Rob Wagner's Script
May 11, 1946
page 22

SCREEN

D.W.G.:

The Minor Masterworks

Herb Sterne

DAVID WARK GRIFFITH'S cult is cleaved into two camps: one adheres to the opinion that the director-producer's genius shines with greatest glory in the spectacle films of panoramic import and molten mob effects; the other group, as vigorously champions the idylls of the king of celluloid, those tender, delicate pastorals that are worked from a palette of pastels.

Now, due to the preferences and limitations of one Miss Iris Barry, a lady who patently rates glister above nuance, The Museum of Modern Art Film Library's sketchy list of Mr. Griffith's feature-length films heavily subscribes to the more expensive items he created during his illustrious career. With the exceptions of "Broken Blossoms" and "Isn't Life Wonderful?" today it is impossible for the public to view other post-Biograph Griffith vignettes, for Miss Barry, and *ipso facto*, the Museum, chooses to circulate only the more grandiose of his works such as "The Birth of a Nation," "Intolerance" and "'Way Down East."

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of Griffith's important and varied contribution to the cinema, it is necessary to be familiar with this artist's creations in the realm of the intimate feature film. It is impossible for the public of these benighted times to be acquainted with such of his endeavors as "The Love Flower," "The Idol Dancer," "Dream Street," "The White Rose," "Sally of the Sawdust," "Scarlet Days" or the several most meritorious works which were released through Paramount-Artcraft. Today, the titles, not to say the subjects themselves, are unknown to all but the more esoteric clique of cinema enthusiasts. Because of the Museum's lack of judgement, the Griffith collection it has chosen to circulate is woefully incomplete, thereby giving contemporary students of the motion picture a distorted and erroneous impression of the scope of the man's achievements.

Recently, through the good offices of Mr. Griffith and Adolph Zukor, I was privileged to view three of the ignored films, and thus in part repair certain dire omissions in my personal pleasure and knowledge of the work ot the foremost figure produced by the motion picture. It is certainly to be regretted that the prints are once more on their way to the Paramount

OldMagazineArticles.com

vaults in Albany, New York, again to gather dust, and that the Museum is so insufficiently interested in the photoplay as art as to ignore procuring this trio of minor masterpieces for general distribution.

During World War I, Griffith was prevailed upon to visit the battlefields of Europe to make a propaganda film for the Allied cause. The result was the saber-flashing "Hearts of the World." In addition, while abroad, Griffith procured additional war footage, which he planned to utilize as background material for subsequent battle subjects upon his return to this country.

"Hearts of the World" was pro-War. But what Griffith saw and experienced in the trenches appears to have made him anti-War, for when he once more went to work in the United States he turned his attention and talents to studies of plain people who wished to live their lives in peace. These films propound the philosophy of simplicity and non-violence, and as lyric essays they remained unsurpassed.

But before beginning this cycle, Griffith completed the military films for which he had contractual obligations. One of these, "The Greatest Thing in Life," clearly foreshadowed the change in the director's philosophy. Although it has a background of battle, the film itself focuses on the people of the villages of France, plain folk to whom war is not glory but tragedy. Curiously for its period, the photoplay is no hymn of hate, and it is only in the concluding, climactic footage that one encounters the customary caricature of "the enemy." For the rest, the film points the injustices in the American social code (witness the scene where a white man snubs a Negro; and, again, the sequence in the shell hole at the front where the snobbish *Edward Livingston* tries to alleviate the last moments of a colored comrade-in-arms) and, courageously in a time of hate, declares hatred to be a two-edged blade.

In many respects, "The Greatest Thing in Life" is superior to the far better publicised and generally remembered "Hearts of the World." In it Lillian Gish, as *Jeannette Peret,* proffers a performance unlike any other she has contributed to the screen. As a child, *Jeannette* is a hoydon, volatile in expression and motion. As she matures, she becomes a coquette of no small sexual allure, a girl sure of her beauty, one certain of her power to attract men. *Jeannette* is a vivid, dimensional heroine, a figure which is unique and bears no resemblance whatsoever to the other Gish portraits of the Griffith gallery. David Butler's *Monsieur le Bebe* is quite unforgettable. Amazing in its originality of conception and playing, the character possesses an unusual combination of direct humor and oblique pathos. Robert Harron, an actor I'm just beginning to properly ap-

OldMagazineArticles.com

preciate, is unfalteringly superb as the aristocrat who is changed by his contact with fellow beings.

The sub-titles are easily the best to appear in a Griffith picture, and are notable for their nonchalant and satirical tone. Of technical interest is the appearance of the first "beauty close-up" in this film, a diffused type of lensing originated by Griffith and cameraman Hendrik Sartov, which later came into universal favor and use.

"True Heart Susie," a tale of a Hoosier small town, is one of Griffith's finest achievements in the realm of the intimate film. It is a comedy drama of characterization and atmosphere, simple in its telling, overwhelming in its effect. Here the director gives full play to his feeling for landscape, his expert sense of editing, the emotion to be evoked from such familiar objects as corn popping and apples roasting. Tinted stock is utilized for mood purposes and the land itself becomes an active protagonist of the story through an artful use of lighting, hues and shades. Costumes are utilized for comedy and dramatic points in Griffith's inimitable way. And the searing sorrows and delights of adolescence, always so understandingly presented by Griffith, are here depicted in segments that are among the director's very best. The cast, headed by Lillian Gish and Harron, could not be improved upon for delicacy of delineation and sheer delightfulness.

"The Romance of Happy Valley," laid against the Kentucky country which Griffith knows and loves, is in much the same simple mood. Its treatment of small town religion, the comments on the human will to be "good" and its tendency to "backslide," are genuine Americana, and, what is more, eternal and universal human nature. Late in the story of a boy who rebels against his constricted surroundings and longs for the adventure he supposes he will find in a large city, the story bolts into melodrama. It is good melodrama, but it is an extraneous thread which has no actual part in the picture's plot. Despite this structural fault, "The Romance of Happy Valley" is one of Griffith's most persuasive idylls, and contains still another pair of endearing performances by Miss Gish and young Harron.

It is a distinct loss that the minor masterworks of Griffith are so little known today. As experiments in mood and characterization in photoplay form they have no equals in American film history.

—

"KITTY" WOULD LIKE to appear a direct descendant of *Amber St. Clare* for purposes of boxoffice pelf, but it is also to be judged that she has a blood relationship to *Liza Doolittle*. The writing, I hurry to relate, is closer to the Winsor hovel than it is to the

OldMagazineArticles.com

Minor Masterworks

Shaw castle.

This pageant of 18th Century London is a handsome, slow and somewhat amusing movie of a wench no-better-than-she-should-be, who, praise be!, never receives her come-uppance, unless one subscribes to the Bolshevik belief that marrying a title and a fortune constitutes catastrophe.

Paulette Goddard at no time has difficulty appearing beautiful, conniving, brittle and carnal, no more than which *Kitty* demands. Ray Milland has little to do beyond being arch, and trying not to look silly in hats that only the astounding style of Hedda Hopper could save from looking silly. Sara Allgood, all done up in a *La Frochard* makeup as a mistress of a Houndsditch stew, gives a wonderfully traditional performance, as does Constance Collier, portraying an aging damsel who spends most of her time on lost weekends.

—

"THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE" bears little of the true mark of Cain. The screen transcription of the novel is less mayhem than moral values, and as an osculatory opera its merits are strictly those of the kiss of death. John Garfield is excellent type casting, but he hasn't much chance against a dull script and ditto direction. Lana Turner, it is my guess, drew the inspiration for her heroine from recent runnings of Norma Shearer's single performance in "Her Cardboard Lover," "We Were Dancing" and "Romeo and Juliet."

OldMagazineArticles.com