
SILENT COMEDY PROGRAM The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"Racing Hearts and Chasing Cops" (Mack Sennett-Pathe, 1924) 1 reel With Billy Bevan and Andy Clyde, Ruth Taylor. We haven't yet traced the original title of this British print, and the 1924 date is a guess, but probably a reliable one. Dal Lord was also probably the director. The first half was flipped in the printing, hence the signs that read backwards - but the second half is normal (in that sense at least!) It's a run of the mill Sennett, rather formulaic and full of those weak bits of animation that he used so much, but it is fast and furious, and one that we haven't come across before.

"Africa F.O.B." Circa 1925; 2 reels; With Monty Banks, William Blaisdell We must apologise for the rather sketchy notes for these shorts and for the lack of research; frankly the pressure of work has been such of late that we are getting to these notes only a few hours before show-time - and the musical scoring is likely to be equally off-the-cuff. However, we guarantee that the really major silents (e.g. "Underground" last session, "White Gold" coming up) will always get the care in all departments that they deserve. "Africa F.O.B." starts off well with a series of Harold Lloyd type sight-gags, each one leading into another, The African half of the film is more straightforward knockabout, and the split screen in the animal compound sequence is rather carelessly prepared since the ground on either side of the division doesn't match at all! But it's an amusing trifle, full of old cars, lions, and nice Los Angeles streets, and that's a good deal more than "The Graduate" had to offer!

"The Goat" (Metro, 1921) Written and directed by Buster Keaton & Mal St. Clair; With Buster Keaton, Joe Roberts; 2 reels Like most of the early Keatons, "The Goat" is fast and almost all chase, but its best moments are still the surprise gags and the seemingly casual but expertly timed denucements to those gags. The final wrap-up gag is one of Buster's best from any period, Much of the things he does here he was to do better in the near future, in "Cops" particularly, but it's still a delightful comedy and manages to triumph completely over the harsh print quality.


It has always been a source of major regret that Erle C. Kenton, who not only directed some first-class Sennettts, but also had a reputation for silent zilen comedies akin to those of Lubitsch and Mal St. Clair, is really known to us only through his extremely varied and versatile, but hardly outstanding, sound films. "The Girl in the Pullman" is no rediscovered classic, but it does tend to confirm that all we've heard about Kenton is probably true. The film's content is not only slight, but potently dull; in the hands of a Paul Sloane or a Donald Crisp it might have been tedious beyond belief. But Kenton gives it a pace and eloquence that quite makes you forget that nothing is really going on. A good running gag (involving a pantomimed drink) is given subtle variation; scenes are short and snappy; titles are clever in design and in content, not wholly a responsibility of Kenton's it's true; and the film comes to a really lively climax with a runaway train episode, shot on that same picturesque stretch of track where Willman shot "Baggars of Life" and Monty Banks did "Play Safe." There's also a beautifully matched cut in the derailing scene. Marie Prevost apart, the cast is relatively undistinguished, but Kenton seems to draw more from them than their material warrants -- though Heinie Conklin doesn't look too happy in blackface, and probably got the role only because Walter Long was off playing Iron Head Joe in "The Yankee Clipper!" Certainly never more than a programmer, "The Girl in the Pullman" still has a lot of style and manages to be consistently entertaining.

Justified in assuming that those sophisticated crowds where Kenton really has something to work with won't make quite something. In any case, the subtlety of his slapstick in the Sennett feature "Small Town Idol" (1921) suggests that his work may well have paralleled that of Mal St. Clair, who likewise started with Sennett and went on to such joys as "Are Parents People?" and "A Woman of the World.

--- William K. Everson ---