A Program of silent NELL SHIPMAN films

Piano Score arranged and played by STUART ODERMAN

At a time when women producers and/or directors were still rare on the screen (not that they were ever common) Nell Shipman was a star-producer-writer-director of her head on her shoulders. Her short-lived career, outlined in far more detail in her own autobiography "The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart", published by Boise State University in Boise, Idaho, and very much recommended. In a sense a kind of Leni Riefenstahl of the Far North in many ways (not politically) she filmed primarily in Idaho and Canada, specializing in rugged outdoor melodramas, and for a while working with author James Oliver Curwood. (Many authors in the silent period, Zane Grey, Gene Stratton Porter, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Curwood among them, sought to form their own production units or ally themselves with existing units like Miss Shipman's, so that their works could be brought to the screen in a manner faithful to the original. Whatever the literary/artistic success involved, commercially these ventures always seemed to fail).

Miss Shipman was a woman of determination and great skill, and a true "auteur" long before that term came into common usage. Personal convictions and foibles recur frequently in her films. A love of animals and the need for their conservation was something she practised in her off-screen life, and a theme she frequently brought into her films. A strong, independent woman, she usually cast herself in that light -- frequently having to protect a weak and alluring husband from the rigors of the North! Tonight's two films, and especially "The Grub Stake", give a good idea of her work -- which often features the finished and unfinished and the discarded film reel displays as "Wings in the Dark", a 30's aviation film with Myrna Loy and Gary Grant. Her son, Barry Shipman, a child actor in several of her films, himself became a noted screenwriter from the 30's on, and scripted the remarkable "Stranger at my Door" which we ran a season or two back.

For once, we are departing from our accustomed procedure (assuming that everyone will be here for the whole program) and screening "The Grub Stake", announced for the latter part of the evening, first. This is because Miss Shipman's films cover so much ground (often literally!) that whichever one came on second would meet with a kind of subliminal audience exhaustion. It's too good a film to have that obstacle, so we're switching the order. Tom Trusky of Boise State University, the man most responsible for the present renewed interest in Miss Shipman and for the circulation of her films, will be on hand tonight to introduce the program. We're most grateful to him for coming in from Idaho today and making these films available to us.

THE GRUB STAKE (Nell Shipman Productions, 1925, released by American Releasing Corp). Directed by Bert Van Tuyle; Story by Nell Shipman; Camera, Josepha Walker; reissued in 1927, shortened, as "The Golden Yukon"; tonight's print is of the full original, approx. 90 mins.

With: Nell Shipman (Faith Diggis); Hugh Thomson (Jeb); Alfred Allen (Mark LeRoy); George Berrell (Malannte Mike); Walt Whitman ("The Skipper"); C.K. Van Auken (The Meuntie); Aa Wing (Wong)

Produced for only $180,000 -- a low-budget both for Shipman films of the period, and for any film requiring such lengthy and difficult location work -- "The Grub Stake" is a remarkable film for one made outside of the Hollywood system, worthy of comparison (in many ways) with Clarence Brown's "The Trail of '98", and showing its economies mainly via the lack of recognisable names in the supporting cast, and the occasional bland quality and "new" look of some of the interior sets. But outside -- and it stays in the wild most of the time -- it bears comparison with any Hollywood work. Like Stroheim, Nell Shipman's situation was precarious, and she seemed to approach each film as though it might be her last, cramming perhaps a little too much in, in case another opportunity never arose. Mid-way through, the film's narrative comes to a virtual halt when Shipman's character discovers a Disneyesque hidden valley and communes with nature and animals for a reel or so. And the climax backtracks into the picture to such an extent that at least the whole last quarter of the film is all climax, milking suspense, last-minute rescues and literal cliff-hanging to the nth degree. Strictly speaking, the film is too long and individual sequences too protracted, but as it happened she never did get a chance to make such an ambitious film again, so had so much net been poured into this film, much of it might never have made it to the screen at all.

Although her career included stage work as well, Shipman seemed to be well up on the latest movies and techniques, and was not averse to borrowing. In his book, cameraman Joseph Walker (who later worked on so many Capra films) recalls that the departure date for location shooting was deliberately delayed so that he could see the opening of the new Griffith film. (He doesn't

-over-
identify it, but it can only have been "Orphans of the Storm", since "The Grub Stake" was shot in 1922). Certainly Griffith influence abounds, one sequence especially recalling "Broken Blossoms" ... and either Miss Shipman or Joseph Walker seem to have managed to see Abel Gance's "La Roue" too, and to benefit therefrom!

The hardships that the crew went through certainly show up on screen, but so does the excitement and poetry that they tried so hard to achieve.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

SOMETHING NEW (Neill Shipman Productions, 1920) Written and directed by, and starring Nell Shipman and Bert Van Tuyle; Produced by Fred H. Groghan; 50 mins approx.

Shipman's mild working relationship to the methods of Stroheim is rather emphasized by this real curie basically starring the Maxwell automobile, a vehicle that owes its fame to its use as a running gag by Jack Benny.

Shipman was hired to make a short commercial for the auto, stressing its strength and durability when subjected to terrain and hazards it could hardly hope to encounter in its normal working life. A one-reel short was probably all that was anticipated; Shipman and crew somehow managed to expand it to a near feature-length Western which is virtually all chase and action. Its basic appeal may well be to the vintage auto buff, who thus gets a whole film devoted to the Maxwell. Western fans may be less excited since while it is all action, it is rather repetitive action. Nevertheless it's a fascinating curie, and certainly an amazing tribute to the Maxwell which, even in days when autos were built to last, has incredible energy and recuperative powers.

The first half of the film is a race to the rescue via Maxwell, and the latter half the escape, also via a now increasingly battered Maxwell. The same car, incredibly, is used throughout -- but a single back-up car was used from which parts could be cannibalised when serious damage was done. Since the car hurks itself over rocks and climbs cliffs, this minor poetic license, even for the sake of a commercial, seems quite justified. Incidentally, the Mexican villians seem even more racially stereotyped than was the norm at the time, allegedly because cameraman Walker had been kidnapped by Pancho Villa's men some years earlier, and while he survived, he apparently saw this film as a chance to get some of his own back!

Program ends approx. 10.15.

--- William K. Everson

Note: while I have seen these films before, I do not have the prints on hand to check running times and appropriate projection speeds. Also we may have a slightly late start because of the preceding jazz concert, so the program and may be slightly later than as estimated above.