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KING VIDOR

September 1 - November 13, 1972

Sunday, November 5 (5:30)

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PEG O' MY HEART*. 1922. Made under the supervision of J. Hartley Manners. Directed by King Vidor. Scenario by Mary O'Hara from "Peg O' My Heart," a play by J. Hartley Manners. Photographed by George Barnes. Spanish titles. ca. 71 minutes.

Cast: Laurette Taylor (Margaret O'Connell [Peg]), Mahlon Hamilton (Sir Gerald Adair), [Jerry]), Russell Simpson (Jim O'Connell). Ethel Grey Terry (Ethel Chichester), Nigel Barrie (Christian Brent), Lionel Belmore (Hawks), Vera Lewis (Mrs. Chichester), Sidna Beth Ivins (Mrs. Jim O'Connell), D. R. O. Hatswell (Alaric Chichester), Aileen O' Malley (Margaret O'Connell, as a child), Fred Huntly (Butler), Michael (A Dog).

Synopsis

Peg, the daughter of a poor Irish farmer and an upper-class Englishwoman whose family has disowned her, is sent to England to live with the Chichesters when her mother dies. Their snobbish ways alienate her, and her only friend is Jerry, who lives on a neighboring estate. When Peg learns that the Chichesters' only interest in her is the money paid to them by her uncle and that Jerry is really Sir Gerald Adair, she returns, disillusioned, to Ireland. Jerry follows and persuades Peg to marry him.

"During the golden years of Hollywood, feminine stars usually put a tremendous emphasis on their chief cinematographer. When a cameraman had learned all the tricks of lighting a star's face she would insist that he come along with her as part of a package which usually included her hairdresser, her make-up man and costume designer. Garbo had William Daniels, Colleen Moore was photographed by George Folsey, Mae Murray had Oliver Marsh. By carefully watching the electricians the stars learned what arrangement of lights suited them best.

I first became acquainted with the importance of this when I undertook the job of directing Laurette Taylor in PEG O' MY HEART. Miss Taylor had been starring in the stage play for quite a few years when the Metro Company made a deal for her and the play. I was a young director who needed some income in order to get my very small studio out of the greedy hands of a most unethical lawyer. It was not a question of who should play the part - it was Laurette Taylor or no one. Her husband was the author of the play and together they owned all rights.

The character Laurette Taylor performed in the play was an Irish girl of eighteen or nineteen years. At the time she was forty-two and had a reputation as somewhat of an imbibor. The legitimate stage had been kind to her but what would happen when her face and figure had to withstand the critical examination and tremendous enlargement of the motion picture screen?

I had never seen her on the stage nor met her in person. I was most anxious to see what she looked like. The first film test that arrived from New York was photographed by Billy Bitzer, D. W. Griffith's famous cameraman. Nevertheless, instead of looking eighteen or even forty-two, she looked sixty. She had chosen to wear a curly wig in the test and this in itself could have been responsible for adding ten or fifteen years. Her frightened face hung down like an old lace curtain. I suppose that first test added fifteen or twenty years to my twenty-two, at least for the rest of the day. But there we were and although I began to see it as an impossible task, I knew that there was no backing out of it, or recasting the part, or abandoning the film.

In desperation I remembered a day's retake because of bad photography on my previous film. On this occasion I had jokingly said, when I noticed the photographer of the still photos standing idle all day, 'If it is a question of bad lighting, why is it we don't have to retake all the still photos?' In looking at the still pictures I found that the feminine lead in the film looked as beautiful as ever on that particular day when retakes were ordered. What was the reason? The lens of the still camera had a peculiar distortion which gave a roundness to the face instead of the harsh reality of the newsreel type of lens used on the movie camera.

I put the next question to George Barnes, the photographer whom we had chosen for the unhappy job of photographing the Taylor film. Barnes was still trying to catch his breath after viewing the Bitzer test. I said, 'George, is it possible to photograph 35mm movies through the lens of an 8-by-10 still camera?' He replied, 'I've never heard of it but we can certainly try.'

We found the still cameraman working with his flattering distorting lens at another studio on another film. We had to do our experimenting at night so that he and his camera could be back at work in the morning. As I remember, the final and most successful test was made with the movie camera by photographing through the 8-by-10 ground glass of the still camera. We were ready with our trick lens to perform a miracle.

The day after our forty-two-year-old star arrived in California with maid, poodle dog, and playwright husband we started a series of photographic tests to see if what we were trying to do was somewhere within the realm of possibility. Barnes, with the help of his chief electrician, rigged up a spotlight with rifle sights. This spot was mounted on a six-foot platform (or parallel) and an electrician assigned to keep Miss Taylor's face in the small circle of light at all times. The brightness of the light served to wash out all shadows and wrinkles on the star's face regardless of her position. Because of its height above the stage floor, it threw a false shadow around our subject's aging chin. This manufactured chin line working with the distorted fun-house-mirror lens began to subtract the years like an expert face-lift. And speaking of face lifts, the following trick was my final trump card. When Laurette was amused and laughing the inside muscles of her neck and jaws tightened up becomingly. If I could only keep her this way for the duration of a scene, we would have it made. I came to work each day with a good supply of jokes and gags. I instructed the crew to keep the set light and gay and the musicians to play only happy and fast tempo tunes.

In the final film Laurette Taylor looked eighteen. In some of the scenes when all tricks worked together she could have passed for sixteen. She fell so much in love with the person she saw on the screen that she ran the picture night after night for her friends in her New York home on Riverside Drive. One time after many such screenings she invited Ethel Barrymore to come to dinner. Miss Barrymore's secretary called back with this message, 'Miss Barrymore accepts with pleasure if she is assured that she will not have to sit through PEG O' MY HEART again.'" -- King Vidor, King Vidor On Filmmaking (David McKay, 1972)

This incomplete composite print of the Spanish version of PEG O' MY HEART is possibly all that remains of Laurette Taylor's screen debut. (Until this print was imported from Spain for the current showing, no known copies existed in the United States.) The film is slightly disappointing to anyone who has already seen the Taylor/Vidor HAPPINESS of two years later. Miss Taylor's gestures are very much the same (with perhaps a little touch of Mae Marsh thrown in), but she does not dominate PEG as she was to do in the subsequent film. PEG is too stagebound, too respectful of this comedy of Manners. (One suspects that Miss Taylor trusted young Vidor more the second time around and afforded him greater opportunity to make HAPPINESS more cinematic.) When Vidor does get the chance to do more than photograph the play, one sees touches recalling other films of his from this period. Ultimately, however nice it is to have another of Miss Taylor's films survive, PEG O' MY HEART is a very small footnote to the career of King Vidor. Its greatest importance was in giving him his big break - a chance to work for the fast-rising Metro Company, soon to be M-G-M.

-- Charles Silver

* Silent film, original piano score by William Perry