The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

CHARLESTON (France, 1927) Directed by Jean Renoir; 2 reels
With Catherine Hessling, Johnny Hedges.

Frankly it is only the Renoir name that makes this avant-garde curio worth looking at. While his sense of humor could be both whimsical and bizarre, Renoir's style was so rooted in naturalism and stylised realism as to preclude any sympathetic or workable affinity with experimental film. Even the dream sequences (tempered with or not) in his much later "The Woman on the Beach" are the least effective elements of that strange film. "Charleston" has none of the grace or imagination of the best French avant-garde from the period. Taken out of context, individual scenes and compositions are arresting, and one basic set - the decaying shop facade on a deserted street - is interestingly designed. These visual elements might look promising in the form of stills, but the film as a unit is little more than a casual home movie, far less exciting than one would expect of a talent like Renoir's, even admitting that it was on unfamiliar ground and had not in any case reached its peak. Catherine Hessling also does nothing to give it the attention-grabbing spark that a truly magic personality like Louise Brooks could have done so easily. Nevertheless, it's good to fill in any gaps in an career as important as Renoir's.

SUCKER FOR TROUBLE (Monty Banks comedies, circa 1928) 2 reels
With Monty Banks, Florence Gilbert, Sid Smith, William Blindell.
We acquired this print just a week or two ago, and as yet have had no time to dig into its history. The title, snapped on by a British 16mm distributor, is not the original, and we haven't as yet traced the title or its credits. Since it is so derivative of Lloyd however, we felt that it would make an interesting contrast with tonight's Lloyd film, and thus didn't wait to do all the detective work first. Credits will be printed on later notes. The dates seems fairly reliable, though a guess; it is obviously one of Banks' best and most elaborate 2-reelers, so presumably made just before his 1928 switch to feature comedies. It seems to draw inspiration both from the old Fairbanks Triangle film "Flirting With Fate" and more especially from Lloyd's early 20's two-reeler "Never Weaken".
If not original in concept, many individual gags are original, and it is certainly fast, energetic, and produced on a large scale. Individual touches so characteristic of Banks suggest that it was directed by him too.

- intermission -

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE (Harold Lloyd Corp-Paramount, 1926) Directed by Sam Taylor
Story by John Grey, Ted Wilde, Clyde Brucchalli; Titles, Ralph Spence; Camera, Walter Landau, Henry Kohler; Assistant Director, Robert A. Golden; 6 reels
With Harold Lloyd, Jobyna Balston, Noah Young, James Nash, Paul Wolff.

In one of his least-known features, Lloyd here seems to be following the practice of John Ford by relaxing after a blockbuster, and making time until his next "big" one. It's - in a sense - Lloyd's "The Sun Shines Bright", a mild and undistinguished film compared to "The Freshman" of a few months earlier. Like all Lloyd films, it is constructed rather than written, and assembled rather than directed. But since there is virtually no plot, and the mechanical elements aren't strained in order to make a plot, it has a grace and a fluidity that many Lloyds lack. It is pleasing, full of surprises - both elaborate sight gags and subtler situational gags - and it's rather fascinating to watch how the final obligatory chase is literally manufactured out of thin air, doesn't really go anywhere (there's far less of a suspense motivation than usual) and yet is still as effective as ever.
Since the film is so unknown (though it probably won't remain so for long) it would be a pity to spoil its many delightful surprises by discussing the gags. Harold is for once cast in the earlier Fairbanks mould - not the aggressive if mild-mannered boy trying to make good, but the Howard Hughes brand of tycoon who already has it made.
Jobyna Balston is a lovely and believable inspiration - a kind of one-dimensional "Major Barabara" - and the small supporting cast is composed of Lloyd's regular stock company.

William K. Everson

Erratum: The correct title of the film referred to in our current Bulletin as "All Night Long" should of course be "Open All Night".