

Monday next, May 18: "THE LOVE TRAP" (1929, dir: William Wyler) with Laura La Plante, Neil Hamilton; and William S. Hart's "THE NARROW TRAIL" (1917)

May 11 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"DOWN IN THE DEEP" (France, 1904) Director: Ferdinand Zecca; ½ reel

This utterly charming early color (hand-coloring) French fantasy is not only a delight in itself, but also a good example of the fine work being done by the American Film Institute in preserving not only non-American product, but in this case a print that in its original 35mm form was too shrunken ever to be projected again.

"HIS PEOPLE" (Universal, 1925) Directed by Edward Sloman; story by Isadore Bernstein; 9 reels

With Rudolph Schildkraut, Rose Rosanova, George Lewis, Blanche Mahaffey, Kate Price, Edgar Kennedy, Virginia Brown Faire, Bobby Gordon, Arthur Lubin, Jean Johnson, Albert Bushdano, Nat Carr, Bertram Marburgh.

One is tempted to paraphrase the now-famous Levy's Bread ads and say that one doesn't have to be Jewish to enjoy "His People" -- but that it most certainly helps. The trouble is that while one can see Carl Laemmle sitting back and happily making sure that every single Jewish detail is there in order to make it a blockbuster for the Jewish trade, what emerges is really no more Jewish in theme than a 10-reeler set entirely on a British cricket-pitch would be essentially British. The British have never been really interested in playing cricket; the real game is in spectating, and murmuring "Well-bowled!" at appropriate intervals. So it is here: the cast is really playing a game which requires them to perform little rituals every so often, but the overall theme has far less traditional Jewish content than, for example, "The Jazz Singer". Sweep all this extraneous detail away, and one is left with a staggeringly unsubtle sob-story of the "Stella Dallas" ilk. Some of the sentiment is so contrived and so predictable as to be quite hard to take; all that is really left out is for the hero (rejected by all) to have a sweet-faced little puppy run over by a steam-roller. It's a slowly developed story, and not too well directed; Edward Sloman always seems to be forced into scenes where he has his three or four main characters jammed into the same frame while he tells his story with titles. Yet it's a handsome and elaborately mounted film: the sets are impressive, and the print is a beautiful two-toned original that has been very carefully preserved through the years. (Originally Rudolph Schildkraut's print, it was maintained by Joseph, and is made available to us through the cooperation of the A.F.I. and Mrs Joseph Schildkraut). Its huge success prompted Universal and Sloman to follow up with "Surrender" (shown by this society last year). Quoting Sloman from Kevin Brownlow's excellent book "The Parade's Gone By": "(It) brought me a five year contract with Universal. This is my favorite film, not because it was the best thing I'd done, but because it was such a sure-fire picture. I knew when I started that it was going to be a great hit. It was voted one of the ten best of that year; it cost ninety-three thousand dollars and netted three million. I really haven't a penchant for Jewish pictures. I've done only three (the others, "We Americans" and "Surrender") and these were forced on my by the powers that be because of the success of "His People" directing Rudolph Schildkraut was a marvellous experience. I'd talk to him from behind the camera. If he was playing it too broadly I'd call to him "Tighter, Poppa, tighter", and his control over his amazing technique was so perfect that, without losing the sense of the scene, he would diminish the overplaying and ease the action into perfect balance. Whatever you planned with Rudolph Schildkraut always came off--sometimes even better than you'd dreamed it. (He) was one of the great actors of his era".

- intermission -

"THE CRUISE OF THE JASPER B" (DeMille Pictures Corp., 1926)

Directed by James W. Horne; presented by Bertram Millhauser; scenario by Tay Garnett and Zelta Sears from the novel by Don Marquis; camera, Lucien Andriot; titles, John Krafft; editor, Jack Dennis; 6 reels

With Rod la Roque, Mildred Harris, Snitz Edwards, Tiny Sandford, Jack Ackroyd, Fred Kelsey, Frank Hagney, Charlie Hall.

It is now nearly 30 years since I first saw this film, and through the years I have carried with me the enduring impression that it was a spoof on bootlegging, and that Jacqueline Logan was the leading lady. There's nary a bootlegger in sight or even referred to, nor is Miss Logan on deck; so much for the reliability of one's youthful memories! Long promised, long unavailable, the film perhaps doesn't quite live up to its reputation, but it's easy to see why it did impress the critics at the time. It's a wild, zany comedy, perhaps a shade too

shapeless and undisciplined, yet so different from the general run of comedy in the mid-20's that its very novelty must have made it stand out. It's a pity in a way that it does try to cover so much comedic ground. It is both satire and lampoon; it spoofs Doug Fairbanks as a performer, and it kids the chatty titles of his earlier movies. Some of it is inspired, some of it merely childish, and there's certainly too much mid-picture padding with Jack Ackroyd and Snitz Edwards. The plot is often forgotten for prolonged gags; a crazy chase sequence is fine, but over-mechanical Sennett type sight-gags often seem out of place. However, the climactic race to the rescue, composed of military stock shots, is clever and original, and an obvious forerunner of the similar gag in the Marx Brothers' "Duck Soup".

The scenes that have often been reproduced in picture-histories -- much Rod la Rocque beef-cake, the bombing of the Jasper B -- are as unrepresentative of the film as a whole as any single still would be. Perhaps its greatest joy is that it is so unpredictable and certainly lively. Economically made, it uses a few stock shots from other DeMille sea films (they certainly got full value out of their clipper ship!), keeps a small cast busy all the time, and uses Catalina as a pleasant backdrop for the ship. Direction by James Horne veers more towards the speed and insanity of his later Columbia serials than the discipline of his Laurel & Hardy comedies. In case you wonder why it seems to be taking so long for the plot to get off the ground, it might lessen the pondering to explain that (apart from the prologue) the Jasper B never does put to sea -- one of the many jokes that is perhaps under-developed because of the sheer weight of all the other gags.

William K. Everson

The new schedules covering May-August will be in the mail tomorrow; in the meantime one copy is pinned to the wall here for your perusal.

- - - - -

A post-script to "His People":

Arthur Lubin, who plays the no-good son who walks out on and then denies his father, bears enough of a resemblance to Irving Thalberg for one to wonder whether Laemmle cast him deliberately in that role in the hope of shaming Thalberg, who had left him to join Louis B. Mayer! This is the same Arthur Lubin of course who later directed Abbott & Costello and Francis the Mule for Universal.