

Thanouser Classics DVD Volume 1

Review by Paul Holbrook

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Several VHS editions of Thanouser's short films have been available for years. You can learn more about them and their contents at www.thanouser.org. Now with the first DVD volume, the films are easier to access individually and have better print quality. It has seven films released between 1910 and 1915, each accompanied by original music composed and performed for this special edition by Andrew Crow and Robert Brubacher. Full color poster images, actor biographies, and a four-page booklet of notes are the DVD extras. The print quality of these films varies. Most have the usual scratches, were, and jump cuts.

Only in the Way (1911, 12 minutes) – One of Thanouser's most versatile child actresses, little Marie Eline, stars in this sad tale. An old woman with nowhere else to go is taken in at the home of her son, his wife and their little girl. The little girl, who gets about with the aid of a crutch, finds in her a playmate she loves at once. The old lady soon gets underfoot of the impatient wife's housekeeping, so she sends her off to live at the home for the aged. Unable to endure her loneliness without Grandma, the little girl writes a note explaining that if the grandmother was in the way, then she is too. Then she runs away. She loses the crutch but manages to hobble on to grandma at the home. When her parents find her, they realize how much the old lady means to her. They dedicate themselves to making sure their home is a place of love for all its members.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1912, 11 minutes) – This short film is significant for being the first screen adaptation of the novel. It opens with Dr. Jekyll (James Cruze) reading a passage from a book suggesting the radical physical and mental transformation that might occur by ingesting some chemical compounds. He mixes up a batch and transforms to the hideous Hyde, then drinks the antidote to revert back to his Jekyll self. Next, he begins dating the minister's daughter (Florence LaBadie) and makes a good impression with his integrity. After repeated uses of the transforming elixir, he suddenly begins changing into Mr. Hyde without the drug and against his will. One day on a walk with his beloved, he transforms into Hyde and kills her father. Chased by a policeman, Hyde barely makes it back to his home in time to drink the last ounce of the drug. Realizing that he must stay Hyde forever the next time he transforms, the doctor sadly breaks off his relationship with the minister's daughter. At home, he locks the door to his study and transforms into Hyde, then sets about smashing all the furniture. As the police beat down the door, Hyde drinks the poison and dies.

The Cry of the Children (1912, 26 minutes) – This film is a more powerful look at its time now than it was meant to be in 1912. The DVD's liner notes call it "the most famous and best documented of all Thanouser films." It opens with a look inside a busy factory where children are doing hard, dangerous work. Beside the factory is a shantytown where all its employees live. It's morning, so in the shacks weary people drag themselves out of bed and prepare to get to work. One household features a sickly mother (Ethel Wright) and father (James Cruze) and three children, the youngest of whom (Marie Eline) is about five years old. The family's "one ray of sunshine," she's too young to work and is left at home to keep house, which she does cheerfully (picture the typical Shirley Temple character).

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After a few scenes of the family trudging to work with all their neighbors and the unsafe working conditions in an actual factory, we return to the little girl getting a pail of water from a stream just outside her home. The factory owner's wife passes in her chauffeur-driven roadster and stops to admire the little girl. After meeting her and deciding she wants to adopt the girl, the woman and her husband visit the family and offer them a lot of money to agree to part with her. It's enough money to provide them all with an escape from the exhausting work in the factory. Naturally, the family cannot accept. The factory owner and his wife leave in a huff.

The mill workers strike for a better wage. But the factory owner refuses to even consider their issues and simply waits them out. After months of privation, everyone is physically and emotionally much worse off than before and sadly go back to their jobs. The little girl's mother has become weak from malnutrition and can't return to work. But the family can't survive with her part of the household income. They realize the only thing they can do. Her father tearfully takes the little girl to work and puts her on a strenuous, noisy job just like all the other children. A short while later, the little girl, dirty and crying, goes to the factory owner's house and pleads with his wife to take her in and release her family from their suffering. But the woman pays no attention to her, preoccupied as she is with a new puppy. Back at work, the little girl collapses from exhaustion and dies. The film ends with the family informing the factory owner and his wife of their daughter's death as the drive by the house. The factory owner and his wife drive away, but later privately realize what damage their selfishness had done. Nothing has been gained by anyone and the misery continues.

Petticoat Camp (1912, 14.5 minutes) – Here's a surprisingly modern battle-of-the-sexes comedy. Five young married couples go camping on an island in a lake. Soon the men are having a great time going off exploring and fishing while the wives have to stay behind preparing food and maintaining the camp. The men scoff at their pleas for help with the work, so the angry ladies gather some gear and retreat to the next island to set up their own camp. The men try to get by without them but don't know anything about cooking and have one mess after another. Rather than apologize, they have an idea to get the women to return on their own. Two of the men disguise themselves as hobos and boldly raid the woman's camp. But the ladies are prepared and whip out pistols. The men dive into the lake with bullets whizzing around them. Soon the hungry, defeated men have had enough and agree to do their part so that the woman can have some free time for fun too.

The Evidence of the Film (1913, 14.5 minutes) – Since this one provides a rare look at filmmaking behind the scenes, the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress selected it in 2001 for inclusion in the National Film Registry because of its "cultural, historical and aesthetic significance." A young woman (Florence LaBadie) works in the joining (editing) room of a movie studio. She has a little brother (Marie Eline) of about six years of age who spend the day working as a delivery boy. The movie begins with him exiting the studio with her after a tour of the set and saying his goodbyes as he leaves for his next delivery job.

Across town, an investment broker has received a letter from a woman he has been cheating. Her note states that unless he delivers several thousand dollars in bonds that he has taken from her, she will have him arrested. He secretly prepares two identical bundles, one with the bonds and another with newspaper. He makes sure his office

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personnel witness him giving the bonds to the boy and verifying that the bonds are indeed there.

The crook follows the boy across town. At the right moment, he walks into the boys, knocking him down. He immediately switches the packages, completely oblivious to the fact that he's wandered into a movie being made at this location and there's a movie camera recording his every move ten feet directly in front of him!

When the boy delivers the package, the woman opens it and concludes that the boy took the money and substituted the dummy package in its place. She immediately summons the police. An investigation confirms, based on the testimony of the broker's staff, that the money did indeed leave the building with the boy. The hapless youth is taken before a judge minutes later. His sister arrives but can do nothing but watch and wring her hands. Without any legal representation whatsoever, the boy is convicted of the theft and hauled away to jail! (The wheels of justice moved fast in those days.)

Later, in case you haven't already figured out how this is going to end, the sister is at work editing film when she sees the footage of the bundle switch. She rushes the film to the authorities. The broker, confronted with the footage, confesses to the crime and the boy is freed.

A Dog's Love (1914, 11 minutes) – This is the kind of story Thanouser did so well. It must have been a powerful tearjerker in the more sentimental time of 1914. It's unrelentingly sad and, I admit, still has the power to move the emotions. A little girl (Helen Badgley, "The Thanouser Kidlet") has no one to play with. On the other side of the hedge along the property line in her back yard, she discovers a doghouse with a friendly collie (Shep, "The Thanouser Collie"). She brings the dog over to her side and plays with him. Days later, the little girl is sent on an errand and gets hit by a car. She passes away. Her parents and the dog visit her grave. The dog stops eating and grows weaker by the day. He spends his days mourning at her graveside. He even coaxes a woman tending another grave to water the flowers on the little girl's. One night, her ghostly form appears before the dog and leads him back to her grave. Iris out. But Wait. The last title card says, "Don't cry, it's only make believe." We see a final close-up of little Miss Badgley and Shep smiling warmly at the camera.

Their One Love (1915, 15.5 minutes) – This Civil War drama was released just after Giffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Twin girls (Madeline and Marion Fairbanks) are in love with the same neighbor boy. In the months after he leaves to fight with the Union army, each observes how much her twin pines for the boy and secretly writes letters telling him of the twin's devotion. During a furious battle (employing impressive night cinematography and pyrotechnics), he is killed and the girls receive his parcel of belongings, which includes a tintype of them. The film ends with a jump ahead to 1915, where we see the twins, now old ladies, having tea in their yard, evidently an indication that they never married.