

Raymond Griffith: The Silk Hat Comedian (Blu-ray Review)

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Review Date: Jun 12, 2023

Format: Blu-ray Disc



Director

Clarence Badger/Arthur Rosson

Release Date(s)

1925/1926 (June 13, 2023)

Studio(s)

Paramount Pictures (Undercrank Productions)

Film/Program Grade: See Below

Video Grade: B+

Audio Grade: A

Extras Grade: C+

Review

Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd—these were the giants of the silent era. Though all three made talking pictures when sound came to the movies, they are best remembered for their work in silents. But who is Raymond Griffith? Most people—even film enthusiasts—will shrug when asked this question. Griffith

was a comedian who achieved popularity in silent pictures but today is virtually forgotten. A new release, **Raymond Griffith: The Silk Hat Comedian**, contains two of his features.

Paths to Paradise (1925) stars Griffith as a swell who enters a seedy bar in San Francisco's Chinatown and is quickly relieved of most of his money for assorted "cover charges." He's tricked into thinking he's killed a man and one of the con artists agrees to take the blame for \$100. Assisting in the scam is sassy Molly (Betty Compson). When the swell presents a phony detective badge, Molly attempts to bribe him, not yet realizing that he, too, is a con artist. Later, the two of them join forces to steal an expensive piece of jewelry. As multiple police forces pursue them to the Mexican border, Molly declares that a life of crime is not for her and vows to go straight.

The action takes place mostly in indoor locations until the rousing, lengthy chase sequence late in the film, featuring an abundance of the mishaps, happy accidents, and sight gags typical of silent comedies. Unfortunately, the film's final reel is not known to exist, so the conclusion of the picture is filled in by titles describing the scripted action.

The film has a decent plot but is slow getting underway, there aren't a lot of laughs, and most of the humor stems from the clever intertitles. Griffith bases his performance on subtle gestures, facial expression, and quirky mannerisms, but he comes off more as an ensemble player than star. His character in all his movies is impeccably dressed and wears a silk top hat, his primary signifier. There's little evidence of Chaplin's graceful comic timing or Keaton's amazing facility with props. His bland screen persona might account for the fact that he has slipped into obscurity.

In the second feature, **You'd Be Surprised** (1926), once again a piece of jewelry gets the plot going. During a party given by District Attorney White (Edward Martindel) on his houseboat, a valuable necklace has been stolen. A grim-faced White claims to know the identity of the thief. He will turn the lights off, and expects the necklace to be returned in the dark. But when the

lights are turned on, White has been stabbed to death. One at a time, cops of increasing rank check out the body, each reaching the identical conclusion—"This is a case for the coroner."

The coroner happens to be Griffith, who enters wearing his trademark top hat. His investigation consists of asking the guests, point blank, if they killed Mr. White. Naturally, they all deny it. A young woman (Dorothy Sebastian) is soon found hiding in a clock, grasping the stolen necklace. The coroner politely asks her to sign a confession, but she claims she's innocent. He tries various other ways pinpoint the killer and finally convenes a "coroner's jury" of assorted workmen he pulls in from the street, including a hot dog vendor. Complications occur when a second murder takes place, but the coroner ultimately succeeds in uncovering the culprit's identity.

The comedy/mystery is in the mold of Agatha Christie stories—a detective (or coroner, in this case) must solve a crime for which there are numerous suspects. Griffith's good but not particularly extraordinary in this comedy. Once again, the jokes are tepid at best, the funniest moments are supplied by the intertitles, and the prime interest is the whodunit plot. Watching the two films, I found that Raymond Griffith lacked the instantly identifiable characteristics that led to great success for his contemporary movie comedians. Director Arthur Rosson isn't great at creating suspense, nor is he imaginative in exploiting the setting of a houseboat. In fact, apart from an establishing shot, the houseboat location is easily forgotten, since the interior looks like the ballroom of a large estate.

PATHS OF PARADISE (B) / YOU'D BE SURPRISED (A-)

Paths to Paradise was shot by director of photography H. Kindly Martin with spherical lenses on black-and-white 35 mm film and released in the aspect ratio of 1.33:1. Quality is quite good for such an old film. Details stand out well, and several tinted scenes break up the monotony of monochromatic images. The print on this release was digitally restored at 2K resolution from a new scan of a 35 mm nitrate print in the Paramount Collection at the

Library of Congress. According to information on the disc, "Two sections of decomposition were replaced using the library's 35 mm safety duplicate negative. The final reel is not known to survive and was recreated using stills and a cutting continuity script from the Margaret Herrick Library." The original tinting scheme was reinstated as detailed in the original script.

You'd Be Surprised was shot by director of photography William Marshall with spherical lenses on 35 mm black-and-white film and presented in the aspect ratio of 1.33:1. The print was scanned and digitally restored at 2K resolution from a 35 mm nitrate print in the Paramount Collection at the Library of Congress. Not much is done with lighting or camera angles to enhance suspense and create atmosphere, and most scenes are played with actors in a group, with only occasional close-ups. Images are sharp, with details such as designs on the women's gowns, Mr. White's wavy hair, Griffith's shiny top hat, and furnishings well delineated.

Ben Model composed and conducted the musical scores that accompany both films, which are presented as 2.0 Stereo Dolby Digital tracks.

The only extra is the video essay **Raymond Griffith: The Silent Comedy's Silk-Hatted Secret** (11:17). Griffith is described as a "comic very much left out in the cold." He made ten films for Paramount, but half no longer exist. A career overview is provided. Griffith worked in vaudeville, which led to movies in Hollywood. He appeared in comedy shorts and worked for Mack Sennett. He lacked a distinctive screen personality and worked behind the camera as a writer for a time. He returned to performing in 1922. Film excerpts are shown. In **The Night Club**, he has to marry in order to inherit \$1 million. In **Time to Love**, he has to fight a duel and then pretend he's his own ghost. Griffith disagreed with Paramount about the speed with which his films were expected to be made. He retired after playing a dying soldier in 1930's **All Quiet on the Western Front**. He died in 1957. His rediscovery was initiated by Walter Kerr in his book **The Silent Clowns**, in which an entire chapter was dedicated to Griffith.

It's always a delight to discover something new about movies. This release offers contemporary audiences a chance to experience two examples of what remains of Raymond Griffith's filmography. Despite his fame in the 1920s, time has not been kind to his legacy. Though he doesn't rank with the giants of silent comedy, he's an adept performer with an eccentric sensibility.

- Dennis Seuling

Tags

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