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FILM TREASURES FROM EASTMAN HOUSE

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston - Lecture Hall

Thursday, October 11, 1973 6:30 PM

This film is preceded by an introductory talk by James Card, Director of the International Film Department at Eastman House.

THE LITTLE AMERICAN

USA, 1917. Produced and directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Photographed by Alvin Wyckoff. With Mary Pickford, Jack Holt, Hobart Bosworth, Raymond Hatton, Walter Long, Ben Alexander. 55 minutes. Silent..

The exceptional qualities of the Pickford - De Mille Little American are apparent only when the time and circumstances of its production are realized by present-day viewers.

First, Pickford was more intimately bound to public esteem and affection than any star film has ever produced: what the Beatles were to teen-agers a few years back, Mary Pickford was to all members of most American families from 1914 to 1924. Secondly, this film was made while the United States was on the very brink of entering the first World War: an involvement that the President of the United States had been elected specifically to prevent, an adventure moreover that carried no clearly defined enthusiasm for the choice of the side of the Allies as against that of the Great Powers.

Although certainly a mature woman by 1917, the Pickford image with the public, nurtured through most of her roles, was that of a teen-aged engaging hoyden with an irresistible smile and long blonde curls that became a ubiquitous presence in the existing media. Mary was to be observed embracing sheafs of corn on breakfast-food cartons at a time when corn flakes were becoming the national breakfast food.

Some notion of the audacity of Mr. DeMille in presenting Miss Pickford to her public as a grown woman can be gathered by the fact that with the exception of an appearance as Madame Butterfly, Mary had scarcely ever played a woman of marriageable age since she worked for Griffith at Biograph, when she was, in truth a teenager. But DeMille's apparent recklessness did not stop with an atypical role for America's sweetheart: this is probably the only silent film ever made in the United States in which the hero actually attempts to rape the heroine and is, in the end, forgiven and presumably enabled to live with her happily ever after.

DeMille, extraordinary showman that he was, thrived during the silent days on the total unpredictability of his films' denouement. The only sure thing about DeMille films was that they would be filled with elements calculated to win widespread approval and leavened by other factors certain to engender controversy, widespread attention, and lively discussion.

When The Little American was made in 1917, large segments of our German-American population were appalled at the suggestion of American intervention on the side of the Allies; hence DeMille's hero is a German, living in the United States and enchanting his girl-friend with the goose-step. She favors him completely over a competing Frenchman. But on a trip to warring Europe, the heroine is witness to unrestricted submarine warfare: her ship is sunk, like the Lusitania. She becomes a first-hand witness to German barbarity in Belgium. Her German lover first participates in, then rejects the cruelties of his fellow soldiers.

The Little American was an enormous hit on its release just in time for the Fourth of July, 1917. In Chicago, the city censor, (a German-American), was outraged by what he considered anti-German propaganda in the film. He banned all showings in Chicago. Whereupon the citizens were outraged. There were protests and riots and the matter was brought to court. Ultimately the film was permitted to be shown over the censor's ban.

In 1918 the film was re-issued; with the United States a belligerent in the war, it was deemed advisable to alter the story line considerably. A few titles, a little skillful re-editing and Mary chose her French suitor over the German. Jack Holt, as the German, is killed, and it is Mary and the Frenchman, played by Raymond Hatton, who survive to enjoy a world made safe for democracy.

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