
Piano Score played by Stuart Oderman

"Thomas Graal's Best Child" (the date is 1918, not 1917 as stated on the print) is considered the best of a trio of social comedies centred around Thomas Graal, a creative breadwinner who was something of a composite of the American Skinner, the French Monsieur Hulot, and Charley Chase. It had been preceded by "Thomas Graal's Best Film" (1917, with the same director and the same four leading stars) and would be followed in 1922 by a third film directed by Gustav Holender with a different cast and for a different company. It's a major delight not in that it is a great film, but in that it is a refreshing discovery and proves again how wrong it is to have preconceived notions about any aspects of film history. Even at this late date, there are still surprises awaiting us. Although it proves that the Swedes are not entirely dour and humorless, it also rather confirms their own self-doubts in the realm of humor. Both in their films (and probably in their writing) and in their national characteristics as individuals, the Swedes tend to leave an escape-hatch in all their humor, so that if it doesn't succeed as comedy, it can always be claimed that it was intended seriously. To a degree this ambiguity affects this film, and lessens some of its comic effect. However, even if this film is an isolated comic excursion, which it is, quite apart from the occasional outdoor dramas and family sagas, it indicates that Sweden exercised a definite if never exploited leadership in sophisticated screen comedy. This is exactly the kind of film that didn't become fashionable (and for the most part didn't get made) until the mid-1920's. It recalls, but predates, the best of Lubitsch, St. Clair and Rene Clair in "Eddy Mindermere's Fan", "Are Parents People?" and "The Italian Straw Hat". There are drawbacks of course. Seastrom, a major Swedish director who also enjoyed a brief but notable career in Hollywood, and is perhaps best remembered today for his superb performance in Bergman's "Wild Strawberries", doesn't have the comic presence or the demonair polish of an Adolphe Menjou. And the film's flat lighting and straightforward camerawork doesn't provide the elegance and sparkle that such a comedy of manners needs. But it's gentle and charming, its surprises and its taste quite outweighing the lack of standards which we can only (unfairly) apply by post-judging it in comparison with such later and slicker works as Lubitsch's quite similar "Bluebeard's Eighth Wife".

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

"FAZIL" (Fox, 1927) Produced and directed by Howard Hawks From the play "L'Incormise" by Pierre Prevoteau and the English adaptation "Prince Fazil"; adaptation by Philip Klein; scenario by Seton I. Miller; Camera: L. William O'Connor; Settings, William S. Darling; Assistant Director, James Tinling; musical score arranged by S.L. Rothafel, and directed by Eric Raybaud; 7 reels With Charles Farrell, Grata Nissim, John Boles, Nae Busch, Tyler Brooke, John T. Murray, Vadim Urnoff, Josephine Boro, Clino Corrado, Dele Fuller, Hank Hamm, Eddie Sturgis, Eveline Anderson.

Dedicated auteurs will be hard-pressed to find typical Hawksian ingredients of either story, characters or style in this tongue-in-Sheik romp. One of the plethore of exotic Eastern romances that followed in the wake of "The Sheik" and were renewed with the success of 1926's "Son of the Sheik", it casts Farrell not very convincingly as an Arab chieftain (an authentic one, not of the revealed-as-an-English aristocrat variety in the last reel) and pits him rather pleasingly against the lovable Grata Nissim. The marvellous Avo Cornfelden nicely establishes the wrong note: one sits back prepared to enjoy its jovial lechery and lush exoticism, only to have it turn serious behind one's back, so that there is no preparation for the emotionalism of the climax and it just isn't as moving as it might be. Definitely in its favor however is its short length and snappy pacing, its photography, its handsome and luxurious production mountings, and its typical (but well above average for the period) musical score. Recommended for those who still enjoy the period and the silent film, it arguably wastes all its techniques on specious plot material. The whole film has the look of a Victorian pornographic novel from which all of the meat has been removed, though the harem scenes have a definite eroticism. Women's Lib advocates (and civil rights crusaders for racial equality) will doubtless find the film horendous, but conversely supporters of male supremacy will find much to applaud in the modus-operandi of the barbaric East. Rediscovered masterpiece it certainly isn't, but it's still good to welcome another lost sheik back to the fold.

--- William K. Everson ---