ARCHIVE NIGHT: SILENT UNIVERSAL MELODRAMAS
PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART OGDEN

THE KENTUCKY DERBY (Universal, 1922) Directed by King Baggott; based on "The Suburban" by Charles T. Daze, scenario by George C. Hull; Camera, Victor Milner; 66 mins app.
With: Reginald Denny (Donald Gordon); Lillian Rich (Alice Brown); Emmet King (Col. Monroe Gordon); Walter McRae (Ralph Gordon); Gertrude Astor (Helen Gordon); Lionel Belmore (Col. Worm). Directed by Kingsley Benedict (filmed suddenly from The Symbol); Bert Grace (Topper Tom); Wilfred Lucas (Captain Wolf); Harry Carter (Bob Thurston); Pat Harmon (Jensen); Anna Hernandez (Mrs Clancy); Verne Winter (Timmy Clancy).

Universal always gave their (primarily) small town audiences their money's worth in the 20's, and this rousing yet witty light-hearted melodrama is no exception. There's as much Jack London as Old South here; several sub-plots racing along together, action, romance, sentiment and two rival Southern Colonels who perennially sip mint juleps as they worry about mortgages, family losses and the great shame of having Reginald Denny, "the last of the Kentucky Gordons", married to the daughter of a stableman. Emmit King, perpetual Southern Colonel of the silent screen, was one of the Old South's biggest obstacles to true love, both in modern stories like this one and in Civil War epics like "Barbara Frietchie". "The Kentucky Derby" is fast, larger than life, and typical fare from a company that still called itself The Universal Film Manufacturing Company. The direction has some neat little touches here and there and makes it all seem more important, and bigger budgeted, than it really is. As always with Universal, there are good solid sets and some fine photography; nicely composed interiors and sweeping exteriors, all in a good original print with blue tinted night inserts. Reginald Denny, not yet as established as Universal's major comedian, and still specializing in action films like this one and "The Abyssmal Brute", nevertheless has a near-Rheinzaksian lightness of touch that is very pleasing. There are good supporting performances too from that old Griffith-Diaghoff trouper Wilfred Lucas, and from Harry Carter, one of the best known villains of Universal's early serials.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE WHITE TIGER (Universal, 1923) Direction and original story by Tod Browning; scenario by Browning and Charles Kenyon; Camera, William Fildes; 75 mins approx.
With: Friscilla Dean (Sylvia Donovan); Wallace Beery (Count Donelli); Raymond Griffith (Ray Donovan); Matt Moore (Dick Longworth)

Tonight's two films pair well together in that they are both Universals from 1922/23. However, "The Kentucky Derby" holds up well on its own not too ambitious level, whereas "The White Tiger" is a disappointment, hence its shunting into an "Archive Night" Framework. Because it is a Tod Browning, and because so many other apparently lost Broughings have surfaced in the past 20 years, there is, certainly, an academic reason to see it. Also, both of tonight's films are extremely rare: whenever they are shown (which is not frequently) as at the Museum of Modern Art's Universal cycle many years ago, or at the Paris Cinematheque's similar cycle, it is these two prints that are always shown. And since "The White Tiger" was a rather shabby print to begin with, we felt that if we were going to show it at all, it should be as soon as possible. (Although choppy and clearly missing bits of scenes, it is substantially complete, and not far short of the original running time). Although most of the MGM Tod Broughings now available again are disappointing, they are at least reasonably glossy and polished, and in comparison with them "The White Tiger" is almost shamefully rather primitive. However, considered side by side with the Browning-Friscilla Dean "Under Two Flags", also fairly recently rediscovered, it now seems decidedly less primitive. Moreover, it also confirms that Browning's basic story patterns (and he tended to borrow and re-use a great deal) were set up early in his writing/directing career, and that the later and more famous Chaney vehicles showed little sense of real development or progress - other than benefitting from the persons of Chaney himself. As with "The Show", "The Blackbird" and many others, "The White Tiger" starts with a bang. It is pictorially and dramatically exciting, and sets up an interesting group of character and relationships. There is a hint of the macabre, and the roots of themes which will crop up again and again with Browning, at least until as late as 1931. The "Devil Doll", one of his best pictures. (In fact the more one sees of Browning's silents, the more one tends to feel that his best films are his often under-rated talkies). But - as so many of his silents - once Browning has tantalised us with his opening reels, he lets it all spiral downhill, and two-thirds of the way through (e.g., "The Show", "Outside the Law" and others) contrives to get all of his protagonists locked up in a confined space, and literally talk their way to a climax - disappointing enough in a talkie, but doubly frustrating in a silent. However, it has its academic interest, not least in its cast. It's incredible how Raymond Griffith, given a modicum of panto-mima (and not even coming up to life, Friscilla Dean's huge popularity is hard to understand; a harsh and uninteresting actress, she seems totally unsuited to sympathetic roles, and possibly needed von Sternberg to work on her the magic he bestowed on Evelyn Brent and Betty Compson. Moreover, the other Browning-Dean films that survive ("Under Two Flags" and the Virgin of Stamboul) are singularly unexciting, and only her "A Cafe in Cairo" (an independent, directed by yet Winch) has the color, excitement and exotic adventure that her films for Browning were supposed to have.

--- William R. Everson

Program Ends approx. 10:35, Short discussion session follows.