The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

TRAFFIC IN SOULS (Universal, 1913) Produced and directed by George Loane Tucker.
Edited and titled by Jack Cohn; 6 reels

So much of our program-note homework has been done for us on this film by the spring 1974 "Journal of Popular Film" and the current (winter, 74/75) "State and Sound" that we'll merely refer you to those publications, and the printed foreword to the film itself, for the fascinating details of its production. But for a film that has been so suddenly recognised, it has also, I think, been damned by faint praise - almost as though no "exploitation" film can really be taken seriously, and thus any enthusiasm must be severely curtailed. The Museum of Modern Art's notes were condescending and almost invited disrespect, while their limited exhibition made it extremely difficult to see. "State and Sound" terms it "laughably melodramatic today, and even the film's own foreword terms it naive, and says that it isn't in the same league with the modern story of "Intolerance." Well, welcome, the new is - even in 1913 - and this is three years earlier than the final version of that modern story, and a year earlier than "The Mother and the Law." Enthusiasm is very much in order for it, for it is certainly one of the best and most accomplished feature films made to that date. Tourneur's "The Wishing Ring," vastly different, is admittedly far better and more sophisticated, but that too, was a year away. Unlike so many features of the post-1912 period, "Traffic in Souls" is never stagy or tabloid-like. There's no conscious "art" about it either - all of the sets are naturalistic, the framings uncomplicated; the actors do their job, the actors walk in and out of them without bothering about their own positioning, and the camera merely records; it has in fact, much of the casual realism and unobtrusive self-confidence of the Warner crime films of the early 30's. Its documentary values are enhanced by much extensive location shooting in New York. Very little is known about George Loane Tucker's work (he spent much of his short film-making life in England and married actress Elisabeth Risdon) other than for surviving fragments of "The Miracle Man"; his instinctive grasp of film-making here suggests he may have been one of the major talents of those early years.

CAPTAIN FLY BY NIGHT (Robertson-Cole - FSC, 1922) Directed by William K. Howard Script by Eve Ensoll from an original story of the same name by Johnstone McCulley; Camera, Lucien Andriot; 5 reels
With Johnnie Walker, Shamann Halley, Frances McDonald, James McElhemney, Dorothy Bateman, Bert Wheeler, Eddie Gribbon, Charlie Stevens, Noble Johnson, Kit Guard, Fred Kelsey, Monte Collins.

Our playing of this film second tonight is only partly a matter of chronology, since it was made a decade later, and certainly not because we consider it the better film. It's purely and simply a matter of convenience to those who did see "Traffic in Souls" at the Museum, and thus can arrive a little later in面 revised today's MMA program if they wish. A Zorro-like adventure, from the same author, "Captain Fly By Night" is one of Howard's earliest films and very economical. Very little money seems to have been available for it; the sets are skimpy, there was no camera truck for running inserts in the chase scenes, and the cast pretty third-rate. The titles try manfully to make an epic out of a quickie; a gang of mouth-eating Mexicans are constantly referred to as "conspirators," and the villain's plans - which seem limited to straightforward brutality and lechery - are said to be those of a revolutionary planning to overthrow the Government. The rest of the titles do their best to impart a Dumas-like flavor. But working with nothing, Howard, his cameraman Andriot, and star Johnnie Walker (all three would continue to work together through the years), do manage to convey a modicum of elegance and a great deal of enthusiasm. It is beautifully photographed, and the very minimum of locations which include some pleasant coastal seascapes, A stunting falling down to seaweed instead of sand is even covered-up fairly neatly. Cheap certainly, but quite an interesting beginning to a career. -- WSS