A PROGRAM OF RARE SILENTS: PIANO MUSIC ARRANGED AND PLAYED BY STUART ODEMAN

A SONDRELL'S TOLL (Keystone-Triangle, 1915) Directed by Glen Cavender; supervised by Mack Sennett; Camera, E.E. Blackwell; 12 mins.

With: Edgar Kennedy (The Street Railway Supervisor); Gene Rogers (The Company President); Mary Thurman (his daughter); Raymond Griffith (An Inventor); Dale Fuller (Mock Marriage Victim).

Although well above average for Sennett, this one-reeler demonstrates many of the flaws of his inflexible reliance on formula rather than plot. It's all a loosely connected series of gags until Raymond Griffith comes on the scene, halfway through. Then it suddenly takes shape, moves in a straight line, and becomes much funnier. Needless to say, Sennett did nothing of note with Griffith, who had to wait the 20's and a series of films at Paramount to really make his mark.

CODE OF THE NORTHWEST (Chesterfield, 1926; distributed by Associated Exhibitors). Written and directed by Frank S. Mattison; presented by the Van Pelt Brothers; Camera, Elmer G. Dyer; 45 mins.

With: Zandow the Wonder Dog; and Tom London (Frank Stafford); Richard Lang (Sgt. Jerry Tyler); Frank Austin (Sandy McKenna); Shirley Palmer (Lorna McKenna); Billy Frayne (Posby); Eddie Brownell (Clay Hamilton); Jack Richardson (Donald Stafford); Lorraine Lamont (Jeanie McKenna).

By all normal standards of film history and art, "Code of the Northwest" is probably one of the least important films we've ever shown, and apart from the fact that we wanted an excuse to show it, its presence on tonight's program is at least partially due to its extremely short length which matched up nicely with the extremely long running time of the print of "Lucrezia Borgia" that we expected to get. But quite frankly, "Code of the Northwest" - which is never likely to turn up at museums or on videocassette - deserves having attention called to it, and it also deserves respect for trying hard to do something worthwhile on no money and for a small market. Independent films like this abounded in the 20's; made cheaply, largely out of doors, they made no attempt to compete with the big studio films, let alone their blockbuster specials. But they were made cheaply, could be sold cheaply, and probably turned a nice little profit both for their producers and the exhibitors who slotted them in their less-important theatres. In any event, it offers a story of a betrayed woman and her child, a mountie out to get his man who is also his brother, a fight or two, and some mild pyrotechnics. But everybody treats it as though it was all quite important, and visually it's a treat to look at in this original toned print, which probably hasn't run more than a few times in its entire life, and is in pristine condition. The locations of mountain and river are fresh, the compositions very pleasing, and the outstanding camerawork is by Elmer Dyer, who later specialised in aerial photography and did all the airbourn scenes for Capra's "Lost Horizon." Tom London, who normally played villainous character roles in Forties westerns, must have been pleased at the chance of a hero role, and the only liability is the unfunny comedy relief of Billy Frayne, that eats up footage that could better be devoted to more mountain vistas. Clearly most of it was shot in one little community, and its fascinating little combination of railroad and streetcar is intriguing in itself.

Zandow the dog doesn't have to strain himself too much; clearly not in the same league as Rin Tin Tin or Strongheart, he is at least as good as Dynamite, Peter the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte and most of his other canine cohorts of the 20's. His name presumably is intended to suggest a kind of affiliation with Ziegfeld's famous strong man, and while his character title informs us that he is acknowledged the world's greatest police dog - although it doesn't say by whom! Over the years, I had never come across a print of this film, and suddenly it showed up in a mouth-watering little cachet of equally unknown and equally pristine prints, including "The Snowshoe Trail" and "Riders of the Law" - which we'll get to over the next series or two.

INTERMISSION: 10 MINUTES

LUCREZIA BORGIA (Osvald Film, Germany, 1922) Directed by Richard Oswald, from a book by Harry Scheff; Camera, Karl Freund; (approx.) running time, 95 mins.

With: Conrad Veidt (Cesare Borgia); Lilie Raud (Lucrezia Borgia); Albert Basserman (Pope Alexander VI); Wilhelm Dieterle (Alfonso Sforza); Anita Berber (Grafin Orsini); Lydia Salomova (Tietzangererin); Lothar Mathel (Juan Borgia); Paul Wegener (Borgia's chief henchman); Ernst Pittschau (Manfredo); Henrich George (Sebastiano); Adele Sandrock (Mother Superior); Alfonso Fryland (Alfonso of Naples); Wilhelm Diegelmann (im-keeper); and Alexander Granach (prisoner), A.E. Lichau, Max Pohl, Hugo Dobbin.

When I last played this film in New York (in August of 1957) I had a totally complete print, which I had assumed was the same print I was to receive for tonight's screening. In one sense it is the same print, but over the nearly 40 year gap, heavily re-edited by a ubiquitous distributor (whose name is known by all, and spoken only in hushed whispers!) retitled "Cesare Borgia" and partially re-subtitled. The resubtitling covers footage and motivations now missing, and also offers some appalling grammar and mis-spelling - this not entirely unintentional, since the distributor in question was paranoid about others copying "his" material, and a copy containing his spelling mistakes would be proof positive that the deed had been done!

The damage is not as major as might be expected. It was always a disjointed film of primarily academic and historic interest. All of the highlights that I remember are still there, but I seem to miss a lot of detailed explanations and above all too much Germanic humor of fat ladies being chased around trees by fat gentlemen, a brand of comedy that expired even Murnau's "Faust"
While it's always good to have the most complete print available, in the case of "Lucrezia Borgia" it is a little less heavy-going in its edited form.

Authorities on early German film place director Richard Oswald's best years between 1916 and 1920. Thus, in a sense, "Lucrezia Borgia" already represents Oswald in a decline. In his earlier years there was a lot of deMille in his style, and he was a specialist in the hollywoodian film. Apparently quite adventurous, he made an anti-war film during World War One (it was banned) and a number of sex-education films. In those years, he was like Roger Corman in working at a lightning pace. At one point he finished a film in less than a week, and since the star (Warner Krauss) and studio space had been hired for two weeks, he promptly made a second film, "The House in the Dragonerstrasse" which proved to be both one of his, and one of Krauss', biggest hits to date. His pre-"Borgia" films included an earlier version of "The Diary of a Lost Girl", an earlier version of "La Ronde", and an early "Hound of the Baskervilles". One film from this period - Conrad Veidt's "Different From the Others", dealing with homosexuality in a sensitive and non-sensational manner - recently turned up on American educational television, incomplete but still impressive.

If one can equate Oswald's films of the 20's with those of deMille's, then it is not too unreasonable to suppose that, like deMille's, his pre-20's films are his best and most inventive. While many pre-Oswald critics like "Lucrezia Borgia" with all its flaws, and consider it superior to Lang's "Destiny" and "Siegfried", or to such American films as "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and "Phantom of the Opera", it's difficult to support this. Even in this shortened version, it is turgid and ponderous. There are moments, even sequences (such as Lucrezia's escape from the convent, masterminded by the nuns who conveniently do not see her, or great visual beauty, but they are not sustained, and photographically the film is surprisingly commonplace for a German film of 1922. The climactic battle scenes are certainly spectacular, and confirm contemporary comments that this was Oswald's biggest and most ambitious film (even more so than "Lady Hamilton") but despite its size and huge crowd scenes, they are unimaginative. One often wouldn't know which side was winning unless a title provided the information, and the camera remains rigidly rooted to one basic spot to record advances and retreats. Yet again, the night fighting scenes are quite beautiful.

The acting is variable, and seldom subtle - though this is as much Oswald's fault as the players' - and the cast is certainly outstanding, with only Jarmings and Krauss missing from the roster of major German stars. Liane Haid also played the lead in "Lady Hamilton", and Wilhelm (William) Dieterle is robust and good-looking as the nominal hero of the closing battle scenes. Surprisingly, some of Oswald's former stars - Lyda Salmonova and Anita Berber in particular - have what amounts to little more than bits.

While it may be one of the most elaborate, this is also one of the least exciting of the many films built around the Borgia clan. Others have included "Don Juan" (with Warner Oland as Cesare), "The Prince of Foxes" (Orson Welles), the strange "Bride of Vengeance" (with Paullette Goddard as Lucrezia) and best of all, Abel Gance's 1936 version. Now there were orgies that were orgies! Martine Carol's later version couldn't hold a candle to it! Incidentally, it seems extremely unlikely that Cesare's degradations included throwing maidens to the lions in the old Roman arena ... but possibly a historian in our midst can correct me on that point.

Oswald's early talkies in Germany included remakes of earlier works such as "Unholy Tales" and tended to be equally ponderous. He came to Hollywood in the late 30's and remade "The Captain from Köpenick" (as "I Was a Criminal") with Wasserman in the lead, and one or two other minor programmers such as "Isle of Missing Men" and "The Loveable Cheat". His son, Gerd Oswald, became a very successful movie and tv director. When I last showed the film (at a film society) in 1957, the notes were quite lengthy, including not only my own rather critical comments, but some near rhapsodic analysis by a German film scholar who thought very highly of the film. Since Oswald was still alive in Hollywood (but virtually forgotten) and since the notes were well balanced between criticism and praise, I thought he might like a copy of them, if only to show that he wasn't forgotten and that his films were still being studied. To my surprise, he sent back an outraged and abusive reply - not because of the criticisms, but because the more positive notes compared him to deMille and Lang and stated that he was their equal. Far from being pleased, he was insulted, pointing out that he was the leader, the #1 director in Germany artistically and commercially, and that at best deMille and Lang were mere imitators!

--- William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.15 (depending on flexible projection speeds)
No question/discussion session tonight since I am away holding questions for next week when program should finish by 10.30.