Monday next, April 27: a Powell & Pressburger program: "BLACK MARISSUS" (1947), a complete print with the censors cuts restored; Schu, Deborah Kerr, Technicolor; and "I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING" (1945) with Wendy Hiller, Roger Livesey.

April 20 1970
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE BELLIS" (Chadwick Productions, 1926) Adapted and directed by James Young from the Brook-Chattrian play; Camera, L. William O'Connell; Technical director, Earl Sibley; assistant director, Cliff Saume; Lighting effects, L. William O'Connell. The Cast: Mathias (Lionel Barrymore); Amette (Lola Todd); The Nemesis (Boris Karloff); Jerome Frantz (Veston von Seyffertitz); Catherine (Caroline Frances Cooke); Hans (Lorimer Johnson); Christian (Edward Phillips); the Fortune Teller (Laura LeVernic); Baron Kawasaki and Jethro Kawasaki (E. Allyn Warren).

"The Bells" is an interesting period melodrama of murder and conscience. As a play it was one of Sir Henry Irving's most successful vehicles and it was a matter that it would seem natural, historically, it served Harry Baur in a French version, and here of course Lionel Barrymore has a field day in it, particularly in the well-handled scenes where he plays cards with the ghost of his victim. I haven't read the play, but at least two sequences would seem to be borrowed from Macbeth, although these may be additions by writer-director Young. Certainly the conception of the Nemesis must have been his addition, since not only the character, but his makeup and the composition of many of his individual scenes, are quite obviously patterned on Dr. Caligari. Karloff does so extremely well in this role that it is very much of a puzzle as to why it took another five years for producers to again cast him in a major menace role. Along with "The Cat and the Canary," Langton's "His Marriage Now" and Florey's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Bells" is another strong reftation of Iris Barry's statement that "Caligari" influenced nobody. Gustav von Seyffertitz, who apparently would appear in anything and everything in the 20's, regardless of the size of the role is disappointingly wasted but has some good scenes in the nightmare sequence towards the climax. What impresses most of all about "The Bells" however, is its production mounting. It's well-made, well-acted, well-made scenes are solid and substantive, those in the most dreamlike sequences, and the photography and lighting are really superb. Intelligent independent films of this sort, too often forgotten, are frequently quite superior to the much more highly touted and better remembered major studio works of the same period; "The Bells" for example could more than hold its own with the average economo-conscious feature from Paramount.

Chadwick Productions had a curious insensitivity that all of their films run an exact SEVEN reels, doubtless the length they considered the minimum acceptable for their films to be treated as "A" products. Sometimes the padding showed; here it doesn't. The final production print from the original negative, and shows the crystal clear photography off to its best advantage. When we first (and last) showed the film at the Huff some 15 years ago, the print- fresh off the negative - was totally out of order and had to be re-assembled, like a jigsaw puzzle, hence the many splices. It is still complete, and visually a joy to behold.

"THE SHOCK" (Universal, 1923) Directed by Lambert Hillyer
Story by William D. Felley; six reels

Despite Lambert Hillyer's admirable handling in 1936 of "The Invisible Ray" and "Dreary's Daughter" and his silent-period versatility which extended far beyond the William S. Hart, Tom Mix and Buck Jones westerns for which he was best known, "The Shock" has curiously theatrical and vivid directorial qualities. At the time, though commercially important, it was merely "more of the same" for Chaney's shock melodramas with touches of the bizarre. Doubtless neither Chaney nor Hillyer were very excited by the property, and merely gave it workmanlike attention. It was Chaney's last film before "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," and the success of that film of course launched him into bigger properties and an MGM series - which in time also took on a standardised if always glossy look. The plot here is thin, and as if aware of it, there is a stress on what the advertising department called "shocking" and "harrowing." At the close of the film, Gladys (Valli), the feature's chief concentration on her crippled condition - he is allowed to hobble directly from one place to another when a more arduous route can be devised! The Chinatown-underworld background is unstressed, but the big earthquake climax is exciting. Universal's special effects department by the end of the 20's was the best in the business; here its achievements are more limited, but nevertheless for 1923 they are quite accomplished, and many of the shots and effects were good enough to be copied and improved on by Alan Crossland a few years later in "Old San Francisco." As in the horror film, this criticism is of course not meant to detract from the Divine intervention to save the leading Lady from the proverbs but more than death! Points to watch: the doctor's ominous, toothless recitation of Chaney describing the heroine's cortical, emotional, cascading crimes - from a "clear" California day where you can really see Catalina across the ocean.

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