GILBERT: CRAWFORD: NEGRi IN TWO RARE 1927 SILENTS

Film Series 50: Program #7

March 22, 1985

PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT ARRANGED & PLAYED BY STUART ODERMAN

TWO HEL MILES OUT (MGM, 1927) Directed by Jack Conway; Screenplay by A.P. Younger from the (1925) play of the same title by William Anthony McGuire; Camera, Ira Morgan; Sets, Cedric Gibbons & Eugene Hornebstel; editor, Basil Wrangell; Costumes, René Hubert; 86 mins.

With: John Gilbert (Jerry Pay); Ernest Torrence (Red); Joan Crawford (Jane); Eileen Percy (Maizie); Paulette Duval (Trini); Dorothy Sebastien (Chiquita); Gwen Lee (Hulda); Edward Earle (John Burton); Bert Roach (Luke); Tom O'Brien (Tom)

It was in the War years that the Omen and "Dark Star" were introduced by Leatrice Gilbert Fountain, John Gilbert's daughter and author of the biographical study "Dark Star".

The more one sees of the lost (and happily rediscovered) MGMs, the more one tends to become disenchanted. They were of course a star-oriented studio, and many of their star vehicles were indeed excellent as just that. But their ratio of really good films was much lower than at Paramount or Fox, and it seems safe to say that their few outstanding films were invariably the work of those directors (especially Brown and Vidor) who had the clout to make their films their way, or at least to trade off a personal choice against a purely commercial one. Of course, W.S. Van Dyke often managed to be good and commercial and star-oriented all at the same time. But "Twelve Miles Out" is a perfect example of a star vehicle that is just that and no more. Having just put Gilbert through six big hits in a row - four by Vidor, and one spiced by Von Stroheim and Brown - MGM decided apparently to coast on his reputation for a while, and shunted him into two programmers (by their standards) which offered little more than his name. In "Dark Star" (although its author feels that the film is much better than her father claimed it to be), Gilbert is quoted as having been extremely disappointed in the film, partly because it failed to do justice to an exciting theme, partly because MGM hedged on spending real money on it, and also because they deleted specific scenes which he felt should have given the film the opportunity to get the characteristic reformatory look of the William S. Hart films.

Finally, Gilbert is allowed to laugh and smile far too much -- except that it may be necessary. He keeps the film going by sheer force of personality, and his smile is very much a part of that. The happy ending of the play is changed substantially here, but to no particular end. It shows its talkie theatre origins far too much, and altogether lacks the drive and guts of Roland West's quite similar "Corsair". However, we complain and gripe when we can't see these unavailable silents, so perhaps it is unfair to be overly critical when one simply has the opportunity to get the opportunity to see it. Certainly it's an enjoyable film in its own way (though the theatre marquee advertising "The Big Parade" is an annoying touch!) and Leatrice Fountain feels it is much better than I have here suggested, so her introduction may well help to balance the scales.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

BARRED WIRE (Paramount, 1927) Directed by Rowland V. Lee; Produced by Erich Pommer; Assoc. Producer, B.P. Schulberg; Camera, Bert Glennon; Scenario by Jules Furthman and Rowland V. Lee from "The Woman of Knockaloa" by Hall Caine; 77 mins.

With Pola Negri (Mona); Clive Brook (Oskar); Einar Hansen (The Brother); Claude Gillingwater (The Father); Gustav von Seyffertitz (Pierre); Charles Lane (The Commandant); Clyde Cook (Hans); Ben Hendricks Jr. (The Sergeant) and Stuart Holmes.

Far too few of Pola Negri's prolific 20's Hollywood output has survived, but the films that have survive are fully representative of both the variety and the top quality of her work. Although not one of her most celebrated films, "Barred Wire" probably gives us her best and most personal performance. After all, what could be more in keeping with Glennon photography, with languid and well composed closeups that capture quite surprising nuances of expression on Negri's face. The film, a rather interesting forerunner of the recent "love in Germany", is less studied and self-indulgent than "Hotel Imperial", and moves much better. For a short film, its climax is delayed a bit too long - though at that it has some surprises, and Einar Hansen doesn't come through with the come-all-revelation that one expects. Clyde Cook, Paramount's resident comic for serious works, gets in the way a little - but not too much - and the often untranslated French and German subtitles, plus the absence of sound, allow us to accept Gustav von Seyffertitz and Clive Brook as a Frenchman and a German respectively. -- W.K. Everson

Program Ends approx. 10.40.