Monday next, April 10: Two British films from 1936, both off-beat musical dramas: "SONG OF FREEDOM", a curious welding of African adventure with music and drama in the depression years; starring Paul Robeson with Elizabeth Welch; preceded by "END OF THE ROAD", a shaming if artless vehicle for Sir Harry Lauder.

April 3 1972
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"FIG LEAVES" (Fox, 1926) Direction (and original story): Howard Hawks
Scenario: Hope Loring, Louis D. Lighton; Camera: Joseph August; Assistant Director: James Tinling; Costumes: Adrian; 7 reels
With George O'Brien, Oliva Borden, Phyllis Haver, Andre Beranger, William Austin, Heinz Conklin, Eulalie Jensen.

Auteurs may have some trouble spotting the traditional Howard Hawks trademarks in this breezy but somewhat arch modern comedy. Today, in any case, it is seen somewhat at a disadvantage: originally, its major raison d'etre was its prolonged fashion show shot-making, blanketing itself, but this film was designed to exploit the old two-color Technicolor. At the time, that was quite sufficient novelty to take up the slack of a comedy that was funnier at its beginning than at its end. Today, without the benefit of the color, the padding of these sequences — and the lack of substance of the latter part of the film — is a little too obvious. However, it's a brisk film, kept lively by the performances of its stars, with Phyllis Haver's vamp — as always — making the husband's devotion to his wife a little hard to understand. The earlier deliberately unchronicled prehistoric sequences quite accurately blueprinted the brand of humor of the much later "Flintstones" TV cartoon series.

"THE SILENT COMMAND" (Fox, 1923) Directed by J. Gordon Edwards
8 reels **

** Note: for release, the film was cut by some eleven minutes, possibly to its advantage. Our print tonight however, is of the full original version.

J. Gordon Edwards is one of the pioneer directors least adequately represented archivally today. He was with Fox from 1914 on, turning out some 20 of the best known Theda Bara vehicles, a dozen William Farnum films (ranging from Westerns to spectacles like "If I Were King"), was associated with Herbert Brenon on the Annette Kellerman films, filmed extensively on location (Italy, Egypt etc.), and in addition to the afore-mentioned films, directed such diverse works as Betty Blythe's "The Queen of Sheba" and early adaptations of Tolstoy — and Alice Collins! Yet apart from the still unconfirmed report of a print of the Theda Bara "Cleopatra" in Spain, only two of his (later) films are still known to exist: the Farnum western "Drag Harlan" (which we've already shown) and tonight's film, his last film but one, made in the early 20's when his earlier prodigious output — nine or ten films a year — was down to a mere one a year. Obviously his boxoffice record in the past was too impressive for us to judge his capabilities on this enjoyable but frankly mediocre picture. An old-fashioned plot does not necessarily make for an old-fashioned-picture. Benjamin Christensen's "The Mysterious X" of a decade earlier had a similar plot — but is still a fresh and smooth movie, while a much less ambitious Fox thriller of 1924, "Arizona Express" (which you'll be seeing in a week or two) was overwhelmed as to plot, but by virtue of its pace and speed seems much more modern today. "The Silent Command" in fact has one of the perennial plots — the same one used for Robert Taylor's "This Is My Affair" in the mid-30's — but its technique, abounding in far too many quick establishing shots, is quite incredibly primitive. It is also pedestrian in its movement, coming to life only for its admittedly prolonged and exciting climax. And coming from a man who guided Theda Bara through her biggest hits, its vamp scenes seem surprisingly tame and uninspired to. Yet there are compensating factors: most spectacularly of course, the pleasure of watching Bella Lugosi as the villain (neatly labelled 'Hisaton!) with many of his gestures and mannerisms already well established — the flourishes, the self-satisfied puffing at cigars, even the use of his eyes (emphasised in panel shots) in scenes of menace. Quite incidentally, Gordon E.Edward, who plays Gridley, was director Edwards' son, was also an assistant director on his father's films (and for Ford, Borzage, and other Fox directors) and is the father of Blake Edwards. He is still active and is currently gratis of his memoirs to the American Film Institute in Hollywood. Disappointing as not the "Silent Command" is an enjoyably straightforward spy and thriller of the old school, from a time when it still mattered whether or not the Panama Canal was blown up.

--- Wm. K. Everson ---