June 24, 1924

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE VOICE OF THE NIGHTINGALE" (France, 1923; original title "Song of the Nightingale") 1 reel; color

"THE GIRL WHO WANTED TO BE A PRINCESS" (France, 1923) 1 reel; color

Both produced by Ledislas and Irene Starwichtch, and starring their daughter, Nina Starwichtch.

Starwichtch's career with puppet and stop-motion animation trick films began in Russia in 1911, but reached full fruition in Paris in the 20's, and continued there through the 30's. Tonight's two films are particularly enjoyable and unusually well-preserved examples of his unique art. The first is in some ways the better of the two, although it is simpler and its many pleasing images do not rely exclusively on trickery. The second film is much longer and more elaborate, and even constructed somewhat like a feature, so that its "plot" builds in excitement to a definite climax. In a dramatic sense, it is too long for its good points wear out in its length. The combination of live motion and puppety, and the incorporation of natural backgrounds, are often ingenious in the extreme, and much of it transcends mere novelty to encompass the beauty of the them very lively French avant-garde movement -- especially the superimposition of shots in the sequence of the child lost in the woods. Like all good fairy-tales, it has a macabre elements, and indeed there is a dwelling on the details of horror (rats scampering out of a coffin for example, or the facial expressions of monsters) which reminds one of Wells O'Brien in its cheerful extinction of horror and sprightly personalities from basically grim material. The titles for the second film are all in French, but it is fairly elementary French and hardly needs translation; since the images themselves immediately back up the text.

...Intermission...

"THE WHITE TIGER" (Universal, 1923) Directed by Tod Browning; scenario by Browning and Charles Kenyon from an original story by Browning; Camera: William Riddle; 7 reels

With Priscilla Dean, Wallace Beery, Matt Moore, Raymond Griffith.

It is 17 years since we last ran this film at the Huff. On that occasion we had access to a fine toned original print, long since vanished. Our print tonight is a routine black-and-white copy, and is missing scenes here and there. A negative does exist in England, and we had hoped to replace those missing bits and pieces, but the footage hasn't materialised as yet, and since many of our members are impatient to see it (we've had the print for over a year) we are playing it in its rather rough state. Frankly, while the missing scenes make its plot a bit smoother, they don't make it a better film, and even originally it had a disjointed quality, as in the virtually unexplained climactic death of the villain -- and the repeated symbolic use of the title throughout is a bit murky too.

When we last ran the film, it and "The Unholy Three" were about the only silent Brownings available, and thus it tended to be regarded as something of a Browning primitive. Today (after exposure to the abysmal "Under Two Flags") it seems far less primitive; but it also confirms that the basic pattern and structure, the use of coincidence and irony, were set up very early in Brownings's writing/directing career, and that the later and more famous films with Chaney showed little sense of development or progress. As with "The Show", "The Blackbird" and so many others, "The White Tiger" starts out with a bang -- it is pictorially and dramatically exciting, and sets up an interesting group of characters and relationships. There is a hint of the macabre, and the roots of themes which crop up again and again with Browning, at least as early as 1923's "The Devil Doll". One of his best pictures. (In fact the more one sees of Browning's silents the more one is convinced that his best films are his often very under-rated talkies). But -- as with so many of his silents -- once Browning has tantalised us with all this material, he lets it all spiral downhill, and two-thirds of the way through (as also in "The Show", "Outside the Law" and others) contrives to lose all of his characters locked up in a cramped space, and literally talk them into the silent era. A classic example of silent film, but a noticeably silent one. However, it has its academic interest, at least in its cast. It's incredible how Raymond Griffith, given a medium of pantomimic material, can make the whole film suddenly come to life. Priscilla Dean's huge popularity still eludes me; a harsh and uninteresting actress, she seems totally unsuited to sympathetic roles, and possibly only von Sternberg could have really brought her to life -- as he did with Betty Compson and Evelyn Brent. Moreover, the Browning Dean films that survive (this one, "Under Two Flags", "The Virgin of Stamboul") are singularly unexciting and unexciting, and in "A Cafe in Cairo" (made independently, with Chet Button directing) has the color, excitement and exotic adventure that her Brownings were supposed to have...