May 18, 1920

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE LOVE, TRAP" (Universal, 1929) Directed by William Wyler
Scenario by Albert DeGraaf, John B. Clymer and Clarence Marks from a story by Edward J. Montague; dialogue in part-talking version by Clarence Thompson;
Cameras: Gilbert Waterton; Edited by Maurice Pivar, Edward Curtis and Harry Marker; 6 reels
With Laura LaPlante, Neil Hamilton, Robert Ellis, Joselyn Lee, Norman Trevor, Clarissa Selwyn, Rita LeRoy, Mike Denlin.

After a couple of years in 2-reel and feature westerns, Wyler was promoted to directing more imposing works in mid-1928. Tonight's film is his third non-western (immediately following "Shakedown", which we played a few months ago) and although it was made as a part-talkie as well, his last silent. His next film, and his first one of major interest, was the all-talking "Hell's Heroes".

"The Love Traps" is a minor film perhaps, but an interesting one in view of such later films as "The Good Fairy" and "Roman Holiday" in that he is already bringing a deliberate fairy-tale approach to an essentially modern story. Although not credited as such, the story looks as though it may have originated in one of those rather dreamy German comedy movies of the late 20's, themselves based on stage plays or musical comedies. Wyler however, a much more sophisticated filmmaker, than now, never lets himself be trapped by his material and gives it a lot of style and photographic lift to keep it moving. Although filmed as a part-talkie, both versions were substantially the same - the official silent version was only about a minute shorter than the sound - and the film has such lack of the look of such hybrid productions than, say, Frank Capra's "Ladies of Leisure" where the silent version is literally a sound film played mute. Here the scene is given away not by stage sets-up or awkward technique, but only by the way the lamp light was caught by Laura LaPlante's eyes. This made it possible to read her lips quite easily. The charming and light-hearted opening is a little misleading, and the comedy little it is not maintained; it becomes rather like a combination of "Are Parents People?", a Capra film and a Constance Talmadge vehicle, but played just a shade too seriously. However, Laura is delightful, though oddly enough the critics at the time didn't think so and felt that she was the weakest thing in the picture. (Her voice was, and is, fine). The print is fully complete, and obviously taken from a British print or negative, judging from the intriguing Universal-British trademark. Wyler himself is not particularly abour the picture (as he has always been about his pre-prestige films) and recently remarked that the "g" in the last word of the title should have been changed to a "s".

"THE NARROW TRAIL" (Paramount/Artcraft/Ince, 1917) Directed by Lambert Hillyer
Produced, and original story by William S. Hart; scenario, Harvey Thaw;
Cameras: Joseph August; 5 reels
With William S. Hart, Sylvia Breamer, Milton Ross, Bob Kortman, "Fritz".

The first of Hart's pictures for Paramount (though the second to be released), "The Narrow Trail" was designed both as a tribute to his pinto Fritz (hence making a well-publicised comeback, after having been kept off the screen for some time due to a disagreement between Hart and Ince) and as a spectacular launching to the new series. Although contractually Ince still got supervisory billing, he had nothing whatsoever to do with this new group, and Hart had sole control. The new Harts were being advertised as "...Always inspiring...". As always, they made full use of the caption "Better a painted pony than a painted woman!". While not a western classic in the sense that "Hell's Hinges" was, it is still one of the best Harts, not least in that it is a kind of apotheosis of all the things that he had done before. There is loyalty to his horse and to fellow outlaws; reformation by a woman; a visit to the big city where his rugged strength outshines the silhouetts; a well-done horse race (using some excellent running inserts of Hart, a device he rarely used); a sentimental finale, and Joe August's photography is fine. The San Francisco location scenes are fascinating, and action slammed over with vigor, coming over run only in one rather obviously faked scene of Fritz crossing a log between canyon walls - though for 1917 it is not at all unacceptible. Hart's total control is not all to the good; he does rather over-do the sentiment and the florid titles, and while we know that he fervently and sincerely believed in every word of it, some of it may be a little hard to take for those seeing Bill for the first time. The new Hart is also exceptionally rich in comedy, but too, especially since he remains quite unimpressed by much prettier ladies (especially a maid in a well-to-do Frisco mansion) that he meets subsequently. He is beginning to show his age a little, and he uses the iris device rather too much, but why care? If the Gods ever decreed that only three Harts could be saved for posterity this would have to be one of them. (The others? "Hell's Hinges" and, arguably, "The Testing Block").