An evening of trains: silent, sound, melodramatic, comic
Piano Scoring & Playing for silent excerpts by
STUART ODERMAN

Once, even more than the aeroplane, the symbol of power and speed, the locomotive has served as a basic prop ever since the movies began -- and also perhaps as a symbol of dignity. In the later silent, the later electric and diesel trains never possessed. From "Juggernaut," "The General," and "Spies" in the silent period, through "Rome Express" and "The Lady Vanishes" (now just remade) in the sound period, trains have added immeasurably to the fun of moviegoing. Tonight's program is in no way an attempt to present a comprehensive historical chronology. Some of the very best examples (e.g., Hitchcock's "Number 17") are excluded because we have already seen the director twice in these film showings. (Alfred Hitchcock probably used trains more than any other single director as a recurring background or motif, though Fritz Lang wasn't far behind; neither are represented this evening). Others ("The Great Barrier", "Oh Mr. Porter") are out because we have played them once, and anticipate early repeat showings. Still others are missing because, alas, no 16mm prints are available in this country at present -- a fate that precludes our showing the British "Rome Express" and "The Ghost Train" though we have hopes for the future. So, with only two repeats from films shown here earlier, this is (we hope) an amusing and entertaining roundup of the fairly restricted but always entertaining things that the movies have done while playing with trains. Because of the wish not to cut up too many prints and also to save time in a long program, the credits have not been attached to each segment. Everything will be shown in the relatively chronological order listed below, so you will need these notes as a reference to know what is running on what track. (Much fuller credits for the films will be displayed at the rear of the hall).

1. BETWEEN ORTON JUNCTION AND FALLONVILLE: A most enjoyable and very typical early Edison melodrama, filmed in New Jersey in 1913.

2. A GIRL AND HER TRUST: One of the very best of D.W. Griffith's chase melodramas, virtually a showcase for his splendid editing technique. 1912.

3. LET'S GO: One of the first films directed by William K. Howard, director of last week's "A Ship Comes In". Richard Talmadge, one-time double for Douglas Fairbanks, later a director of stunt action sequences, leaping and cavorting on buildings and motor cycles, winding up on a train, 1923.

4. THE GREAT X & A TRAIN ROBBERY: Tom Mix, stuntting without a double, in a sequence that is both funny and thrilling. 1926

5. ARIZONA EXPRESS: A marvelous climactic chase from a 1924 Fox melodrama, in which the exceptional thrill and stunts are somehow topped by a prison chaplain with a bizarre sense of ecclesiastic showmanship. It's a non-stop barrage of action with all the realism of a chuck Jones cartoon, where scenes hurl off mountains, cars, horses and trains, and bounce back unharmed (though a little dusty), ready for more. The stalwart hero is David Butler, later a notably successful director of musicals and thrillers.

6. THE GIRL IN THE FULLMAN (unconfirmed) There hasn't been time to isolate and screen this runaway train climax prior to the writing of these notes, so its inclusion will depend on merit and the final running time of the program, 1927

7. PLAY SAFE: A classic essay in Harold Lloydian comedy-thrills by the lesser-known Monty Banks. Expert stunt work, doubling and editing to hide the doubling. The spur line used for the shooting was a Hollywood staple location in the 20's; it was used in Wellman's "Beggars of Life" (seen in a previous series), and also in "Arizona Express". So by the end of the evening you should be very familiar with its loops and curves.

8. THE FLYING SCOT (1929/30): A transition to sound British melodrama starring Ray Milland and the Flying Scot train -- which was given a US tour not too long ago. Directed by documentarian Castleton Knight.


10. BULLDOG JACK (1935) Another change-of-pace; London's Underground is the background to this excellent comedy-thrill chase encounter between Jack Oakie and Claude Rains, the master agent and Claude Hubert, Fay Wray and wild and woolly villain Ralph Richardson.

11. OVERLAND STAGE RAIDERS (1938) "B" westerns made excellent use of train/chase scenes. It was a toss-up between this one and "Rackets of the Range", which had some excellent stunts performed without a double by star George O'Brien. However, too much of its train stuff was done via studio back projection, so this more authentic chase won out. With John Wayne.

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THE SILVER STREAK (RKO Radio, 1934) Directed by Tommy Atkins; screenplay by Roger Whately, Jack O'Donnell and H.W. Haneman from an original story by Whately; Camera, Roy Hunt; 72 mins.


"The Silver Streak" is almost an epitome of what the good "B" picture used to be: fast, slick, efficient, full of hokum, and immensely entertaining. There's enough material in its incident-laden plot to have made an "A" picture — but then they'd have had to worry about logic, motivation and star names, and it wouldn't have been as much fun, or, in its own way, as good a picture. As it is, it brings in a revolutionary new train (amazing how fast technology has moved since then), lots of old ones, footage from the Century of Progress at the Chicago World's Fair, scenes at the country, a love story, references to another (then) modern marvel, The Iron Lung, lots of excellent actuality footage of the train speeding across the country, and a neat kind of construction. While never slow, the film takes its time getting under way (today's audience may be quite grateful for this after the barrage of action earlier on), allowing for the best parts of the plot to be over before the audience is ready. The plot's second timing by which the train rolls across closing bridges and narrowly misses other trains suggests that the pre-planning for the run was almost as disorganised as an U.S. rail travel has become today.

The cast is full of old friends, and there's a particular bonus in the really good and underplayed performances by William Farnum, an actor not noted (in the 30's) for turning down an opportunity to make more than the most of any scene.

The New York Times seemed to like the film very well, though it did make the odd comment that it didn't have the guts of "The Iron Horse" because the new train was "too feminine"! Although an RKO release, it was actually made by independents and then bought by RKO, though presumably they moved into it before complete ion, since RKO art-directors and technicians worked on it, and some of the "King Kong" score is grafted on to the Chicago World's Fair footage. Oddly, the slight extended to planes seems to have escaped aviation-oriented production head Merian C. Cooper.

Little is known about director Tommy Atkins (such a cliche name for a Britisher that it sounds like a pseudonym) except that he was formerly an associate director on "Midshipman Jack" and this was his (very commendable) first film as a director. The only other films of his that I'm aware of are the independent "Mutiny Ahead" and RKO's "Hi Gaucho". After that, he either died, retired, or possibly, having gained experience on cheapies, changed his name. Either way, in his case more searching and sifting is clearly needed.

"The Silver Streak" may well the the only (and quite certainly the first) "B" movie to warrant a book; it was both a readable (and unpretentious) account of the making of the film, and a novelisation of the script. It's now hard to get and something of a collector's item.

William K. Everson

DUE TO THE LENGTH OF TONIGHT'S PROGRAM THE SCREENING WILL NOT START UNTIL APPROX. 11.00. NORMALLY THAT WOULD BE TOO LATE TO ALLOW FOR A DISCUSSION PERIOD, BUT IN VIEW OF THE NUMBER OF FILMS INVOLVED (AND THE NECESSARILY BRIEF NOTES) AND THE FACT THAT THERE'S A HOLIDAY NEXT WEEK, WE WILL HAVE A BRIEF PERIOD FOR QUESTIONS. HOWEVER, PLEASE LIMIT YOURSELF TO QUESTIONS ABOUT TONIGHT'S FILMS, AND HOLD OVER ANY GENERAL QUESTIONS UNTIL NEXT TIME. THANKYOU.