EAST COAST (NEW YORK, NEW JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA, MAINE) SILENTS

Plane Scene arranged and played by STUART ODEMAN

SOMETHING IN HER EYE (Lubin, 1914) and HIS LUCKY STRIKE (Lubin, 1915)

Both starring Oliver Hardy

While I have considerable (and lengthy) documentation on these two rare shorts, space precludes reproduction here, but I will try to issue additional separate notes for these interested later in the season. In the meantime, apart from being the earliest Oliver Hardys we've ever seen, they're surprisingly good. (There is a third one available too, of lesser quality but still of some interest, that we'll probably get to later). Clearly Hardy was being offered as an imitation Fatty Arbuckle (just as later there'd be imitation Oliver Hardys) yet there's a pleasing lack of standardisation -- the Hardy character is different every time -- and also Hardy is a far less versatile actor than Arbuckle was at that time. Arbuckle was not yet being allowed to be himself, and was being wasted in crude if fast slapstick. The first of the two is fairly traditional in form, but the second has a far subtler plot than one tended to find outside of the John Bunny films. Print quality, from aged but remarkably preserved nitrate, is variable, but we're lucky to have them at all. Although many of the Lubins were shot in Florida, Philadelphians have seen these two shorts and identified some of the locations as being in or around that city.

CHILDREN OF EVE (Edison, 1915) Written and Directed by John H. Collins 70 mins

With Viola Dana (Fifty/Fifty Manie); Robert Walker (Bert Madison); Robert Connors (Henry Clay Madison); Nellie Grant (Flossie Wilson); Thomas Blake (Bernie the Gyp); Brad Sutton (The Bouncer); William Waadsworth (The Peddler)

To James Carea, long-time curator of George Eastman House in Rochester, goes the credit for rediscovering one of the major and totally forgotten talents of the early silent period, John H. Collins, and for resurrecting four of his early features for Edison and Metro, all of them starring his wife Viola Dana. (There is insufficient space here for a full appraisal and history of Collins' work and importance, but these interested are referred to my book "American Silent Film" where several pages are devoted to him). Collins, Dana, Walker and cameraman John Arnold all made the trek from Edison to Metro in 1916; Arnold whose expert camerawork is evidenced by tonight's film) was taken on reluctantly at first only at Collins' insistence, yet went on to become the head of Metro's camera department. While certain of Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" towers above all else as the most dynamic and inventive live film of 1915, we have become increasingly aware over the past few years that other directors were making major contributions in that year too: deMille, Tourneur, Walsh, Raymond West, and quite certainly John Collins. Although Collins' films did receive excellent reviews from perceptive critics of the time, he died tragically in the influenza epidemic of 1919; had he lived to make a few more in the 20s, his reputation would have been secure, and his earlier films remembered. One wonders just how many of Collins' calibre may likewise be unknown by ill-fate or the vagaries of preservation? Certainly "Children of Eve" is a solid lesson that nobody can afford to generalise, as we always have about the Edison company, insisting that their films, ground out like so many sausages, had no importance, and that their methods discouraged the development of serious directors. As a generalisation, it's true -- any average Edison one-reeler of 1915 has the overall stature and lack of a 1910 film and is incredibly primitive alongside "Children of Eve". But no company that produced a film like "Children of Eve" (and others by Collins) should be dismissed so casually.

"Children of Eve" is one of the first feature-length social protest films, although such themes were not new and had formed the basis of many shorter shorts. Basically a anti-child labor film, it is largely inspired by the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist fire in Washington Square in March 1911 although in actual specific detail, it more resembles a later and somewhat less serious fire in New Jersey. Although we have run a few 1915 and earlier features, most of our silents come from a later period, and those not familiar with the early features may find the reliance on Dickensian plot coincidence lacking in sophistication. But it should be remembered that the early cinema was rooted in both Victorian and American literary traditions; indeed, one of its greatest historical values is in those those links. In 1925 after all, we were much closer in time to Dickens' writing than we are today to Scott Fitzgerald's. Had the cinema arrived a few years earlier, or had Dickens been a few years younger, this is precisely the kind of story that he would have written specifically for the screen.

Viola Dana's lively and subtle performance predate in many ways Mae Marsh's in "Intolerance", and the film can also be seen as a forerunner to Walsh's "Regeneration". (Miss Dana is still alive and feisty in her mid 80's). One of
the basic flaws of the Edison films was the way their directors merely illustrated the "scripts" (usually just two or three pages listing the shots) but didn't flesh them out. Here Collins and Dana flesh them out with a vengeance; after Dana walks off jauntily with a boy friend, the camera lingers long enough to show a child imitating her walk. Later, when a terse title doesn't have the wordage necessary to do more than say that a woman of Dana's type is needed to infiltrate the factory, Dana's body language, re-arranging of her hair etc., makes it quite clear that she is to pose as a much younger persona.

Robert Walker makes a through his seedy villain roles in scores of talkie westerns and serials, reminds us here that he wasn't too far removed from Griffith's leading man of the period, Robert Harron. The climax, surprising and unconventional, features a remarkably realistic scene. It was in fact, though deliberately staged, the real thing. An old warehouse in New Jersey was set afire - but it burned rather too well, and the cameraman, atop the building shooting down, narrowly escaped with his life and his camera was a casualty!

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

SECOND FIDDLE (Film Guild, 1922) Directed by Frank Tuttle; story by Frank Tuttle and James Ashmore Creelman; Camera, Fred Waller jr. 70 mins app.

With Glenn Hunter (Jim Bradley); Mary Astor (Polly Crawford); Townsend Martin (Herbert Bradley); William Nally (Cragg); Leslie Stewe (George Bradley); Mary Foy (Mrs Bradley); Helenka Adamska (Cragg's daughter); Otto Lang (Dr.Crawford) Osgood Perkins (Sheriff).

Release through the W.W. Hedkinson Corpns.

The Film Guild was an enterprising independent company, working out of New York and New Jersey in the early 20's, trying (successfully) to make inexpensive but unusual and intelligent pictures. "Second Fiddle" alas is apparently the only one of their four films to survive. All the others were directed by Frank Tuttle and starred Glenn Hunter. "Puritan Passions" as a matter of fact, in the manner of "The Devil and Daniel Webster" sounds the most interesting of the group, although "Grit" (with Clara Bow and Roland Young, from a Scott Fitzgerald story) sounds interesting too. "Youthful Cheaters" was the fourth item. The films served their purpose well; within a year of the last one, Tuttle was contracted to Paramount and produced ranging from 'Love 'Em and Leave 'Em' to "This Gun for Hire" while Mary Astor was appearing opposite Barrymore in "Beau Brummel". Bow, Hunter, Perkins and others in the group were also picked up by the bigger studios.

"Second Fiddle" is a charming rural romance, photographed in lovely New Jersey landscapes too much changed today to be identifiable, and with a strong plot that occasionally veers to near horror. If the brutish William Nally as the villain seems familiar, it is probably because his face was used so well as the executioner-to-be of Lillian Gish in the final reels of "Orphans of the Storm". True, the economy does show. Lightning flashes are rather crudely achieved, and a rainstorm is quite obviously achieved by water being dripped from a pipe right in front of the camera. Too, the night scenes, shot in daylight, are so often were, are not given the benefit of blue tints - though possibly they were in the 35mm release prints. But it's unfair to carp: it's an enterprising and enjoyable film; Mary Astor is exceptionally lovely and appealing, and the print is a particularly good original. (Erratum: W.Nally played the film's assistant in "Orphans of the Storm".

ALL BUT FORGOTTEN: HOLMAN F. DAY, FILM MAKER Written by James Peters; Narrated by James Card 30 mins.

Holman F. Day was a prominent author of the 20's, though possibly not quite as prominent as this fascinating documentary suggests. Like Zane Grey, Gene Stratton Porter, Harold Bell Wright and other American writers of the period, he set up his own production company to film his own stories; and like them, he met disaster. This film is an intriguing record both of his career and of the myriad small, independent, regional film studios - this one in Augusta, Maine - that set up shop for a little while and then vanished, leaving behind a few films, a few faces, like Mary Astor here (immediately prior to the period of "Second Fiddle", who went on to better things. As a documentary, the film is not too well made. It is often confusing in its use of voice over unrelated picture, and rarely explicts to the full the material it deals with. But it is full of information and charming film excerpts from Card, the re-discoverer of Louise Brooks and John Collins, his guide and narrator of the film, made in the 70's and partly financed by grants from local interests. Amazingly, Augusta itself seems to have changed but little in the half-century interval. Day's later Hollywood credits, incidentally included the original story for the 1926 musical feature "Clothes Make the Pirate".

Kenneth Scott, noted Zane Grey and James Fenimore Cooper scholar, provided me with some additional research material on Day's career and the 19 films that comprised his movie career, but alas, space is too short to include it (although the essential points are covered by Card's well-delivered narration). I will however post xerographs of this material at the back of the hall for your information.

--- William K. Eversen ---