

COMPTEs RENDUS / REVIEWS

A Tray Full of Trouble, *The 13th Pordenone Silent Film Festival*, (8-15 October 1994).

Although the programs presented were called lighthearted – *Forgotten Laughter*, *Light of Asia* or *Hollywood Independents* – last year's thirteenth episode of the Pordenone silent «serial» seemed to be overshadowed by an avalanche of trouble. It should be called a miracle that it even took place. War in Bosnia had transformed the town into a temporary leisure resort for American military personnel so there was a housing problem for festival guests. The nearing centenary of film as well as budgetary and thematic conflicts had increased rivalry between festivals and archives (nobody knew the details, but everyone wanted to). Local and regional institutions were in a mess; mayors were arrested for corruption; and in spite of Operation Clean Hands, the same pillarization society still rules, with all its consequences. Festivals and archives dependent on these institutions have to fight or die. Pordenone fights bravely, but it cannot win the battle alone. The solidarity of the visitors expressed by their signatures was a noble gesture, but more urgent is cash. Festival organizer Livio Jacob gave a loud cry for help in the introduction of the festival program, appropriately entitled

A Tray Full of Trouble.

For the regular Pordenone visitor, problems seemed to be part of the daily routine. Still one could not be ignorant of the things that happened offscreen. Luckily, one of the general themes of the festival was comedy – *Forgotten Laughter*, a program with unknown or lesser known comedians. It should be stated that not all of the comic films were funny. Quite a few of them were badly acted, badly staged, had dull jokes, and starred actors who are rightly forgotten. Still there were some revelations. The greatest was Max Davidson in his memorable kingsize bathing suit in *Flaming Fathers* (Hal Roach, directed by Leo McCarey, 1927), and even more so in *Pass the Gravy* (Hal Roach, directed by Fred L. Guiol, 1928). He, as well as the actors around him, like the nasty kid Spec O'Donnell, got the Verdi Theatre shuddering with laughter. Nobody will easily forget the young couple desperately imitating the killing of the prize-winning leghorn in order to warn Max not to eat from the dish before his nose. All their facial mimicry and body language made Wednesday, October 12th a very good festival day. Apart from Davidson's films, the Laurel & Hardy-like *A Pair of Tights* (Hal Roach, directed by Hal Yates, 1928) with Anita Garvin and Marion Byron, was a delight. Afterwards, the audience hesitated before

taking a next «gelato». Dropping an ice cream from its cone is a well-known gag, but dropping it over and over again, as performed by little, innocent and rather dumb Anita Garvin, is great fun. It is not only Garvin who impresses. Her counterpart, the tall and bitchy Marion Byron, is also very likeable. *A Pair of Tights* is a well constructed comedy, where every prop, every actor (like the unfortunate policeman) has a clear function and heightens the general comical feeling. Both actresses also appeared in the Davidson comedy, *Feed'em and Weep* (Hal Roach/MGM, directed by Fred L. Guiol, Roach Star Comedies, 1928.). A bad copy was shown that also lacked the generally spicy English intertitles. On a whole, this year offered too many qualitatively bad copies: grey 16 millimeters, fragments without explanation. Still this would be pardonable if there were no better copies available.

More disturbing is what is now becoming a traditional overkill of a topic that should be dosed in portions and in variety (e.g. in earlier Pordenone editions, the programs of Eclair, Emile Cohl, Yugoslavian actualities, and Lloyd Hamilton). This year American comedy and early Indian cinema were the victims. An interested audience is drawn back after seeing too much of the same and too many bad copies. Fortunately, another Pordenone tradition was absent – the worst copies at the beginning of the week and the best at the last. For some people, this has become a reason to come only at the sec-

ond half of the festival.

Another programming miscalculation happened again – the prime time (at 21 hrs) presentation of six early Indian films of which only one was complete. After a day of bad and incomplete films, of black-and-white preservations that cry for color (where was Haghefilm?), even the most die-hard film researcher needed a nice feature film or at least a well-built program. Obviously, the festival hoped to launch an author, like Bauer or Hofer, with D.G. Phalke, India's main film director of the teens. Phalke is interesting for his links to European fairy tale films like the *féeries* of Pathé, but he should not be overestimated. More interesting were the Euro-Indian films from the twenties by Franz Osten, with their combination of impressive settings and feeling for the subtle. They remind one of the once popular Oriental fairy tales and of Orientalism in nineteenth century European painting. It is precisely this combination of a European and an Indian vision on India that is the attraction of these films. The melancholy expression of leading actress Seeta Devi in *Shiraz/Das Grabmal einer grossen Liebe* (British Instructional Film Ltd./Pro Patria Films Ltd., 1928), as well as the romantic story around the building of the Taj Mahal deeply impressed the audience. The marvelous live music and song often created the enchanted mood that best suits these romantic stories.

The Pordenone organization continued their tradition in productions of

original musical accompaniment. On the opening night, the Alloy Orchestra of Cambridge, Mass., performed at Paul Fejos' masterpiece *Lonesome* (Universal Pictures, 1928). The experiment of using John Cale's music for Tod Browning's *The Unknown* (MGM, 1927) was unfortunately less successful. I saw the performance at *Cinémémoire* in Paris last December and not the one in Pordenone, where the technical problems at the presentation probably influenced one's judgement. Although clearly a low budget film, *The Unknown* is such a forceful film in its perversity and in the performance of Lon Chaney that Cale's music seemed unable to cope with it. The music became a sort of «*musique d'ameublement*» instead of an essential contribution.

Next to Fejos and Browning, there was the program of the acclaimed Hollywood authors William Wyler and Monta Bell.

Wyler's first steps, B-westerns, were only enlightening for the Wyler «*afficionado*». At the end of the festival, Wyler's *Hell's Heroes* (Universal, 1929) held an unexpected finale. While bringing the baby into the town, the last desperado stumbles and slowly dies from exhaustion and poisoning: suddenly, the audience heard faraway voices singing: «*Silent Night...*» At first the spectators got the impression they were watching a silent/sound film version (under-standable after all the former programs dedicated to the arrival of sound). Suddenly, the voices grew and grew, and the Verdi filled

with the voices of the Coro Polifonico «*Città di Pordenone*». The audience was moved. Tears were even shed.

My personal revelation was Monta Bell. Like George Cukor, he was clearly a woman's director. In his films, Zasu Pitts, Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo are all given space to excel. Often his films evolve in the world of theater, which gives them the possibility of a double performance. Zasu Pitts and Norma Shearer thus star together in *Pretty Ladies* (MGM, 1925), Norma Shearer in *After Midnight* (MGM, 1927), and especially in *Upstage* (MGM, 1926). In *Man, Woman and Sin* (MGM, 1927), the big city is a sort of theater, and there is a leading man instead of a lady – John Gilbert. All these films show a maturity in the classical Hollywood style. One finds subtlety in filming, in setting, in body language, in lighting and even in the intertitles. Morality runs high, but at least less severe than in the films of Cecil B. de Mille or Rex Ingram. Bell seems to ask for forgiveness, for pity for these creatures who are good at heart but affected by their surroundings. The condemnation of hedonism in his films is quite a contrast to recent Hollywood products. However this condemnation is always preceded by heavy outbursts, eruptions of violence, aggression and sexuality. An example is the connection of the storm and the flood to Garbo's sexuality in *The Torrent/Ibanez' Torrent* (Cosmopolitan Pictures, 1926). Bell is highly interested in pent up feelings, repressed sexuality, as well as rivalry

among sisters and the poor theater girl corrupted by the wealthy. In this film, she struggles for food and clothes and receives entertainment and affection from the wrong men. Just like Cecil B. DeMille, a discovery at the 1991 Pordenone festival, Bell should be researched by film scholars interested in class, gender, and sexuality in the twenties.

Apart from the main programs *Forgotten Laughter*, *Light of Asia*, Monta Bell & William Wyler (curiously indicated as «Hollywood Independents» although they worked for MGM and Universal), Pordenone showed smaller and incidental programs. There were recently restored films from the Cineteca Nazionale (Rome), a program of early Pathé films (because of André Gaudreault's book *Pathé 1900*), and two newly found and restored Méliès' films. Among the films of the Cineteca Nazionale were *The Scarlet Lady* (by Alan Crosland, Columbia Pictures, 1928) (starring a kinky Lya De Putti, all dressed up in leather), as the Bolshevik leader *Pinocchio*, directed by and starring Ferdinand Guillaume (Cines, 1911), better known as Tontolini or Polidor, the Italo-Russian coproduction *La Dama Errante*, directed by Alexander Uralski (Nelson-Film, 1922), *La Regina del Carbone*, directed by Genaro Righelli (Tiber-Film, 1919) and *Ariadne in Hoppegarten*, directed by Robert Dinesen (Maxim-Film GmbH/Ebner & Co., 1928), both starring Maria Jacobini, and one of the earliest Pola Negri films, the Polish

Jego Ostatni Czyn, directed by Aleksander Hertz (Sfinks [Polska], 1917). The choice of titles was excellent, and many of these films proved to be revealing and surprising in play, lighting and setting. *Ariadne in Hoppegarten* contained a very peculiar narrative. A woman runs away with her nephew just to escape her husband's jealousy. Later, she falls in love with her nephew. Her husband gives her up as he is so much older than the other two. Cecil B. DeMille would never have allowed such an ending. Pola Negri already shows the signs of *divismo* in the Polish film. Her mimicry is memorable. Sadly, the narrative is hardly convincing: her private snake kills the crocodile menacing her in her boudoir. *Divismo* though is often about unbalanced situations and emotions. Apart from the pleasure of seeing these films, one is distressed at seeing how these films were restored. The new restoration of the colored *Pinocchio* is an insult and a waste of money: the colors are so «fat» that they hurt the eye or create white patches in the film image. Clearly a tradition in good color restoration has yet to be established in Rome.

A few films were interesting for thematic reasons, namely films on blacks. From one side, there were three comedies from the teens with the famous American black comedian Bert Williams. These films were probably produced for black audiences. Apart from the value of the presence of this peculiar genre, the films were not extremely outstanding. Stylistically more interest-

ing was a Spanish film, *El negro que tenía el alma blanca*, directed by Benito Perojo (Goya Films, 1926). Its preaching for tolerance toward blacks was such a pseudo-tolerance that it made it difficult to «enjoy» the film. The Spanish girl allows the famous black dancer, who is madly in love with her, to touch her only when he keeps his white gloves on! She kisses him only when he is dying. He behaves like a well-educated, warm-hearted and rich American dancer who is tolerated by the Europeans but not accepted. He damns the color of his skin that prevents his girl from loving him. This is the eighteenth century idea of the «noble savage».

A small exhibition on the theme *Forgotten Laughter*, organized by David Robinson, was installed on the upper floor of the Verdi. The *Giornate*, as a whole, was dedicated to the de-

ceased Angelo Humouda, founder of the Cineteca Griffith (Genoa) and founder and first publisher of *Griffithiana*, the magazine linked to the festival. The annual Jean Mitry Award was presented to David Francis and to Naum Kleinman.

P.S : The 1995 «episode» of Pordenone (Oct. 14-21) was dedicated to «fiction/non-fiction», «early Chinese cinema», «Henry King», «Edison before 1900», «Max and Dave Fleischer», «Israel before Israel», «caricatures and comic strips on film», «the Alan Roberts Collection, and films of the Cinémathèque Française». For information contact Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, La Cineteca del Friuli, Via Osoppo 26, 33013 Gemona, Italy; telephone (0432-980458) or fax (0432-970542).

Ivo Blom

Compte rendu du troisième colloque de Domitor, New York, 13-19 juin 1994.

Le troisième colloque de Domitor a été une nouvelle fois le point de ralliement des chercheurs sur le cinéma des premiers temps et l'occasion d'échanges fructueux. Organisée sous l'égide de l'Université de New York et du Museum of Modern Art et sous l'impulsion

d'Eileen Bowser, d'Antonia Lant et de Charles Musser, cette manifestation bisannuelle était notamment consacrée, opportunité du centenaire oblige, aux premiers temps du cinéma des premiers temps... autrement dit aux toutes premières années des vues cinématographiques.

En nous offrant une véritable débauche d'images animées de la fin du siècle dernier, les organisateurs, soutenus par des archives du monde entier, ont