Next program, Oct. 25th: SKID PROOF (1923), dir: Scott Dunlap) with Busc Jones; Czech titles, synopsis provided; LET"ER GO GALLIGHER (1927, dir: Elmer Clifton) with Harrison Ford, Elmer Fair, Junior Coghlan, Ivan Isabell.

October 12, 1976

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society.

THE FLAME WITHIN (MGM, 1935) Written, produced and directed by Edmund Goulding; Camera, James Wong Howe; Music, Jerome Kern; Editor, Blanche Sewell; 7 rls. With Ann Harding, Herbert Marshall, Maureen O'Sullivan, Louis Hayward, Henry Stephenson, Margaret Seddon, George Hassell, Eily Malyon, Claudelle Kane.

Coming a few months after "Private Worlds", "The Flame Within" suffers both by not being as good as its predecessor, and by being far more of an MGM soap opera, with the still (for film) novel plot material of psychiatry being used as little more than a background. Too, the film appears to have suffered from extensive pre-release editing; whole chunks of narrative and motivation appear to be missing, and the film has a lack of a logical quality of the whole. Still, as a typical and not-too-easily seen MGM glossy of the day, it still has its interest, though Ann Harding's appeal has always been difficult to explain. As a graceful if somewhat mannered actress, she certainly had her place, but she always looked far more mature than she was, really supposed to be, and as the frequent objective of rival and equally passionate admirers, she rarely seemed to evoke the spark that could arouse such interest.

LE ROI DES CHAMPS ELYSEES (Nero Film, France, 1934; Paramount release) Directed by Max Nossek; produced by Seymore Nebenzal; Supervised by Robert Siodmak; Scenario: Arnold Lipp; Dialogue, Yves Mirande; Camera, Robert Le Febvre; Music: Joe Hajes; Art Direction, Hugues Laurent, Jacques-Louis Attelin; 8 rls. With Buster Keaton, Paullette Dubost, Madeleine Gitty, Collette Darfeuille, Jim Gerald, Jacques Dumesnil, Pierre Pierrade, Raymond Blot, Lucien Galland, Henri Pneut, Gaston Duprat, Paul Gierget, Frank Maurice, Fitouto. (Unsubtitled, synopsis provided)

Rudi Blesh in his excellent Keaton book dismisses this film as "poor", but says little more about it, a fairly clear indication that he hadn't seen it. It's certainly not a major rediscovery, but it is decidedly better than "poor", really quite amusing, certainly fast-paced, in many ways more satisfying than most of Buster's MGM talkies, and above all, fairly typical Keaton material. It's all essentially visual too, very easy to follow without a translation of the French dialogue, though we have provided a synopsis.

A film so long lost and unknown deserves more than a few notes here, and we'll be devoting an article to it in an upcoming "Films in Review", but a film that is so little known - and of no great merit - deserves at least the advantage of surprise, so I want to deal only in very general terms here. It is surprising that Buster wasn't cast as an American adrift in Paris, thus enabling him to (logically) continue his silent screen role of the man unable to communicate; it would have been an ideal solution for him, if only for a picture or two. But apart from that, Buster does seem to have had some control over the gags and their handling. There are many specific echoes from previous Keaton films, most of it is done, as was his style, in long shots or medium shot; and one whole musical number exists only as a prop to a Keaton gag. Some of the best moments are almost throw-away bits of typical Keaton pantomime. There are traces (musical and otherwise) of the Rene Clair school, but essentially it is a Keaton comedy: an economical one, but not a cheap one, and far better served in terms of the production value than his British "The Invader" ("An Old Spanish Custom").

Bith producer Nebenzal and director Nossek later went to Hollywood, Nossek to specialise in thrillers ("Dillinger", etc.). Nebenzal gets in a free plug for his recent "The Testament of Dr. Mabuse" by having Keaton back up to a poster for it, and (quite unsuccessfully) cuts a lot of the nightmarish footage of the car chase from that long classic into the slapstick car chase here. Obviously the two moods don't match at all! Buster's voice is heard only once or twice (the odd "Hey!") and he is otherwise dubbed. It's an oddity - not least for Buster's beaming smile at the end - but a fascinating one.

Wm. K. Everson
Buster is employed by the publicity department of a large company; his chore is to dress as a millionaire, and throw away apparent bank-notes — on the back of which are printed advertising slogans. However, one day he inadvertently picks up a pile of real bank-notes by mistake, and gives away the genuine money, unable to understand the furore he is causing. One of the recipients of his unwitting largesse is Germaine, a pretty young girl who uses the money to pay her rent. Buster is smitten by her. He loses his job, and being an aspiring actor, tries to get another one in the theatre where his mother works as prompter. However, after having ruined a musical production number, he has no chance and is thrown out. Dejected, he pens a suicide note for his mother, and tries to commit suicide. Various attempts fail — even the gas is cut off when he tries to gas himself — and finally he tries to poison himself in a restaurant. There, fortunately, he meets Germaine (a waitress) and his zest for living is restored. Further good news: his mother has a job for him in the theatre’s new play. However, it is a dull crime play that the audience sleeps through, and Buster’s ineptitude doesn’t help. Meanwhile, an American gangster — the exact double of Buster — escapes from prison and rejoins his gang. However, there is a mix-up and it is Buster who is commandeered and taken to the gang’s hideout — an elaborate one, fitted out with trick panels and sliding floors. The gangster’s mistress is puzzled by Buster’s lack of ardour. Meanwhile, the real gangster arrives somewhat tardily, and the gang is unable to understand the sudden switch in personality. (Buster is unable to open up a booby-trapped strong box that his double had designed). Even when the duality is revealed, there are still complications as to who is who. Finally Buster escapes from the hideout, with the gangsters in hot pursuit, and police joining in the car chase. Buster leads the gangsters on to the stage of the theatre, where the ensuing free-for-all wakes up the audience and turns the show into a hit. Buster (smiling!) is reunited with Germaine for a happy fadeout.