THE NEW SCHOOL
ARCHIVE NIGHT: TWO RARE SILENTS
Plano accompaniment arranged and played by STUART ODENMAN
THE LIFE OF CHARLES PEACE (1905) and LIEUT. DARING AND THE PLANS OF THE MINEFIELD (1912)
These are the two British shorts that were delayed in transit and therefore not shown on our last Archive Night on Dec. 12th. Fairly extensive notes were issued at the screening, but I will give them, we are displaying copies at the rear of the hall. If anyone would like a copy for the record, just drop me a line at the New School and I'll be glad to mail one.

THE MILKY WAY (Western Pictures Exploitation Co., 1921) Directed by W.S. Van Dyke; Supervised and presented by Louis Burston; Story by Olyda C. Westover and Lottie Horner; Titles by John Clymer, Art Titles by Jacobsmeyer; Camera, Arthur Tedd; a David Butler production; 56 mins.
With: David Butler (David Bartlett); Phil Ford (his brother); Laura Winston (his mother); and Margaret Loomis, Fred Kohler, Fred Butler, R. Henry Grey, Bert Hadley, Irene Hunt.

For film students, this film is almost as valuable a find as John Ford's first feature, the 1917 Straight Shooting which was rediscovered some 15 years ago. But whereas the Ford film was at least well documented, nothing was known about "The Milky Way". Although it carries a copyright notice, it was not copyrighted. It was never reviewed by the NY Times or the leading trade papers. The American Film Institute catalogue does list it, but gives no credits, states "No information available", and suggests that it is a western. Adding to the frustration is the fact that the excellent biography of Van Dyke ("Van Dyke and the Mythical City of Hollywood"), published after Van Dyke's death, refers to it with great affection, obviously making material from Van Dyke's own notes, but again gives no credits or details. In a chronological index to his films, only his MGM films from 1926 are cited. Van Dyke was a major director, both commercially and artistically, though the latter is often downplayed because of the former; his films include White Shadows in the South Seas", "Trader Horn", "The Thin Man", "Rose Marie", "San Francisco" and (his last) "Journey for Margaret". "The Milky Way" and the subsequent "Forget Me Not" were two slick little independents that Van Dyke made for Louis Burston; both so impressed Louis B. Mayer (then a leading independent distributor, pre-MGM) that he signed a contract with Burston for eight pictures, with Van Dyke's services included. Tragically, Burston was killed in an automobile accident almost immediately. The deal was off. But Mayer remembered the pictures, and Van Dyke, and when he was enounced as head of MGM, brought Van Dyke into the company where he directed 50 films between 1926 and 1942. Prior to the Burston films, Van Dyke had been unable to get out of the rut of the westerns and serials that he did so well and so quickly, so "The Milky Way" is a major find as the first extant example of his purely dramatic work. Silent independent films are often unpretentious in the extreme; they were often also very dull and padded with titles, which told things that would have been expensive to shoot. Only those of you who know the grimness of the really cheap silent independent films will realize what a really good film like this brings, given its budget and economies; but it needs no apology and stands on its own verily well. It moves briskly, all action, all dialogue, and it is made with care. The subjective shot of the mother's farewell to her son, softening into a tear-stained fadeout, is the kind of extra-effort shot one rarely found in these independents. The plot is slight but entirely serviceable, and excellent use is made of outdoor locations - both rural, and in Los Angeles streets - to keep studio work to a minimum. All told, it's a pleasant, serviceable film on its own merits, and a most rewarding one archivally, especially since the print is such an excellent one.

The only thing that might raise an eyebrow today is a blatant racial slur in the titles, but even this is valuable in indicating how casually such slurs were taken then. Star David Butler remained an actor (and often a very athletic one in action films) until 1927, when he switched to directing. His main forte was musical comedy, and his films until 1967 included "Sunny Side Up", "Captain January", and "The Road to Morocco". He died quite recently. Philip Ford, Fred's son, himself became a director in time, and did many Republic westerns. Cameraman Arthur Tedd became one of the most prolific cinematographers of Bs and programmers at Warners in the thirties. Van Dyke's fidelity to the methods of his mentor, D.W. Griffith, is quite apparent throughout the film, not least in the use of the iris-in and out; and calling his hero David Bartlett (the role Richard Barthelmess played the year before in Griffith's "Way Down East") a "boastful" like one so often does to the film noir of the 40s, which took the opposite tack, the film espouses the end-of-the-rainbow theme of the trekking from the country to the big city as the only route to success. Curiously, Fred Kohler (the heavy in the dance hall) gets no billing, although he had been a well-established player for years, getting billing at least since 1914, I shouldn't oversell the merits of this film here, but it is well worth seeing, not expecting to be overwhelmed, and merely enjoy the film on its own simple but very efficient level.

Ten Minute Intermission
Kismet (Robertson-Cole Productions, 1920) Directed by Louis Gassner, from the story and play by Edward Knoblock. 70 mins approx.

With Otis Skinner (Haji); Elmo Fair (Marsinal); Herschell Mayall (Jawan); Leon Bary (Caliph); Emmett C. King (Abu Bakir); Hamilton Revelle (Wasir Mansur); Paul Weigel (Alife); Rosemary Theby (Kut-Ul-Kulub); and as extras, Tom Kennedy (guard).

Corinna Otis Skinner (slave girl).

Like its co-feature, "Kismet" is an independent film, though a much more elaborate one. Robertson-Cole made some quite classy little films, and eventually evolved into F.B.O., the Joseph Kennedy company, which itself was the ancestor of Rko. For an independent film, "Kismet" is very commendably done, though alas most of the money probably went on securing the rights to the play, paying Otis Skinner what must have been a very handsome salary, and in creating some very impressive and large-scale sets. Not too much is done with them to conceal the theatrical origin, but they do have space, depth, and grandeur. But, once all of that money was disposed of, little was left to pay for a good director or a major supporting cast. The latter isn't a major drawback, since the whole show really rests on the persona of the star, but they could hardly have chosen a worse or less suited director than Louis Gassner - who was a hack when he began with the "Perils of Pauline" serial episodes, and was still a hack in the '30's, when he made really cheap films at Paramount, often using much stock footage, and wound up doing Poverty Row quickies. Maybe the rationale was that a creative director wasn't really needed for a film like this, and certainly it's a far more impressive film than MOST Gassner credits, but the material is basically so good that a first-rate director could really have given it a sense of rhythm and panache.

Even so, the critics' restrained endorsements at the time are a little surprising. Skinner's stage performances were of course fresh in their minds, so the lack of his voice may have seemed more serious than now. And the NY Times decried the lack of color, saying that the film was a perfect vehicle for it, but given the technical limitations on color as early as 1920, it seems an unfair complaint.

Anyway, Skinner - like Barrymore - has such style that while his voice is missed, the performance still captures his style and persona. It's a fine visual record of a major actor in his prime, and luckily he did remake it as a talkie for Warners in 1930. (There were of course two later versions, one at MGM in the 40's with Colman and Dietrich, and a much later musical version, based more on the stage musical).

Curiously, the film was copyrighted and released in both 5 reel and 9 reel versions. Our print comes somewhere in between, at seven reels. It is a little choppy and physically far more ragged a print than we would like to run, but it is all that is currently available. (The last time the film showed in New York was at a private screening at the now defunct Ziegfeld Theatre for the cast of the musical stage version, and the time before that was a small film society showing in 1952). So please bear with us if the print seems sub-standard in terms of physical condition, though otherwise it's a good, original print. But of course it is precisely for these oddities - and the occasional prints that show the infirmities of age - that these Archive Nights exist.

In any case, with Skinner's performance, and with the rich, flavorsome subtitles taken directly from the play, it's a most enjoyable example of filmed theatre, notable perhaps more as a record of theatre than as a film itself.

William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10.25., followed by discussion session.