An evening of Silent Melodrama: Piano Accompaniment arranged and played by STUART ODERMAN

The interpretation of the word "melodrama" has shifted and become more sophisticated in recent years, and one hears it applied, casually, for example to most of the high-style slapstick operas directed by Douglas Sirk. In earlier years, melodrama was usually associated with crime - if only a moral one. In any event, both of tonight's films, with themes of revenge, lust, mother-love and regeneration, run the gamut of what the simpler type of silent film melodrama was often all about. These are the kinds of films that the unknowing often regard as "typical" silents. Obviously they are not; from each of the years that produced them, one can point to far more sophisticated works. But their simple energy does make them enjoyable representatives of a long-vanished style of story-telling.

A MORMON MAID ( Jesse Lasky-DeMille Productions) Directed by Robert Z. Leonard; 1916, rel. 1917; Scenario by Charles Sarver from a story by Wilfred Rosher; Ast Director, Wilfred Buckingham; 60 min. With Mae Murray (Dora); Frank Borzage (Tom Higgins); Robert Dewhurst (John Hogue); Noah Beery ( Apostlearius Burr); Edythe Chapman (Nancy Hogue).

From the very beginning, Paramount (or its Lasky predecessor) seemed a little afraid of this one. Although produced with Lasky-DeMille technicians and cast, it was actually made and copyrighted independently. It saw no New York first-run, though that may not be significant since very few of the many Mae Murray vehicles of 1917-20 got New York openings. "Variety" took it somewhat to task, saying that it would do for mormonism what "The Birth of a Nation" did for racism. Actually it is merely one of the first in a long line of American (and especially British) silent melodramas that equate Mormonism with White Slavery, and it was only via such considerably later films as "High Noon" that the legend of Brigham Young's having like a fair shake on the screen. The influence of "The Birth of a Nation" is evident throughout both in structure and in the composition of individual scenes and quite obviously it was made to cash in on that film rather than out of any real zeal to attack the Mormons. One wishes that it had gone the whole hog and come up with an equally spectacular climax. As it is, it winds up without a great deal of excitement for the finish - although enough certainly for the routine, program-level offering it was intended to be. The "Klan" menace is slightly dispelled by the fact that the giant Seeing-Eye designs they wear make them look like walking commercials for Camel cigarettes. Considering current screen morality and explicitness, one of the more amusing sequences deals with the heroine's use of the Mormon bible to prove her "unfitness" to become a bride. Although the screen had no hesitancy in using the word "virgin" as a Biblical quote in a full-screen closeup, it would still not use it as part of a dialogue title. The heroine's hesitancy, and the dawning emotions of surprise, disbelief, puzzlement and finally shock on the hero's face (almost like a piece of lightning Keaton pantomime) are wonderful examples of the silent screen's ability to convey quite complex thoughts purely visually. The Frank Borzage who plays the dismayed hero is of course the same Borzage who went on to direct "Seventh Heaven", "A Farewell to Arms" and so many other great emotional films. Print quality is on the dark side, though as with last week, we can probably compensate with extra light. However, some titles will be difficult to read, and the further back you sit, the more legible they will seem.

- Ten Minute Intermission --

MY OLD DUTCH (Universal, 1926) Directed and adapted by Lawrence Trimble, based on the play of the same title by Arthur Shirley and Albert Chevalier; Camera: Ed Sherrill; Actors: Sam Trench; With My Ma'Avoy (Sal Graton); Pat O'Malley (Joe Brown); Cullen Landis (Herbert Brown); Jean Hersholt ('Erb 'Uiggins); Agnes Steele (Mrs Shudd); Jane Winton (Lady Diana); Fatsy O'Byrne (Mrs Smiff); Edgar Kennedy (Bill Sproatt); Frank Crane (James Vrayford); Rolfe Sedan (Al); Violet Kane (Mary Avenall at 3); Kathleen O'Malley (Herbert Brown, infant); Sheila O'Malley (Herbert Brown at 3); Newton Hall (Herbert Brown at 12); Zama Zameria (Mrs Avenall); George Slagmann (Workhouse superintendent).

Lawrence Trimble clearly had a great affection for this subject. He'd filmed it once before for Universal - in 1915 - on location in England, with author Albert Chevalier playing the lead, and with Florence Turner as the mother, and之类的。His work on the film was to serve as inspiration for the Vitaphone pioneer, Trimble did his best and most prolific work in England, and never quite got back on his feet again as a major American director when returning to Hollywood in the 20's. His remake of "My Old Dutch" turned out
to be his last film. Clearly it was made not because the subject itself had any great appeal to the American market -- it is very British in a theatrical manner quite outdated by 1926 -- but because Universal did own the property, and it probably seemed at the time that it could cash in very nicely on the then-booming "mother love" cycle started off by Fox's "Over the Hill to the Poorhouse" a few years earlier and climax ed by John Ford's "Four Sons" in 1928. Unfortunately, though a handsome and ambitious production for Universal, "My Old Dutch" lacks subtlety both in writing and direction, and especially in acting. May McAvoy was a lovely lady and a good actress, but hardly a great one, and fans must have been quite disappointed to see her features hidden behind so much theatrical makeup. Pat O'Malley was never a very exciting hero, Edgar Kennedy and Jean Hersholt were badly miscast, and Cullen Landis was perhaps too perfectly type-cast to be really convincing. (His role is in some ways a repeat of his role in "Pampered Youth", the silent version of "The Magnificent Ambersons"). Admittedly, no complete prints of the film seem to survive: although this version covers all of the basic elements and has a proper beginning and end, clearly footage is missing here and there. It might well seem a better film at a slower, better ordered pace. On the other hand, its melodrama gets so out of hand at times -- George Siegmann as the overseer of the workhouse seems right out of "Oliver Twist"! -- that its speeded-up pacing may well help in some respects. In the ground it covers it seems almost like Edna Ferber territory -- and British audiences today would surely love the title referring to the humanisation of Lady Diana, who in wartime becomes a charwoman! (Driving an ambulance perhaps -- but "charring" was something no English Lady ever did!) Universal destroyed most of its silents when the coming of sound seemed to make them valueless. Lots of interesting little films like "My Old Dutch" were among the casualties, and if it weren't for the survival of the old, odd 16mm print leased to non-theatrical libraries, we'd have no record of these films. "My Old Dutch" is such a print.

William K. Everson

Program should end at approx. 9.55, depending on clearance of the preceding jazz concert. Even if delayed however, there will still be time for a discussion session this evening.

A reminder: all of the MGM's have been confirmed with the exception of THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN, booked for next week. The substitute will be NIGHT COURT (1932, dir. W.S. Van Dyke) with Walter Huston, Lewis Stone, Anita Page, giving us both a pre-Code and a post-Code crime program, and a mini-Lewis Stone festival at one and the same time. (The other film: PUBLIC HERO #1 (1935) with Chester Morris, Jean Arthur, Lionel Barrymore.)