AN EVENING OF GENTLE SILENT CINEMA

PIANO SCORES ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART OSERMAN

BAD BOY (Pathé, 1925) Directed by Leo McCarey; Produced by Hal Roach; supervising director, P. Richard Jones; Camera, Len Powers; 20 mins.

With: Charley Chase, Martha Sleeper, Evelyn Burr, Hardee Kirkland, Noah Young, Edie Borden.

Since there is a fair amount of physical mayhem in "Bad Boy" its place on a program of "gentle" cinema is perhaps arguable, but the Chase personality is such a civilized and charming one that he more than justifies its inclusion. If not up with the very top silent Chases like "Mighty Like a Moose" and "Luminause Love", it's not far behind, and is the expected Chase/McCarey blend of sight gags, sophisticated and a really solid little plot, virtually feature-length plot material told in a tight two reels.

THE PRIMITIVE LOVER (Constance Talmadge Film Co.-Associated First National Pictures, 1922)

Directed by Sidney Franklin; presented by Joseph M. Schenck; Scenario by Frances Marion from a play by Edgar Selwyn, "The Divorcées"; Camera, David Abel; Art Director, Stephen Goosson; 70 mins approx.

With: Constance Talmadge (Phyllis Tomley); Harrison Ford (Hector Tomley); Kenneth Harlan (Donald Wales); Joe Roberts ("Roaring" Bill Rivers); Charlie Stevens (Indian herder); Chief Big Tree (Indian husband); Mathilda Brundage (Mrs Graham); George Pierce (Judge); Clyde Benson (attorney); Snitz Edwards (Witness); and Frederick Vroom.

Constance Talmadge was such a delightful and animated performer, almost a female Fairbanks at times (a trait evident ever since her Mountain Girl role in Griffith's "Intolerance" in 1916) that her personality alone was often all that was needed to hold together so-so material. In a way it's a pity that she was at her peak in terms of youth and popularity before the era of sophisticated comedy really arrived. Lubitsch, St. Clair, Monta Bell, William Seiter and other directorial comedy stylists could really have joined forces with her and made even more of her unique charm and sense of timing. But we need hardly apologise for this film, minor though it is, directed with pace and taste by Sidney Franklin. (Although the Museum of Modern Art, under an earlier regime, once refused the film as a donation on the grounds that it was too poor to warrant showing!) Its plot is fairly obvious and trivial, and indeed was remade as a dull talkie quickie in the early 30's. (Note: although based on a play titled "The Divorcées", the Norma Shearer film of that title is not a remake. But it is so full of likeable players, good titles, comic moments that are surprising if not overwhelming, and solid production values, that one hardly cares what it's all about. Not that the plot - "The Taming of the Shrew" mixed with "My Favorite Wife" - is dull, but it is familiar, its constant repetition and embellishment through the years robbing it of some of its originality and sophistication it must have had in 1922, when stories about divorce were both new, novel and fashionable. Since Constance Talmadge vehicles are so hard to come by these days, it's good to have such a typical reminder of what an academic footnote: students of film history may like to be alerted to the fact that this is probably the earliest extant illustration of the art direction of Stephen Goosson, who later worked on such elaborately designed films as "American Madness", "Lost Horizon" (the original!), "The Black Room" (to be shown here next week), "The Little Foxes" and "The Lady From Shanghai". Admittedly, the demands made on him here are hardly spectacular - but, for example, the cabin interiors are both realistic and pictorially quite pleasing. Since Constance Talmadge is known to be one of a team of artists working on Mary Pickford's "Little Lord Fauntleroy", this was very probably his first solo art director credit, to be followed later in the year by "Oliver Twist".

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

DOOMSDAY (Paramount 1927; rcl. 1928) Directed by Rowland V. Lee; scenario by Donald W. Lee, with titles by Julian Johnson, from the novel by Warwick Deeping, and an adaptation by Doris Anderson; Camera, Henry Gerrard; edited by Robert Bassler; 62 mins approx.

With Florence Vidor (Mary Viner); Gary Cooper (Arnold Purse); Lawrence Grant (Perival Fream); Charles Stevenson (Capt. Viner); Tom Ricketts (Fream's butler).

For a company that had deMille, Valentino, Swanson and Clara Bow under contract at various times in the 20's, Paramount also offered a curious undertow of extremely quiet, gentle little films, many of them simple romances that derived from plays or books (they had a virtual monopoly on James Barrie's work for example) and that in many cases must have been more satisfying in their original literary form. In transferring them to the screen, they were sometimes so faithful that they became almost uncinematic, and thus somewhat pointless. Nevertheless, if nothing else, this substantial if forgotten group of films offers an interesting reflection of literary and theatrical taste of the day - a day, one might add, before television (and even before radio in the early 20's) and when reading was a real pleasure and a major entertainment in itself, with a host of popular novelists catering to that need. Many of the films, seemingly at odds with the commercial requirements of the time, have a great deal of taste and integrity. "Conrad In Quest of His Youth", which we ran some seasons back, certainly did, and so does "Doomsday". The film however, does seem to be a kind of commercial come-on to draw attention to a book (and film) in which virtually nothing happens:

Warwick Deeping (along with Gene Stratton Porter, Jean Webster, Mand Diver, Ethel M. Dill and Horace A. Vachel) who have no common denominator other than their popularity and the period in which they wrote) was an enormously popular if rather heavy novelist, comparable perhaps to A.J. Cronin (without medical subplots) or later on, Lloyd Douglas. Not too many of his novels
were adapted to the screen, and "Sorrel and Son" - directed by Herbert Brenon - was by far the most successful of those that were. (It was remade as a talkie in Britain some years after the silent original). Deeping's prestige seemed to falter in the 30's, and the last of his works to reach the screen was "Two Black Sheep", as a Republic programmer (though a good one) in 1935, under the more commercial title of "Two Sinners". I haven't read the novel "Doomsday", but would suspect that the film version is somewhat simplified; if nothing else, Deeping always gave one one's money's worth in terms of plot complications! Nevertheless, the film does seem to be in keeping with the spirit of Deeping's writing.

It's a simple story, so simple in fact that stylish (if somewhat second-rate and imitative) director Rodland V. Lee seems compelled to throw in occasional trick camera effects, much mobile camerawork and a stress on closeups to keep it lively and cinematic. But the background of rural England is quite well etched, the interior sets convincing, and the lack of dialogue adds to acceptance of Gary Cooper as an English gentleman. So strong did his screen image become however, that one can virtually hear his delivery of certain subtitled lines of dialogue! Don't expect an overwhelming dramatic experience; its climax is particularly soft-pedalled, and having reached its logical conclusion, the film very sensibly just stops, without trying to pad out a big denouement. But if the film doesn't rivet one, or shatter one's emotions, it does satisfy -- much as the solid novels of the period satisfied.

William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10.20., followed by discussion session.

Sack-cloth and Ashes Dept.

First an apology for the projection problems last week. One projector was totally inoperative, and so each feature was spliced together on to a large reel to avoid breaks for re-threading. It's something we rarely do, but something that the projectors are capable of. However, when they do it so rarely, problems occasionally arise, and the unfamiliar tensions from the ultra-large reel caused those brief interruptions last week -- although there would have been more of them and with longer breaks had we not mounted the prints that way. However, we do apologize for thus breaking into the suspense values of the latter sections of "Les Disparus of St. Agil".

A more serious -- and more easily remedied -- complaint was voiced by a lady during the discussion session afterwards, when she raised the question of chatter coming down into the audience from the projection booth area. This is a constant form of annoyance in commercial theatres and something we like to avoid at all costs at the New School. Largely to blame (quite apart from the chattering(s)) are the rather peculiar acoustics at the New School. I monitor the sound from the balcony, and sometimes there don't get noises that can be heard in the auditorium proper! When chatter is heard from the offices beyond the projection area, the culprits are always advised and usually are very cooperative in ceasing forthwith. Obviously last week there was insufficient vigilance. We'll pay closer attention to this in future, but would also suggest that -- while this isn't really the responsibility of the audience -- if it should happen again and go uncorrected, one word yelled up the stairway to the right, just outside the exit doors, should have an immediate effect. (For the record, the word should be "Quiet!" and not something a little more colorful).

Finally, to round off this collection of apologies, for those who keep program notes and refer to them, I must point to an error (and an unnecessary one) in the cast list for "Les Disparus De St. Agil". Pierre Larquey is listed, and the actor is actually Pierre Labry. I thought I remembered Larquey from my last viewing of the film, some six months ago, and thus assumed that the spelling in reference books was in error. One of the most frequent causes of error in writing about film is the smug assumption that one knows the film well enough not to need to double-check such queries.

Thus purged, let us hope that forthcoming programs will be free of error and/or cause for complaint.

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