Two rare silents

December 17, 1922

THE MAD WHIRL (Universal; 1924; rel: 1925) Directed by William A. Seiter;
Scenario by Edward T. Lowe jr. and Frederic and Fanny Hatton from the short
story "Here's How" by Richard Washburn Child; Screen Treatment, Lewis Milestone
Camera: Merritt B. Gerstad; Titles, Harvey Thew; Asst. Director, Nate Watt;
With: May McAvoy (Cathleen Gillie); Jack Mulhall (Jack Herrington); Myrtle
Stedman (Gladys Herrington); Barbara Bedford (Margie Taylor); Alex E. Francis
(Jack Herrington); Ward Crane (Benny Kingsley); George Fawcett (Martin Gillie);
Marie Astaire (Julia Caring); Joe Singleton (Spivens).

As we've noted before, William Seiter was not a director of particular daring or
originality, but he had taste, charm and a quite unique ability to mirror, in his
films, the contemporary scene, as witness "Skinner's Dress Suit" and "Hot Saturday"
among many others. Many of his films were made for Universal, who owned no
theatres, and thus aimed much of their product at the small town and rural areas,
where independent theatres would accept their films on their own considerable
merit. Thus many of the titles did not only reflected the contemporary scene,
but that scene as it applied to the rural communities. MGM's "definitive" jazz age
film "Our Dancing Daughters" was the jazz age as seen by MGM producers, taking
place against a background of art-deco mansions and yachts ... great fun visually
not much related to reality. Seiter's rural jazz-age, recognizing that
alcoholism is a perennial problem, not one just created by the permissiveness and
rebellion of that period, is much more restrained and probably a much more honest
or realistic portrayal of the period's more time affectionsately setting up the
pleasures of an ice-cream parlour than he does in the jazzy excitements of wild
parties. (Although "The Mad Whirl" is represented in Richard Griffith's "The
Movies" by a typical wild-party still, that scene as it appears in the movie is
almost a throwaway). While it probably wasn't setting out to be an honest
reflection of the times, its very lack of pretension creates that honesty, or at
least a semblance of it, almost sublimely. Even the climax of the film, a bit
unpredictable in real dramatic punch, seems to sustain that quality. For the rest,
while the print is physically a bit ragged, it is an original print, not a
dupe, in several tones, and offers a pleasant opportunity to enjoy the work of
May McAvoy and Jack Mulhall, two extremely popular players of the twenties who are
represented today only by a scant handful of films from their peak period.

-- 10 Minute Interval --

TWINKLETOES (First National, 1926) Directed by Charles Brabin; a John McCormick
Production; Scenario by Winifred Dunn from an original story by Thomas G. Smith;
Camera: James Van Trees; Comedy Monologue, Sam Wood; Approx. 85 minutes.
With: Colleen Moore (Twinkletoes); Kenneth Harlan (Chuck Lightfoot); Tully
Marshall (Bad Minnati); Gladys Brockwell (Classie); Lucien Littlefield (Hank); Warner Cland
(Roseleaf); John Phillip Kolb (Bill Carrides); Julianne Johnston (Lillie);
William McDonald (Inspector Territon).

For such a major star, surprisingly few of Colleen Moore's silent films are
available, and most of those that are tend to confirm her reputation as a skightly
comediane. Not that there's anything wrong with that, since comedy was indeed her
major forte, not like Mary Pickford and other major stars who had sufficient clout
and control of their own films to take the risk of taking off-beat once in a while. Colleen Moore
was willing to experiment. This is her foray into Giligan's "Broken Blossoms" territory with another Limehouse story by Thomas Burke.

That it doesn't altogether succeed doesn't lessen either its interest or its
fascation. One problem is that with "Broken Blossoms" as a model, it is almost
aggressive in its determination to be poetic; but whereas in the film by Griffith
the poetry sprang automatically and almost unbidden from the plot and the key
performances, here the plot is basically trivial and melodramatic, and the "poetry"
has to be manufactured via the impressive photography and sets. Given that the
values and appeal of the film are thus vested in essentially visual properties, it
is essential to have a really good print. Possibly originally, in rich 35mm prints,
this film worked much better just because it looked so stunning. In this merely
adequate copy, plot and melodrama take over too much, and the rich visuals are
lost. Finally, the film never really had the courage to take the original novel's ending, in which Moore winds
up a suicide, drowning herself in the river, was changed to a traditional happy
ending. A misfire, but a courageous one, and certainly one that it is good to
have back in circulation to testify to the variety of this unique star. Quite
incidentally, Miss Moore still regards Charles Brabin as one of the best and most
interesting directors for whom she worked. To make things even better, however, Brabin remains
something of an unknown, and not only because of his silents are known to
exist, but are not easily accessible, while from his (reportedly lesser)
sound career up to 1935, we know him mainly for "The Mask of Fu Manchu" and
"Sporting Blood." The film that is probably his best talkies, "The Great Meadow",
exists, but is not readily available to book or study. So "Twinkletoes" becomes a
frustrating experience because it doesn't really tell us whether he was a
genuine artist or merely a pretentious one. But at least it gives us a little
additional evidence to ponder the question.

-- Wm. E. Everson Program ends approx. 10:20 followed by discussion session.