Tuesday week, April 8th: A silent Australian classic, "THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE" (1918); plus Charley Chase in "What Price Coop?" and a group of French "primitives" including "The Evils of Alcohol."

March 25 1969

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"LUCKY STARS" (Mack Sennett-Pathe, 1925) Directed by Harry Edwards
Story by Arthur Richle and Frank Capra; Camera: George Crooker; 2 reels
With Harry Langdon, Vernon Dent, Natalie Kingston.

Another one of those curious combinations of Langdon pantomime and Sennett slapstick, "Lucky Stars" never really gets anywhere, and some of its best gags are the methodically paced little routines which are really quite extraneous to whatever story-line there is. It's a mild Langdon, but thanks to his winning personality, a pleasing one. It's also quite ratee, thanks partially to the extra gloss given by the utilization of a western street set, probably borrowed from a Harry Carey feature. Judging from the visible breath from the cold, these scenes were probably shot at night when the Western unit was home asleep! Sennett's famous cyclorama is also well in evidence in the train sequences, though somewhat inconsistently manipulated, so that the train appears to be rushing through the wilderness in one scene, and dawdling along in the next.

"CONEY ISLAND" (Paramount-Schenck, 1917) Directed by Roscoe Arbuckle; 2 reels
With Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton, Al St. John.

Some moments of subtle pantomime apart (Arbuckle, about to remove his trousers, signals to the cameraman to pan up to his waist!) this 4th in the Arbuckle-Keaton 2-reelers (and the last but one to be shot in New York) obviously still has most of its roots in the Sennett tradition, and Keaton has little chance to really shine. In its plot, in its frenzied and in its imitation Keystone Cop climax, it looks far more like the Sennett-Keystones of 1915-16 than it does the other, later shorts in this Paramount series, which tended to zero in on specific routines and play them much longer. But it certainly moves, gives all these comedy opportunities for spectacular falls, provides Fatty with another of his ingratiating female impersonation bits, allows Buster to laugh twice, and of course has some fascinating views of the marvellous old rides at a 1917 Coney Island. Print quality is harsh, but it does appear to be quite complete.

- intermission -

"THE NIGHT BIRD" (Universal, 1928) Directed by Fred Newmeyer & Reginald Denny
Story by Frederick and Fanny Hatton; scenario by Earle Snell; Camera, Arthur Todd; Editor, Maurice Pivar; Titles by Tom Reed; 7 reels
With Reginald Denny, Betsy Lee, Sam Hardy, Harvey Clark, Michael Visaroff, Alphonse Marten, George Bookasta, Corliss Palmer, and Dwight Frye as an extra.

Apparently lost in this country (tonight's print was brought over from England) "The Night Bird" has long been a frustrating gap in the Denny films, since it was his own personal favorite. He felt that it gave him more scope than the others; moreover, he took over the direction from Newmeyer at the mid-way point; and finally, it was on this film that he met, fell in love with, and subsequently married its leading lady, Betsy Lee. Perhaps he can thus be forgiven for looking back on it nostalgically rather than objectively. In any case, the critics didn't agree with him: they felt it attempted too much of everything and came up with not enough of anything, and while they applauded his attempts to combine serious acting with his usual comic style, they preferred the formula Denny and found "Good Morning Judge" (previewed the same week, and reuniting Denny with his best director, William Seiter) preferable. Certainly "The Night Bird" is one of the weaker vintage Dennys (though superior to later ones) and the fault may be Denny's as much as Newmeyer's. Fred Newmeyer was always a hack on his own, boosted to undue repute through his association with Harold Lloyd. On the other hand, Denny probably made matters worse since the endless sequences devoted to Miss Lee (with those infuriating "Italian dialect" titles) can probably be blamed on his infatuation with her. Oddly enough, it's only when it reverts to formulas and cliches - as in the exciting climax - that it becomes really entertaining. Disappointing or not, it is a handsome film, and of course it is a real pleasure to see any of the fine two-toned original print that is also fully complete, other than for some missing credits. It's also the kind of film that may well come to life with an audience, but whether it does or not it's good to see it and to be able to place it in its correct perspective at last. Denny's prize-fighter, quite by the way, seems to be modelled after Gene Tunney.

William K. Everson