THE NEW SCHOOL FILM SERIES 51: Program 2
October 11, 1985

Two Silents: Piano accompaniment arranged & played by STUART ODNER

THE LITTLE AMERICAN (Artcraft Pictures for Paramount release) Produced and Directed by Cecil B. de Mille; Scenario by de Mille and Jeanie Macpherson from an original story by Macpherson; Camera, Alvin Wyckoff; 70 mins. With Mary Pickford (Angela Meere); Jack Holt (Karl von Austreim); Raymond Hatton (Count Jules de Destin); Robert Bevers (German commandant); Walter Long (German Captain); Senator Meere (James Neill); Ben Alexander (Bobby Moore); Guy Oliver (Frederick von Austreim); Edythe Chapman (Mrs von Austreim); Lillian Leightson (Angela's Great Aunt); DeWitt Jennings (Barrister); extras and bits in the Rain Neveur; Sam Wood, Zasu Pitts, Gertrude Griffith, Celene Meere, Herman Korry, Doris May.

De Mille was certainly Paramount's biggest (and most prolific) director although he was slowing down his frenetic pace somewhat, and in 1917 released only three films. The LITTLE AMERICAN, which Pickford was as big as he was, Mary Pickford was even bigger. She worked with de Mille only twice, on this film and its immediate predecessor "Romeo of the Redwoods". Ironically, while the two de Millies were among her best, as were the two she made with Maurice Tourner, they were among her least favorite films personally. She preferred working with less individual directors who could take orders and turn out Pickford's vehicles rather than films that stood on their own. "The Little American" is typical of the anti-Hum propaganda movies made just prior to and during America's entry into the war. Only a handful of these have survived, and fortunately those that have ("Hearts of the World", "Hearts of Humanity", "The Unbeliever" and tonight's film among them) are some of the best and most representative. It's Unsuitable to say the least, and Mary's determined waving of the American flag to stave off impending disaster (to protest one that is a fait accompli) merely because she's an American might net have gone down too well with victimised European audiences, though the chances are that the film got but little postwar European distribution. One almost sympathises with the harried German commandant when Mary nags him to stop the wholesale raping of the local women and he replies "Madam, my men must have relaxation"!

In the original version (the one we are showing) even Mary is almost raped by Jack Holt, whose sterling if Teutonic qualities are tarnished by associating with Walter Long, and an alternate version was prepared in which Holt (after denouncing the barbarism of the Ruses) is killed, and Mary returns to America uncoiled with the secondary hero, Raymond Hatton. Hatton actually would have seemed very anti-climactic as a husband after Holt, but de Mille's stage training made him such a believer in the stock company method that he felt he could cast away all of his players in any roles and rely on them to pull it off. Actually Hatton was anything but a weak personality, was everlastingly mused in the number of ends of the film, "The Little American", being a de Mille film as well as a Pickford, gets the benefit of the size and spectacle that he was increasingly introducing into his films and moves very briskly. Among the extras, Ramen Neveur can be spotted very easily, while Doris May, Pickford's double, later became a minor leading lady in her own right. Unconfirmed but listed as extras in some sources are Lee McCarey and Wallace Beery; the latter however probably springs from the erroneous identification of Wallace Beery on stills that actually show Walter Long. Whatever the case, the film, though charming, Leive's immediate success, always seemed the prompt despising of young maidens, and his at his energetic and libidinous best in "The Little American".

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

A LADY OF CHANCE (MG M 1928, rel: 1929) Directed by Robert Z. Leonard; Scenario by A.P. Younger from the story "A Little Angel" by LeRoy Scott; Camera, Peverell Marley and William Daniels; titles by Ralph Spence; Gowans, Adrian; 77 mins. With: Norma Shearer (Dolly); John Mack Brown (Steve Cran dall); Lewel Skerman (Bradley); Gwen Lee (Gwen); Eugenie Besserer (Mrs Cran dall); Buddy Messenger (Hank); Pelly Moran (maid); Bert Beach (flirt).

If "The Little American" like most pre-1920 features showed the influence of Griffith in its editing and pacing, then "A Lady of Chances" is equally typical of the film at the dawn of sound, equal parts silent without a word of dialogue. Ruritale, slower pacing, and greater stress on decor and leavily photographed closeup of the stars. Actually (though surprisingly the NY Times taking sequences, and who they don't interrupt the rhythm of the film, it's not difficult to see where they are. "A Lady of Chance" is a star vehicle, first and foremost, and it must be said that while Shearer looks stunning (and we wonder, with these two cameramen) she overdoes the mugging and pantomimed bits of business to a degree that becomes a little tiresome. Fortunately, however, she is still a "bad" girl; once referred, she calms down a little. Either that, or she realised the utter hopelessness of trying to upstage Lewel Skerman with more energy. Anyway, it's a beautiful print and a real rarity; we don't have to have a classic every time out!....William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10:20; discussion follows.

A reminder. Next week's screening is preceded by a jazz concert, which may delay the start a little. Since it is a long program, we will dispense with an inter, and start as soon as everyone is seated.