PAID TO LOVE (Fox, 1927) Directed by Howard Hawks; Screenplay by William Conselman, Seton I. Miller and Benjamin Glazer from a story by Harry Carr; Camera, William O'Connell; Asst. Director, James Talmage; 70 mins (app.). (Last New School showing: November 1973)

With: George O'Brien (Prince Michael); Virginia Valli (Maja); William Powell (Eric); J. Farrell MacDonald (Peter Robarts); Thomas Jefferson (The King); Merta Sterling (Maid); Hank Mann (servant); Francis McDonald (Apache dancer); Gino Corrado (French guide).

Hawks has gone on record as not liking this film, and thus in the latter years of his life, just after it had been rediscovered, it was unofficially suppressed and never shown at Hawks retrospectives. However, it is quite one of the better films among his surviving silents, certainly superior to "A Girl in Every Port" (admittedly, academically more important because of its typically Hawksian ingredients) and much funnier than the rather arch "Flig Leaves". True, in the realm of elegant romantic comedy, Hawks is no Lubitsch, and the film really needs the pace and speech of the sound film. The comic elements are here played rather broadly, and the romantic/sexual ingredients played for poignancy rather than piquancy.

George O'Brien's cheerful energy is brought into play, but his marvellous sense of humor is largely unexploited, while William Powell's polished villainy draws much more interest and attention than was probably intended. It's uneven, true, but it's also lush, handsome and generally unpredictable. If Hawks could have been persuaded to see it again before his death, he might well have changed his mind about it. Since the film hasn't shown up elsewhere, there's a suspicious doubt as to whether a preservation negative was made. This print is a reversal copy made from the (then) only surviving 35mm nitrate print, and while quality varies, it does at least indicate the beauty of the original cinematography and the style of the sets.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---


With Lillian Gish (Nellie Jarvis); Robert Harron (Jimmie Hilton); Ralph Graves (John Hilton Jr.); George Nichols (Martin Cain); George Fawcett (John Hilton); Eugenie Besserer (Mrs. Hilton); Josephine Crowell (Mrs. Cain); Tom Wilson (Uncle Zeke) and Kate Bruce

The last of Griffith's interim group of rural romances -- money-making retrenchments between his big spectacles -- "The Greatest Question" is also in a sense his farewell to Victorian heroines. Here Lillian Gish is traditionally naive and innocent, and despite surviving near rape and attempted murder, wins up unsullied and telling her boy friend "We don't know enough to get married". Within the year she was playing a mature and sensitive woman in "Way Down East", knowing quite enough to be tricked into a false marriage and to produce an illegitimate offspring: "The Greatest Question" is a curious hybrid of a film. Its spiritualist angle is frankly dragged in by the heels because it was a topic of great public interest then. As a film, it is one of the best illustrations of Griffith's stated desire to get away from his war films and epics and back to "the sun on the corn and the wind". It not only breathes the outdoors (beautifully photographed by Bitzer) and makes a great deal of symbolic use of landscape, but it also reflects a great deal of the people and places of Griffith's childhood; the hillside church in the opening scene, for example, is an almost exact copy of the little church in Crestwood, Kentucky, where Griffith and his father are buried. Although the film lacks the pronounced Dickensian structure of "True Heart Susie" and its melodramatic climax is overdone, especially in view of the restraint and pastoral charm of the earlier portions of the film, it is such a visual joy (the print was the last direct reduction made from the original 35mm negative) that one can easily forgive it is weaknesses. Griffith's friendly condescension to the black servant might raise a few eyebrows today, but it should be noted that while Uncle Zeke sits at a separate table to eat, he sits in the same room, shares the family's joys and sorrows, and is clearly considered one of the family. Not a major Griffith, it is also far from being a minor one and was obviously remembered by other directors who admired Griffith; John Ford's 1933 "Kindred of the Wild" copies one scene exactly, and borrows from D.W.'s other films too. Incidentally, when we first acquired this print in 1964 we showed it to Lillian Gish who enjoyed it enormously but didn't remember any of it or even making it (perhaps because the similar "True Heart Susie" does overshadow it) but felt that it must have been made on the West Coast immediately prior to coming back to the East and Manassas to do "Way Down East". Its outdoor locations are certainly superbly chosen to recreate a Kentucky millieu.

--- William K. Everson

Program finishes approx. 10.25. Short discussion/question session follows.