with much fascinated twitching of his nostrils. Also included (and this scene remains in the current English release prints) is a scene where Kong thinks he sees Fay in a skyscraper window, climbs up to her, grabs her, and then drops her into the street when he realizes it is only an extra and not Miss Wray. These scenes were all dropped from the first reissues because of excessive brutality; Karloff throwing the child into the lake in the original "Frankenstein" was likewise lost to us during this purge. In all fairness though, the film does work better without Kong's bestialities; this Kong is a real s.o.b. who really doesn't deserve too much sympathy, while in the pruned version he takes on quite a different and far more respectable aura. It's quite remarkable how just a few scenes can so radically change the balance of a film.

"FOLIES BERGERE" (United Artists, 1935) Excerpts

Director: Roy Del Ruth; Camera: Barney McGill, Peverell Marley

Musical numbers staged by Dave Gould.

With Maurice Chevalier, Ann Sothern, Merle Oberon.

"Folies Bergere" is one of the most frustrating missing musicals of the 30's; it does exist, and had one unadvertised play on New York tv some years ago as a substitute for something else. These two numbers (and the second won an Academy Award) certainly make it look like a lively and spectacular work, and Del Ruth has shown on other occasions (e.g., "On the Avenue") how at home he could be with musicals. The numbers are bizarre, gigantic, full of overhead shots of pattern-weaving chorines, and clearly in the Busby Berkeley tradition. Yet Berkeley had nothing to do with them, and in some (by no means all!) ways they are an improvement on his work. They are smartly edited, better paced, and devoid of the repetition that occasionally made some of his simple sparsely-written songs like "By a Waterfall" seem a bit of a bore on their sixth time around. The numbers here run less than half as long as the average Berkeley number, and musically it is a good thing. Yet in the long run they are less memorable, since they don't achieve that unique Berkeley ingredient of linking the song and the pretty girls with a semblance of a story-line. Also - and this may just be the reaction of a middle-aged voyeur - the girls don't seem quite as buxom or as pretty as Mr. Berkeley's coterie. Still, we're not complaining, especially since all the future holds in the musical line are the bleak prospects of "Hello Dolly" and "Funny Girl".

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