D. W. GRIFFITH'S
GOLDEN YEARS: 1909-1924

3 August 6 at
7:30 & 9:30 P.M.
BROKEN BLOSSOMS

D.W. GRIFFITH and LILLIAN GISH

1919 (silent)

American

Directed by D.W. Griffith. Presented by D.W. Griffith-United Artists. Photographed by
G.W. Sitzer. Based on "The Chink and the Child" by Thomas Burke. 7 reels.

The Cast: Lucy (Lillian Gish). The Chinese Boy (Richard Barthelmess). Battling
Burrows (Donald Crisp). His Manager (Arthur Howard). Evil Eye (Edward
Piel). A prizefighter (Kid McCoy). The Spying One (George Beranger).
Reporter (Roscoe Arbuckle).

After the commercial failure of INTOLERANCE, Griffith had to abandon any really
ambitious plans for a time and retrench. He made HEARTS OF THE WORLD at the request of the
British Government, and it remains the best film about World War One made during that war.
But because of the speed with which it was made, its story was little more than a revamping
of THE HINTH OF A NATION. Its spectacle and its dramatic vignettes hold up superbly; its
plot does not. By the time it was ready the Armistice was signed and the public lost interest
in war films. It was released, shown briefly, forgotten. More than ever Griffith's financial
plight was serious. He turned to little five and six reel romances of Americans -- and
incidentally turned out some of his most charming and least appreciated films. TRUE HEART
SUSIE from this period is a lovely work. But to Griffith, he was marking time, meeting pay-
rolls, and nothing else. Then, in 1919, re-organized again, he was ready for his most am-
bitious period. With Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Charles Chaplin, he formed
United Artists. BROKEN BLOSSOMS was the first of his new productions.

It was, and is, a film as fragile as its title. And it is a film very easily shattered
by insensitive audiences. Today, when one half of the world distrusts the other, when whole
nations are enslaved, a preacher asking the world for charity, to live and let live, seems
naive and old-fashioned. Unfortunately, such a plea is naive -- and probably has always been.
But that is our misfortune and the world's -- not Mr. Griffith's for being likewise naive
enough to believe that the language of the film could do something about it. BROKEN BLOSSOMS
is a tremendously sincere film and an honestly sentimental one -- and sincerity and sentiment
seem to be qualities that we are all too often ashamed of today.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS needs no apology as a film -- but it does need kindness and understanding.
For all its tenderness, it tells an ugly story, demanding as much sensitivity as the audience
can contribute. More than that, it also needs the very special visual treatment that Griffith
gave it. Photographically it was superb, its striking sets beautifully lit. Moreover, its
color tining and toning was an integral part of the whole. Possibly no other silent film
benefited so much from the skilled application of color: gentle rose hues, savage reds,
rich blues for the night scenes, mauves, greens, and other tints that matched every mood
and nuance. Unfortunately today it is impossible to duplicate this precision laboratory work;
and new prints (such as this one) tend to have a slight softness and occasional washed-out
quality, due to having been made from a new negative that was itself made from an original
toned print. Thus the film's emphasis and balance is shifted a little; black-and-white
strengthens the harshness and ugliness, weakens the poignancy and beauty. But knowing of this,
one can make allowances and read "between-the-frames" as it were to the pictorial beauty that
is only partly shut off.

Only in superficial ways does BROKEN BLOSSOMS date. Donald Crisp's performance and makeup
tend to make him seem rather too much like Eric Campbell, stock heavy in the Chaplin Mutuals.
Occasionally a title jars, with its strange combination of forthrightness and poetry. But the
overall mood, and above all Lillian Gish's superb performance -- especially in her hysterical
climactic scenes -- are unimpaired. It is the British sound remake of the mid-thirties --
reverently done -- that now seems old-fashioned and outdated. (Griffith himself was slated to
do the remake; but withdrew after several months of preparations).

In its apparent simplicity and lack of bravura style, BROKEN BLOSSOMS is deceiving.
At first its leisurely development seems to hide the technique (as all good technique should
be hidden). There is an occasional use of the moving camera or the masked screen area; even
a familiar Griffith image or two. (The shot of the girl covering, with the father's heavy
black boot hanging above her in the closet, is a typical Griffith image of terror. We saw such an image in THE HIRTH OF A NATION -- the clenched fist threatening the huge closeup of the gagged Miss Ish -- and we'll see more such images in FIGHTING BLOOD, AMERICA and others in the cycle. But after five reels of such casual reminders of the Griffith technique, the film suddenly (and appropriately) adopts a more dynamic, much faster-paced style, for the closing reels. There are only two men and a girl involved -- no chase in the accepted sense -- and the "big" dramatic scenes are all underplayed. And yet the end leaves one as exhausted physically and mentally as did the multiple chase ending of INTOLERANCE.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS was of considerable influence on other film-makers, especially in Europe, and in this country most markedly on Erich von Stroheim. (However, while Stroheim frequently acknowledged his debt to Griffith, their two approaches to film were quite different. Stroheim espoused story, played down style. Too, he liked to depict ugliness and depravity amid surroundings of elegance and splendor; D.W. had a fondness for showing love and beauty surviving amid squalor).

It even influenced Griffith himself, although his own follow-up, DREAM STREET, was pretentious and only spasmodically interesting. But at least, with all of Griffith's misfires, it failed because he attempted too much -- not because he attempted too little.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS re-established Griffith as the screen's foremost artist, and equally important in terms of his own future, as a showman who could turn out solid boxoffice pictures. He was to make that position even more secure the following year with one of the greatest box-office blockbusters of them all -- WAY DOWN EAST.

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AN UNSEEN ENEMY

One of the best of Griffith's early melodramas, AN UNSEEN ENEMY is a re-working of his 1909 THE LONELY VILLA, in which he first introduced tense cross-cutting. The added finesse acquired in less than three years is quite startling; the cutting is faster, there is an excellent use of closeups, and real imagination behind the various plot twists utilized to lengthen the chase -- and increase suspense. Rarely seen (this is one of the only two complete prints existing in the U.S.), it is however quite well-known in that it provided Lillian and Dorothy Gish with their first film roles. All seven leading players subsequently appeared for Griffith in THE MUSKETEERS OF PIG ALLEY, another embryo classic of 1912.

THE MOTHERING HEART

We'll have more to say about the screen image of Lillian Gish in the notes for WAY DOWN EAST, but while it is true that Griffith liked her ethereal, helpless look -- and often capitalized on it -- he also frequently cast her in roles where that exterior masked an inner strength. THE MOTHERING HEART is such a picture, and Miss Gish's portrait is all the more impressive when one recalls that she had been in films for only a year. In the psychology of its plotting -- which achieves a near-Freudian level in its climax -- THE MOTHERING HEART is an astonishingly advanced film for 1913. It is also one of those rare Biographs -- a film in which Griffith is more concerned with content than treatment. Not that there is any lack of style (note how well organized are the cabinet scenes, and the way one's eye is automatically drawn to the key action, despite the crowded background canvas); and the editing pattern remains as fast as ever; but for the most part, Griffith is content to let his players carry the story. And talking about players -- there is a wonderful, sophisticated, bosomy vamp in Viola Barry. Ahead of Theda Bara, she seems to skip that whole era of early, aggressive vampin', vamps, and to belong with the smooth sirens of the twenties. Griffith had a ready eye for such pulchritude, and might well have developed her into a big star. But Miss Barry, daughter of Los Angeles' police chief, had other ideas. She soon married director Jack Conway, and was seen on the screen no more.

William K. Everson

(Mr. Everson, film collector and historian, is research director for the television program SILENTS PLEASE. He is the author of a forthcoming historical work on the Western. Mr. Everson, who is a sponsor of this Griffith series, is one of the foremost authorities on D.W. Griffith).