AN EVENING OF SILENT COMEDY & MELODRAMA WITH STUART CEDERMAN AT THE PIANO

November 18, 1993

THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 24: Program #8

PASS THE GRAVY (MG M 1927, rcl: 1928) Directed by Fred Cudol; Produced by Hal Roach; Supervised by Leo McCarey; Camera, George Stevens; 20 mins.
With Max Davidson, Martha Sleeper, Spec O'Donnell, Gene Morgan, Bert Sprotte.

When we played this a few seasons back in a print without subtitles it was a huge success; now with the titles restored, some of the gags play even better, the flow and punctuation is what it should be, and it's funnier than ever - a classic example of a basic one-joke comedy in which anticipation, echoes and sight-gag amplification of the one basic situation are worked into an intricate mosaic of both sophisticated humor and slapstick mayhem.

THE SNOWSHOE TRAIL (Chester Bennett Productions for FBO release, 1922) Directed by Chester Bennett; Scenario, Marlon Fairfax; Camera, Jack Mackenzie; 60 mins.
With: Roy Stewart (Bill Bronson); Jane Novak (Virginia Tremont); Lloyd Whitlock (Harold Lonsbury); Herbert Prior (George Edmundson); Kate Toncray (Mrs Bronson); Spottiswoode Aitken (Herbert Lonsbury); Chai Hung (Mun Lung).

"The Snowshoe Trail" is exactly the kind of film we like to show at the New School (so long as good prints are available) because if it isn't shown here, it's not going to be shown anywhere. (This is also the first time that a print of this film has materialised since our series began. Now we only wish we had had the nerve to embark on it the first time, and all of the films he made in '22 were photographed by Jack Mackenzie, and most of them starred Stewart or Novak. Possibly some of them were shot back-to-back, as the outdoory titles suggest. Its lack of subtlety is stressed in the person of the villain (Lloyd Whitlock) who is first seen sneaking out on his fiancee at a graduation ceremony to meet with an outside girl friend and take a forbidden drink from a hip-flask; from then on he rapidly descends to chicanery, cowardice, life as a squawman, and an attempt on the hero's life (aided by some hussy Indians) only when the hero is stricken with snow-blindness. But given the stereotypical roles, it's a well-mounted little film; initial doubts about an extended location work occasioned by a conflict with the hero's background of mountains in a Northern town set are soon dispelled by long and excellently photographed scenes in a snowy wilderness. Racial stereotypes are interestingly reflective of their period too. Surprisingly, little sympathy is asked for the plight of the badly handled Indian woman whom the villain discards, and she is used more to underline the callousness and degeneracy of the villain than anything else. (In contrast, the hero of Roy Stewart is a shade too noble at times!) The Chinese cook is a stereotype too, but at least an amiable and helpful one. The print is a particularly nice toned original.

-- INTERMISSION; TEN MINUTES --

THE GIRL WHO STAYED AT HOME (Artcraf-t Famous Players, 1919) Directed by D.W. Griffith; Story by S.E.W. Taylor and D.W. Griffith, based on an original story by Taylor; Camera, G.W. Bitzer; NY premiere, Strand Theatre, March 23 '19. 75 mins approx.
With: Richard Barthelmess (Selph Grey); Robert Harron (James Grey); Carol Dempster (Atolene France); Clarine Seymour (Ottie Beautiful); Adolphe Lester (Monstre France); Frances Parker (The Chum); Syn De Coe (Count de Prissac); George Fawcett (Edward Grey); Kate Bruce (Mrs Grey); Edward Piel (The Turnverein Terror); Tully Marshall (Ottie's friend); David Butler (August Kant) and as themselves, Joseph Scott (Head of the Draft Exemption Board), General Marceh, Provost Marshal General Crowder and Secretary of War Newton Baker.

"The Girl Who Stayed at Home" was one of no less than six relatively unambitious films that Griffith made between "Hearts of the World" in 1918 and "Broken Blossoms" in 1919. (One of the six is lost, one, "Scarlet Days" was one of his weakest, and "True Heart Susie" remains one of his finest). There was a need to retrace and recoup financially after the initial losses from "Intolerance"; too, with all the left-over footage from "Hearts of the World," Griffith wanted to use that - and war themes - while the subject was still topical. Four more war-backgrounded subjects followed in the "Hearts of the World" vein, but "The Girl Who Stayed at Home" was one of them. Unfortunately, while much of its non-war material is charging, the actual war sequences, while spectacular, disappoint and seem stale. D.W. had really shot his bolt with "Hearts of the World"; other non-Griffith films like "Hearts of Humanity" had covered the same ground all too thoroughly. The climactic suspense and rescue formula employed here is just that, a formula, denied real suspense because the outcome is now obvious, and D.W. doesn't see fit to strain himself in the editing process. Nevertheless, 2nd plateau Griffith is still worthy of attention, and this little-seen and under-rated film is much better than its critical obscurity would suggest. In the Seymor is less important than one might assume, given that the title is built around her character, but it did add an attempt being made to build her up. It was also Barthelmess' first for D.W., and Dempster's first leading role for him. Ironically, given its rarely-revived status, it was shown at MGA recently in honor of Robert Harron; our booking was set long before we were aware of that one showing. Harron by the way is quite delightful in an often semi-comedic role, though his "Killer Slough" is possibly a trifle overdone - doubtless at D.W.'s orders. Tragically, both Harron and the Clewiston died the following year.

PROGRAM ENDS APPROX. 10:25, DISCUSSION/Q UESTIONS FOLLOW

--- Ms. K. Eversen