

Next program: Monday, April 29: LOVE OF THE SARDANS (1934) with Mala and Lotus, preceded by A ROUGH ROMANCE (1930) with George O'Brien, Helen Chandler, Antonio Moreno and John Wayne as an extra. Note: in order to facilitate attendance at the MMA's "Carmen" screening, our program proper will begin at 7:30., but we will add shorts beginning at 7:00 for members arriving at the normal time.

April 8 1974

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

HAT CHECK GIRL (Fox, 1932) Directed by Sidney Lanfield; screenplay by Philip Klein and Barry Conners from an original story by Rian James; Camera, Glen MacWilliams; Set design, Gordon Wiles; 6 reels
With Sally Eilers, Ben Lyon, Ginger Rogers, Monroe Owsley, Arthur Pierson, Noel Madison, Dewey Robinson, Harold Goodwin, Eulalie Jensen, Purnell Pratt, Lee Moran, Harvey Clark, Bert Roach, Eddie Anderson, Bill Elliott, Richard Carle, Hooper Atchley, Tom Steele, Henry Armetta, Arthur Housman, Richard Tucker, Joyce Compton, Larry Steers, Snowflake.

It's never quite sure whether "Hat Check Girl" is a bigger film that went wrong, or a "B" that is much better than it has a right to be. The opening reel gets it off to a grand start, with lots of legs, lingerie, and snappy dialogue. The establishing shot, using a love song juxtaposed with a horse's rear end appears to be a parody of Lubitsch's opening shot parody in "Trouble in Paradise". (The Fox film was released a couple of months earlier, but word may well have leaked about Lubitsch's great opening in time for this film to jump the gun!) Sally Eilers and Ginger Rogers, though their roles could profitably have been reversed, make a fine team, with Rogers getting some of the best lines. (After brushing off a mauling masher in the subway, she remarks "I must be the depression that everybody's feeling!"). Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, the film seems to decline in vitality in direct proportion to Ginger Rogers' gradual disappearance from the film. It's always good to look at, and Gordon Wiles' sets are striking and elaborate. But somehow it gets to be like an overgrown exploitation film, with a little more actually happening than usual, but a great deal of padding too. The long Central Park interlude seems entirely unnecessary, whereas the dramatic material of the climax is cut off and resolved almost before it gets going. With the pace, cutting, imaginative camera angles and zip of that opening reel, one expects more - but even as is, it's vastly enjoyable, and it's always good to see Sally Eilers (perhaps a little on the plump side here) in such a good and for her, typical, role. Incidentally, the sole remaining 35mm print from which this 16mm was made has now deteriorated, so tonight's print is literally ALL that is left for posterity.

CAMEO KIRBY (Fox, 1923) Directed by John Ford; Scenario by Robert Lee from the (1909) play by Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson; Camera, George Schneiderman; Original length, 7 reels; remade by Fox in 1929 under the same title as a partial musical.
With John Gilbert (Cameo Kirby) Gertrude Olmstead (Adele Randall) Alan Hale (Col. Moreau) Eric Mayne (Col. Randall) William E. Lawrence (Tom Randall) Richard Tucker (Aaron Randall) Phillips Smalley (Judge Playdell) Jack MacDonald (Larkin Bunce) Jean Arthur (Ann Playdell) Eugenie Ford (Madame Davezac)

The most important John Ford film prior to "The Iron Horse" - or at least, the biggest and commercially most important - "Cameo Kirby" is obviously not well served with this print of only fair pictorial quality, obviously missing footage, and an over-abundant supply of Czechoslovakian titles. However, it is all that is left, and we must be grateful that the Europeans saw fit to preserve it when its own production company did not. Ford in this period was always a little over-fond of titles, and the many titles here, probably deriving from the original play, are amplified by additional titles inserted later to cover missing footage. Its general similarity to the other Booth Tarkington property "Magnolia" (likewise done as a silent, and remake as a partial musical - twice) makes it a little easier to follow, as do the generally stereotyped characters. Alan Hale's villain is an exact duplicate of his villain in the same year's "The Covered Wagon", and John Gilbert's hero is one of many blueprints for Rhett Butler. The great structural influence from Griffith -- the cutbacks, (as in the earlier brawl, cut into a card game, to explain how Kirby got his nickname), the interweaving of parallel story-threads -- also helps to make it a little more apparent what is going on. The exterior scenes flow beautifully -- a horse-back chase cut for rhythm rather than excitement, a duel amid trees and waving grasses, even extreme closeups taken from the deck of the river-boat with the scenery passing idly by in the background -- whereas the interiors seem rather stilted, full of theatrical flourishes and gestures. The last "act", being virtually all dialogue, is - with that dialogue denied to us - frankly rather dull. Another Griffith derivation (rare with Ford) is the occasional repeat action by showing the same act from two consecutive angles. Some of the steamboat race shots were re-used by Ford in "Steamboat Round the Bend" 12 years later - VERY smoothly intercut we might add - and part of the plot was also incorporated into the George O'Brien talkie "Smoke Lightning", officially but very loosely based on a Zane Grey story. A brief synopsis is printed separately to help in following the story.

Wm. K. Everson

CAMEO KIRBY

The extreme length of some of the titles - probably wholesale chunks of dialogue from the play - may suggest that a great deal of importance is being missed through non-translation, but this is not necessarily the case. For example, early in the film the heroine turns down the marriage proposal of a suitor. Right in the midst of an inordinately long title appears a variation of the word "Konec" (which from sundry Czech prints, we know to be used as "The End"). The girl's expression, and the use of this one word, tell us right away that she is telling him that their romance is finished. The rest of the words obviously mean something too -- but their sense is conveyed by that one word.

- - - - -

Synopsis in brief

River-boat gambler Cameo Kirby accidentally meets and falls in love with Adele Randall (a scene that rather surprisingly foreshadows the meeting of Snow White and the Prince by the wishing well) without knowing her name. Later, Kirby and crooked gambler Moreau engage Adele's father Col. Randall in a card game. Kirby is unaware that he is her father, but when he wins his entire estate in the game, he has no intention of keeping it. However, before he can get to the Colonel after the game to return the deed, the Colonel, in despair, shoots himself. Moreau contrives to have Kirby blamed, and later on tries to shoot Kirby in the back. Kirby turns in time however, and though wounded, has time to fire back. He then falls overboard and is rescued by his partner. Moreau further discredits Kirby by claiming that it was Kirby who tried to kill him.

Kirby recuperates, getting in condition for the duel with Moreau that he knows must come. With the duel set up, Moreau again tries to shoot Kirby in the back, but Kirby shoots first and Moreau is killed. However, one of the Randall brothers, still convinced that Kirby did in fact directly cause his father's death, sees a way to revenge. He removes the gun from the dead Moreau's hand, giving the impression that he was shot down while unarmed. Kirby is pursued by a posse of Randall kinsmen, but eludes them and takes refuge at the Randall home. There he discovers that the girl he met and fell in love with earlier is the heir to the Randall estate. The Randall kinsmen still seek revenge, but he is able to persuade them of his innocence, returns the deed to the property to the family, and marries Adele.

- - - - -