A Program of Silent Melodrama

Piano Accompaniment arranged and played by STUART ODERMAN

THE LITTLE CHURCH AROUND THE CORNER (Warner Brothers, 1923) Directed by William Seiter; Scenario by Olga Printzlau from the (1902) play by Marion Russell; Camera, Homer Scott, Edwin DuPar; Art Director, Lewis Geib; 70 mins. approx.

In his autobiography, Jack Warner singles this film out as being a particularly satisfying film, and one that helped to really establish its co-directors, William Seiter and Lewis Milestone. Actually none of the accredited sources associate Milestone with the film, but he had teamed with Seiter on earlier - and later - films in this period, often as assistant director and/or scripter, so Warner's memory is probably correct. A good reason to remember his two new directors since they replaced, overnight, an unreliable prestige director borrowed from Metro. He proved inept and a drunk, and to add insult to injury, Louis B. Mayer still insisted that Metro be paid, as per contract, for his "services": "The Little Church Around The Corner" is frankly sentimental, melodramatic hokum - done however, with flair and style, the sort of picture that was always a reliable attraction in the 20's, especially in the small towns. Well mounted, neatly directed and with an especially strong cast, it was extremely well received and "Photoplay" even considered it the best thing of its kind since Chaplin's "The Miracle Man" of a year or two earlier.

For director Seiter (many of whose films we have shown here in the past) it immediately preceded his jazz-age "The Mad Whirl", and it wasn't wholly his forte. He was at his best with comedy and light drama in a contemporary setting; in fact, he had a positive genius for reflecting realistically the milieu of current stories, and this film is a little anachronistic, its roots too much in its original 1902 play and operetta in the 20's. For all that, it's not a shallow depth, and this film ideally called for a Borzage or a Brenon. It doesn't always grip the way it should, and the climax is in any event contrived, bringing in a "miracle" from left field. However, it's always unfair to judge a programmer by the more ambitious standards of a much bigger film. Within its own limits, "The Little Church Around The Corner" is technically proficient and dramatically satisfying. Photographically it is both imaginative and sumptuous, this being the work of two top-grade cameramen, (Homer Scott and Edwin DuPar) for the former's expertise with small town and rural stories). The mine disaster scenes are particularly well directed and shot, and remind one not a little of the earlier strike scenes in "Intolerance", and the much later mine scenes in "How Green Was My Valley". Kenneth Harlan (like Harry Carey, he never seemed to change) makes a likeable hero, Hobart Bosworth is likewise a tower of strength as always, and it's good to see the too-infrequently seen Claire Windsor. The only disappointing aspect of the cast is the limited use of Walter Long who is thoroughly underused as the mine disaster hero. The film's major virtues were the whole film, the entire cast, the memorable score, and the whole film becomes the background for a piece of virid melodrama.

THE PENALTY (Metro-Goldwyn, 1920) Directed by Wallace Worsley; produced by Sam Goldwyn; Scenario by Charles Kenyon from the novel by Gouverneur Morris; Camera, Donovan D. Short; 80 mins. approx.
With James Cruze, Ethel Grey, Terry, Claire Adams, Kenneth Harlan, Charles Clary, Doris Bow, James Mason, Milton Ross, Cesare Gravina.

We last showed "The Penalty" in 1971, excelling in its re-availability, and emphasizing how disappointing all or most of the later Chaney-Browning-MGM films were. Since then we have shown several of the latter, confirming their lack-lustre quality, but this earlier Goldwyn film, a piece of really rich melodrama, now seems even more enjoyable when juxtaposed with "The Blackbird", "Mockery" and other of his MGM films that we've shown in the succeeding years. It not only sustains the Chaney reputation for bizarre melodrama and grotesque makeup, but it also makes one wonder why audiences (and the critics) stood still for the formula laden films that followed. In so many of the Chaney films the班主任 were the whole films, with the Chaney behind the background for a piece of virid melodrama.

Directed by Wallace Worsley (who also did "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", but was better suited to non-spectacle vehicles like this one) "The Penalty" is fine, full-blooded stuff. Its almost deliberate lack of subtlety is underlined by the gloriously simple yet overblown title dialogue, while its plot, unlike those of the Browning films, begins on a note of stark tension, and builds upwards from that. It's unreal and illogical, and even the excellent San Francisco locations can't alter this. It's a film of a mixture of macabre physical contortion and frequently underplayed pantomime, while the nimble way he gets around in his constraining and painful harness is still nothing short of amazing.

--- WILLIAM K. SVERSEN
Program Ends approx. 10.20, followed by discussion period.