This curious Keaton feature, not only lost but virtually unknown, was made at a low ebb in his career. Rudi Blech dismisses it in his excellent Keaton book as "poor", but says nothing more about it, a clear indication that he never saw it and that Keaton was uninformative. Although it's no rediscovered treasure, it is quite an amusing film and in many ways more satisfying than Keaton's last MGM talkies. It is so thoroughly visual that the French dialogue is no handicap, and it is surprising that some small American independent didn't see fit to pick it up. It's also surprising that Buster wasn't cast as an American adrift in Paris, so that his inability to communicate - his basic comedy ploy in his best silents - could have been reintroduced. The plot contains echoes -and foreshadowings - of a number of American comedies, and also starts out in Rene Clair fashion, with a lively use of music, before switching to more traditional slapstick and sight-gag material. The construction of many of the gags, and the camera placement for them, suggests that Keaton did not actually have an official hand in the direction, then many of his best gags are omitted. Frankly the film moves a little too fast for him: there isn't time to build and anticipate. Much of the time Keaton is able to make something out of nothing; with more time to work, he could doubtless have made hilarious what is now only amusing. (The dilemma of the gangster's mistress, faced with a passive Keaton one moment, and a passionate one the next, not knowing that there are two of them, is typical of material that could have been developed more.

Undeniably, it's an economical production, but it does have slick and sewecable sets and glossy production. The set for the musical number is obviously too big to have been created for the slight gagging it provides, so was undoubtedly borrowed from a musical in work at the same studio. Producer Nebenzal not only gets in a free plug for his "Testament of Dr. Mabuse", but also - and unfortunately - uses large chunks of that film's climactic car chase for this film's alleged slapstick finale. The footage is still nightmarish when removed from its context however, and it just doesn't serve for comedy purposes. Both Nebenzal and especially production supervisor Siodmak later had substantial careers in Hollywood, as did director Max Nosseck, though limited to profitable program thrillers like "Dillinger" and "The Brighton Strangler". Despite not being as good as one would like a rediscovered Keaton to be, it does have some lovely and typical moments, and one more great sour marriage gag to add to Keaton's already array of them. One final novelty: apparently assuming that this might well be his last film, Keaton seems to want to leave his screen character on a traditionally happy note, and allows him to beam happily (for the first time since an occasional smile in his earliest shorts) for the embrace fadeout. Most of Keaton's limited dialogue is dubbed, but an occasional expression - or a grunt or two - retains his own voice.

Buster is employed by the publicity department of a big company, one of his jobs being to hand out apparent bank-notes on the reverse of which are printed advertising slogans. One day he inadvertently picks up and distributes real money and in so doing meets, and is smitten by, a girl who is about to be evicted for non-payment of rent, and who is saved by his unwitting gift. Losing his job, Buster returns to his real love, the theatre. His mother finally gets him a coveted "role" in the theatre where she is a prompter - but he ruins a musical number and is fired again. On stage he decides on several methods unsuccessfully. After the gas is cut off just as he sticks his head into the oven, he decides to poison himself in a restaurant - but there meets his girl again, and changes his mind. More good news - his mother finally gets him a role in a play. However, it is a dull crime play that has the audience nodding, and Buster's ineptitude doesn't help. Meanwhile, an American gangster who is Buster's brother-in-law is on the loose. However. apparently assuming that this might well be his last film, Keaton seems to want to leave his screen character on a traditionally happy note, and allows him to beam happily (for the first time since an occasional smile in his earliest shorts) for the embrace fadeout. Most of Keaton's limited dialogue is dubbed, but an occasional expression - or a grunt or two - retains his own voice.

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The New School Film Series 32: Program #11
December 15, 1976

The following notes are condensed from a much longer description and appraisal published in the December 1976 issue of "Films in Review".

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---
OLD BONES OF THE RIVER (General Film Distributors/Gaumont-British, 1938)
Directed by Marcel Varnel; Screenplay by J.C.O. Orton, Val Guest and Marriot Edgar from the "Bones" novels by Edgar Wallace; Camera, Arthur Crabtree;
Art Direction, Vetchinsky; 85 mins.

We've commented in earlier Will Hay program notes (especially those for "Oh! Mr. Porter") on his overlapping into W.C. Fields territory (for his characterisation) and into Keaton (for gags and mechanical props) and tonight's films bears this out to a degree, though not as much as in his very best films, the aforementioned "Oh! Mr. Porter" and "Ask a Policeman" and "Good Morning Boys". Old Bones of the River (there were a couple of Edgar Wallace "Bones" novels which killed the sympathy -- or at least the sympathy of the British income tax system to the natives, and being outsmarted by them -- could benefit from a little expansion. But at least the film moves, and keeps moving, and in quite creditably created English "jungle" exteriors.

A few of the Hay films made it into U.S. release, and undoubtably a major factor in keeping this one off American screens was its racism -- perhaps one should say "colonial racism" which is really quite extraordinary. Britain always prided itself in the 30's in having none of America's racial problems, and certainly blacks were far less stereotyped in British movies (viz such Paul Robeson films as "A Song of Freedom"). Britain had an absolutely minimalist black population then, but obviously it's an extremely condensed war -- racial attitudes existed, or a film like this with its casual racism would never have been made or accepted. Some of the outlandish offshoots of these "white man's burden" attitudes are very funny, others disturbing. Enough to say that Commissioner Sanders sums it all up in the very first scene by complaining that there's always trouble when educated natives come back to Africa! In fairness to the establishment, however, the greatest insult to one of the native Africans is delivered by his own brother, suggesting that even among racial slurs a kind of class distinction prevails!

I can't say that we've been inundated with requests for more Will Hay films, but there have been many. It's a pity that we can't, at the moment, get a copy of his absolutely classic "Ask a Policeman", but there is hope. In the meantime, only 40 years late, "Bones" is a solid if not outstanding one to keep us going. Like the best of the other Hays, it's directed by the Frenchman Marcel Varnel (of "Gandhi the Magician"); somehow the French always managed to approach the British Music Hall as though it was the Comedie Frangaise, and give it a little more class than it really needed -- or wanted.

A short post-script to last week's "Now and Forever". It went down well, as it deserved to, and I was delighted that its charm still worked. However, from the laugh reaction to one scene -- a point also stressed by some of you in person afterwards -- it was obvious that many of you thought that the film went a little too far in the scene of the newspaper headline referring to the "Elgin Stil At Large". Normally I wouldn't bother to discuss a scene which caused unintended (but obviously genial) laughter, but in this case I think it's worth doing so for the record, as the scene was not -- surprising as it may seem -- exaggerated.

At one time, the race by elopers from England to Scotland was quite a romantic adventure, Greta Green, their destination, had for centuries been the traditional one place in Britain where people could get married instantly, and without formality. The film so took it for granted that audiences knew this, that it didn't bother to actually state it, and the only reference to Greta Green was on a sign-post. Moreover, in England at that time -- apart from items of above-average interest during the war years -- nothing ever happened. This was well before the race riots and the punk rockers, to say nothing of Jayne Mansfield. Newspapers did indeed pounce on such elopement stories, giving them both extensive coverage and even the headlines shown in the film. Today of course, eloping is almost as outdated as marriage.

William K. Everson
Program Ends approx. 10:30
Discussion session will follow.