Both of tonight's features are really footnotes to the great Golden Age of Silent Comedy. The first is frenetic, the second slight and relaxed. Neither can hope to compete with the best of Lloyd or Keaton, nor did they try to at the time of their release. It was such a rich period for comedy directors as well as for comedy performers - that frequently the off-beat scored just because it was different, or casually unambitious. This is not an apology for tonight's films, merely a warning not to expect a "Kid Brother" or a "Seven Chances". There is never any predicting how the slightly unconventional film will play with any given audience, but the two quite different features tonight should complement each other rather well.

"Easy Payments" (Fox, 1926) Directed by George Marshall & Thomas Buckingham; based on the serial "Married Life of Helen and Warren" by Mabel Herbert Under; with Allan Forrest, Kathryn Perry, Grace Goodall, Arthur Houseman, Charles Sellon; 2 reels.

From the handful that have survived, there are indications that the Fox 2-reel comedies of this era may well have been one of the best short comedy series of the period. Unlike the comedies of Roach and Sennett, there appears to have been no overall formula nor even an overall supervisor. The subjects ran the gamut from kid and animal comedies to bathing girls, domestic family situation comedies and straight slapstick. They had good directors and writers, interesting casts often featuring non-comedic newcomers (Richard Waring, Bill Elliott, Harry Woods) and even the weaker ones had good production values and were made with care.

How many were actually made in the "Helen and Warren" series I don't know, certainly there is a pulse of good short story material to choose from, and it is so thoroughly filmic, and apparently Keaton-inspired, that it probably used only the characters and not one of the original stories - but one must assume that "Easy Payments" is one of the best of the series, and is an absolutely delightful comedy short. Although there's no wasted footage, the first half is devoted to establishing characters, situation and a general framework not unlike that of the prior year's "Skinner's Dress Suit". Then, suddenly, the second half launches into an extremely funny and well-sustained series of sight gags. It would be a natural for either Keaton or Laurel & Hardy, and it is surprising indeed that it has never been picked up and used as the basis of a major comedy sequence in a feature. If it ever was, it escaped me, the nearest parallel being a similar (though less effective) episode in the Marx Brothers' "Room Service". Even apart from this fine sequence, it's a charming and pleasing little film, with likeable people and fascinating use of street exteriors. Kathryn Perry, who has one of the two leads, likewise played the young newly-wed in Frank Borzage's "The First Year" (made in 1925), a film we'll be showing in the Spring.

"THE CRUISE OF THE JASPER B" (DeMille Pictures Corporation, 1926) Directed by James W. Horne; presented by Bertram Millhauer; scenario by Tay Garnett and Zelda Sears from the novel by Don Marquis; Camera, Lucien Andriot; 6 reels.

With Rod la Rocque, Mildred Harris, Snitz Edwards, Tiny Sandford. Jack Ackroyd, Fred Kelsey, Frank Hagney, Charlie Hall.

"The Cruise of the Jasper B" is one of those curious films that, long unavailable, became a kind of cult film in absentia. A few people had seen it and remembered it affectionately - but none could recall it reliably. One sometimes finds it referred to as a "bootlegging comedy" (it isn't) with Jacqueline Logan billed as the star. Miss Logan is not on deck at all, the leading lady being Mildred Harris, a better actress than would be expected after the generally unfattering portraits always painted of her as one of the wives of Charlie Chaplin. When the film finally did become available again (in 1970), though this is its first public showing in New York since that rediscovery it didn't live up to its reputation, but it's easy to see why it did create such a favorable impression at the time. It's a wild, funny comedy, perhaps a shade too shadowy and undramatic, so different from the general run of comedies in the mid-20's that its very novelty must have made it stand out. It's a pity in a way that it does try to cover so much comedic ground. It is both satire and lampoon; it spoofs Douglas Fairbanks as a performer, and it kids the chatty titles of his earlier movies. Some of it is inspired, some merely childish, and there's certainly too much mid-picture padding with Jack Ackroyd and Snitz Edwards. The plot is often forgotten for prolonged gags; a crazy chase sequence is fine in itself, but over-mechanical Sennett-type sight gags seem out of place. However, the comic race to the rescue, composed of military stock characters, is clever and original, and an obvious forerunner of the similar climactic gag in the Marx Brothers' "Duck Soup".

(Continued overleaf)
The scenes that have often been reproduced in pictorial histories - Rod la Rocque beef-cake, the bombing of the Jasper B - are as unrepresentative of the film as a whole as any single still would be. Perhaps its greatest joy is that it is so unpredictable. (Audience response is equally unpredictable; reaction to the film depends almost entirely on the mood of the moment, and on the initial response. There is nothing more rewarding than an unknown quantity which clicks and is clearly working as it should; nothing more depressing than the film which should work, but doesn't strike that one responsive chord, leaving the knowledge that it just going to lay there for an hour or so. Anyway, we'll see ... and will probably light a nitrate candle or two in the balcony to help it along).

Economically made, it uses a few stock shots from other Delville sea films (they certainly got full value out of their clipper ship!), keeps a small cast busy all the time, and uses Catalina as a pleasant backdrop for the ship. Direction by James Horne veers more towards the speed and insanity of his Columbia serials of the 40's than to the discipline of his classic Laurel and Hardy comedies. In case you wonder why it seems to be taking so long for the plot to get off the ground, it might lessen the pondering to explain that (apart from the prologue), the Jasper B never does put to sea - one of the many jokes that is perhaps under-developed because of the sheer weight of all the other gags. Rod la Rocque, by the way, gives a typical "visual" performance. In a few weeks, in our Archive program for the season, you'll be able to see why (in 1929's "The Locked Door") he was unable to transfer his style - or his stardom - to talkies.

Ten Minute Intermission

"SO THIS IS LOVE" (Columbia, 1928) Directed by Frank Capra
Produced by Harry Cohen; Story by Norman Springer, adapted by Elmer Harris and Rex Taylor; Camera, Ray June. 6 reels

Another recent rediscovery (Columbia kept none of their Capras from the silent period, and the recent spate of such prints have all come from European sources or individual collectors), "So This Is Love" was Capra's second film for Columbia. The first, "That Certain Thing" (which we ran some seasons back), was a very impressive debut for him, a good film that managed to look far more expensive than it was. Well established, he seems to have relaxed a bit with this follow-up film, starring, incidentally, Shirley Mason, the sister of the star (Viola Dana) of "That Certain Thing". It's very short, VERY inexpensive, and obviously aims at being no more than a pleasant time-killer. If it weren't for the fact that it is directed by Capra, it might not be worth particularly serious attention, though the fact that it is directed by Capra means that often the gags and the invention are above the average in such a film.

For a director like Capra who had already demonstrated that he had a pretty sure hold on what audiences found sure-fire, there are some surprising lapses in this film. It must be the only comedy on record in which none of the three principals are especially sympathetic. The heroine uses a form of particularly dirty pool to ensure that her boy-friend wins the climactic boxing match. The hero, Buster Collier, delivers another one of his weakening, whining, post-Charles Ray essays in spinelessness. He really doesn't deserve our sympathies or the girl. (Ironically, he was just the opposite off-screen, enjoying the same kind of reputation with the ladies that Warren Beatty does today). Actually it is the nominal (if minor) villain, Johnnie Walker, who comes off best. He's aggressive, but he does have personality and is to a degree useful in his own right. "So This Is Love" (a singularly inappropriate title) is the kind of film that can only be lessened by continual discussion or description. It is minor, quite possibly the weakest of the early Capras; but it is brisk, it builds as it progresses, and the climax is genuinely funny and sustained for a considerable period of time to make up for the earlier reels when the plot merely treads water. Expecting little, you may be very pleasantly surprised.

By the way, disregard the credit for a new piano score. It's there - but it is particularly inept and actually works against the picture - so Stuart Oderman will play for it live.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.10., followed by discussion period.