An Evening of Rare Silents: Music arranged and played by STUART ODERMAN

THE LAND BEYOND THE SUNSET (Edison, 1912) Story by Dorothy G. Shore; 13 mins.
With: Martin Fuller (The Newboy); Bigelow Cooper (The Minister); Mrs William Bechtel (The Grandmother and the Witch)

By late 1912, Edison was releasing a one-reeler like this every day, a minimum of five a week. They were clearly manufactured, turning out a product, and most of their films were never again in print. Exceptions were the films of John Collins excepted, turning out any directors of real note. But they frequently made films in connection with charitable groups (in this case the Fresh Air Fund) or employee-union groups, and at times, with a message to put across, the films were often more carefully thought out and better-made. This near-Dickensian film, with moments of lyricism rare at Edison, is quite remarkable, though the most isn’t made of individual scenes and it’s a pity that the key scene at the railway station wasn’t done an actual studio with a painted backdrop. But for the rest it is quite exceptional, the very moving climax marred slightly by deterioration in the original negative.

THE BOHEMIAN GIRL (Alliance Film Productions, Britain, 1922) Directed by Harley Knole, 2nd Unit Director, Josef von Sternberg, Camera, Rene Guissart; adapted by Harley Knoles and Rosina Henley (*) from the operetta of the same name (music by Michael Balfe, libretto by Alfred Bunn); 70 mins.

With: Gladys Cooper (Arlene Arnheim); Ivor Novello (Thadeus); Constance Collier (Gypsy Queen); C. Aubrey Smith (Devileshook); Ellen Terry (Suda); Henry Vibart (Capt Arnheim); Gibb McLaughlin (Count Florestine)

(*) Rosina Henley was Knoles’ wife, and also an early leading lady in such films as silent “The Sign of the Cross”.

"The Bohemian Girl" is an extremely handsome production from a period of British film all too sparsely represented today, although it must be admitted that its handsome pictorial values seem to be an attempt to duplicate the superb imagery of the Maurice Tourneur films of the period. Almost any frame would create a wonderful still: the sets and the grouping of players maintain a careful balance of delicacy, which is interestingly the result of all the small effects; and almost every scene is ingeniously "framed" — by buildings, by tent flaps, by trees and foliage. In one sense this is self-defeating, the film soon becoming a series of lovely picture postcards, and the framing loses the strong dramatic effect that its occasional use had in full measure in such Griffith films as "Orphans of the Storm" and "America". In another sense however, this deliberate pictorialism is academically quite fascinating, since it represents the first known and earliest extant work of Josef von Sternberg. Von Sternberg not only worked for Knole, but was also his second unit director, touring Europe to get authentic the standards of the costumes of the age, and presumably quite free to design his own compositions — which were then probably copied by Knole in his own work, in order to give the film unity.

While the film never reaches great dramatic heights — the plot probably precludes that — it is all nicely mounted and contains some smooth examples of discreet yet effective use of the mobile camera.

Harley Knole was a curious director who worked in both the U.S. and England, and who seemed to have a fondness for this Rutarian schmaltz. He also made a version of "Carnival", and did the Anthony Hope-ish "The Gilded Cage" with Alice Brady, one of his few other surviving films. Most prolific in the 1917-21 period, when he often made six or more films a year, he made little of note after "The Bohemian Girl". In fact, he was absent from the screen until 1926. Von Sternberg returned to direct two of his comedies. "The Bohemian Girl" was Rene Guissart, who later collaborated with Karl Struss on "Ben Hur".

Not the least of the many delights of the film is its powerhouse cast of British stage and screen straws. All of them have passed on now. C. Aubrey Smith, on the stage since 1892, was also a film veteran of some ten years when he made this film — and he seemed to age hardly a day between it and his last films in the 1940’s.

For Ivor Novello (and it was his performance in this film that caused D.W. Griffith to sign him for "The White Rose") this kind of thing was to become his modus operandi for years to come; despite frequent effective dramatic performances (what a Dorian Gray he would have made!) he was best loved by the British public (especially during World War Two) for his output of romantic musicals of this nature. He wrote, directed, starred in, wrote the songs and sang them in a succession of hits like "Dancing Years" and "The Bohemian Girl". With Hitchcock, Griffith, he never became a top screen star; his basic popularity was with London theatre audiences, and when his later works were transferred to the screen, it was players like Dennis Price and Errol Flynn who took over his roles. But to his fans, Novello was a British Romberg with a Barrymore profile. (The profile is well, frequently and even promiscuously displayed in "The Bohemian Girl")

The operetta was done first as an early silent one-reeler; this British version was the second, and of course Hal Roach made a third in 1936 with Laurel & Hardy, much of his stock company, and to his credit, much of the music too.

There was also a later Warner 2-reel version (1939) under the title "A Swing Opera".

"A Swing Opera".
Despite the simplicity and naivete of the story-line once the music has been removed, the film holds up quite well. Incidentally, any music-lovers who come along in an operatic treat as well as a cinematic one may be disappointed. The dramatic compression of the film doesn't allow for much of it. (Incidentally, when I last ran the film in New York - in 1962 - I tried to dig up recordings of the music to go with the film, only to discover - via contemptuous sners from salesmen at Sam Goody's et al - that only the overture and one vocal existed in record form. Possibly because Hal Roach still held rights to use the music, he had Oliver Hardy sing some of it in the 1939 "Zozobra".

Quite incidentally, we have for a long while been sitting on a print of Novello's "The Dancing Years", unwilling to show it because it was a w/p print of a theatrical T.K.O. original. But since a color print seems unlikely to present itself, and the music is the key thing, it really allows for any of the possible on a double-bill with Novello's early sound "Once a Lady" (opposite Ruth Chatterton). While tonight's "The Bohemian Girl" is a fine original print and looks good on the screen, it grows increasingly brittle, and subjecting it to the rigours of a big professional projector is risky. So tonight is its farewell on the big screen, and it goes into retirement except for a very few classroom screenings where it can be coaxed through a smaller and less hazardous projector.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE DANCERS (Fox, 1924; released 1925) Directed by Emmett Flynn; scenario by Edmund Goulding from the play by Gerald Du Maurier and Viola Tree; Camera, Ernest Palmer and Paul Ivano; 75 mins (app.)
With: George O'Brien (Tony); Alma Rubens (Maxine); Maage Bellamy (Una); Templar Saxe (Pothering); Joan Standing (Pringle); Alice Hollister (Mrs Mayne); Freeman Wood (Evan Carruthers); Walter McGrail (The Argentine); Noble Johnson (Pasifilo); Tippy Grey (Captain Sassil)

Not all of the recently mined Fox films glitter with genuine gold; "The Dancers" is really just an elaborate programmer, rather old-fashioned in theme even then, and its surface potential not fully exploited due to rather straightforward direction by Emmett Flynn, best known for (and perhaps best suited to) the thematic Westerns. Not having read the original play, I can only assume (from its authors) that it has some plot as depth and mystery (if used by them) its symbolic cutting back and forth between the dancers of the world had more point. Here its Victorian morality seems decidedly quaint, literally equating dancing and night-life with sexual debauchery and sin, although actually such morality was more commonplace in the America of the 20's than we have been led to believe so many jazz-age movies. However, it's such a good-looking film - its original rich color tints quite well duplicated in the new preservation negative - and such an uninhibited one in its melodrama, that its basic compression of the film doesn't really allow for any of the directorial help he is given, George O'Brien does surprisingly well, and if nothing else the two women's roles are unpredictable in both their handling and their outcome, and it's surprising in a sense that the roles weren't reversed. A 1950 remake shifted the locale from the Argentine to Canada, and Phillips Holmes, in the O'Brien role, seemed decidedly unworthy of the attentions of Leis Moran and Mae Clarke. What an insuble problem for any leading man! Mrs Patrick Campbell and Walter Byron were in the remake too.

Program Ends approx. 10.30 (depending on variable projection speeds) and will be followed by a discussion period.

--- William K. Everson ---

A reminder: Next week's program - DAUGHTER OF THE DRAGON and WELCOME DANGER - will be preceded with one of this semester's two jazz concerts. (The other is on April 10). Next week's program is a long one, and we will do our best to see that the room is cleared promptly. If there are delays, we'll cut down on the Introduction to save running too late. Next week's program is designated as an "Archive Night" which normally indicates an academic evening and a lesser audience. On the other hand, Fu Manchu and Harold Lloyd have a considerable academic following, so we can't predict the size of the audience. For those torn between the silent film out at Astoria and our program, the only guide-line I can offer is that the Astoria films are generally available and will show up again, whereas "Welcome Danger" is not in distribution and won't be, so this may well be the only chance to see it.