

Thanouser Classics – Volumes 1, 2 & 3

A Review by Anthony Slide
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Back in the mid-1970s, I argued that it was not possible to write a definitive history of the American silent film until the work of each of the major producers of that era had been adequately documented. I regret that I am still awaiting books on most of the companies concerned, but I am delighted to welcome the three-volume video collection, *Thanouser Classics*, which offers a good sampling of the output of the New Rochelle-based Thanouser (pronounced "Fanouser") Company from 1910 through 1917.

The collection is beautifully packaged, with each volume bearing a full-color reproduction of a Thanouser poster, and with a twelve-page book of program notes by Victor Graf. Thirteen films, from various archives, are included in the compilation, each accompanied by an original score performed on a Wurlitzer organ by Andrew Crow. The music is always sympathetic and complementary to the films, although I have to admit that I felt the Wurlitzer was a little too "magnificent" to be accompanying some of the early shorts that would originally have been screened with music provided by a live pianist or possibly even a player piano. I am very glad to state that the films have been transferred to video at the correct speed and properly centered. Nothing annoys me more than to watch silent films on videotape, with the left-hand side of the picture and titles missing.

The first tape features *Only in the Way*, *Get Rich Quick*, *The Coffin Ship*, and *Cinderella* from 1911, together with *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* from 1912. The last features James Cruze in the title role, and he can also be seen as the leading man in the first film on the second tape, *The Cry of the Children* (1912). An important indictment of child labor in the United States, the film makes good use of footage shot inside a working mill. As with so many Thanouser productions, it is a child who dominates the action - in this case Marie Eline (who is also starred in *Only in the Way*). I must state that I am not partial to small children on screen, and I could well understand the mill owner's wife in *The Cry of the Children* deciding against adopting Marie Eline in favor of a small and ugly dog.

The second tape also includes *Petticoat Camp* (1912), one of only two comedies in the compilation; the other is a very tedious effort, *The Soap Suds Star*, on tape three. *Petticoat Camp* stars Thanouser leading lady Florence Labadie, who plays Mary in the next film on the tape, the *Star of Bethlehem*. Originally shot as a three-reeler, this "epic" on the birth of Christ exists today only in a one-reel version. *The Decoy* (1914) provides a rare opportunity to see Muriel Ostriche on screen. Finally, on the second tape is my favorite film, *A Dog's Love* (1914), starring another Thanouser child star, Helen Badgley. Here she is a lonely little girl whose only friend is a neighbor's dog. When the child is killed - in a very well staged auto accident - the dog is bereft, brings flowers to her grave, and eventually keeps silent vigil at the site. Happily, a final title reminds the audience, "Don't Cry It's Only Make Believe," and the film ends with Baby Helen and the dog smiling at the camera.

Tape three begins with an excellent two-reel suspense drama, *Crossed Wires*, in which an innocent man, played by Morris Foster, is accused of murdering his aunt. After *The Soap Suds Star*, the tape concludes with the five-reel drama, *The World and the Woman*, originally released in November 1916. Starring as the Woman, "stumbling blindly towards the pit," is Jeanne Eagels in her screen debut. Having been very disappointed by the great star's performance in the 1929 version of *The Letter*, I was delighted to discover that here she acquits herself well. The story by veteran Thanouser screenwriter Phil Lonergan has Eagels coming to the country, which she equates with

the church, and becoming a faith healer or perhaps more accurately a Christian Science practitioner. The direction by W. Eugene Moore is adequate, and Eagels' performance and the storyline sufficiently compelling to hold the attention. The film is helped immeasurably by an excellent score in Andrew Crow, the best in the compilation.

Unfortunately, the film, which came from George Eastman House, is of poor visual quality, much too dark with no details visible. If nothing else, this series of tapes provides a rare opportunity to compare the work of one archive's with another, with films being provided not only by George Eastman House but also by the Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress, the Nederlands Filmmuseum, and the National Film Archive (London). Obviously, comparisons are odious and also unfair in that the viewer does not know with what preprint materials the archives had to work. On the whole, the prints from the Library of Congress; appeared - lackluster. The best print appeared to be of *Crossed Wires* from the National Film Archive, followed by *The Coffin Ship* from the Nederlands Filmmuseum. Of course, it is all subjective, and I may be biased by the strong storyline and the good use of outdoor locations, on a wharf and on board ship, in *The Coffin Ship*. I do know that I wish archives would routinely restore the tints to silent films. The 16mm print of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was irritating of itself, and it was hurt by a night scene intended to be tinted clearly showing sunlight visible.

The gentleman we have to thank for this excellent three-part tape compilation is Edwin W. Thanhouser, grandson of the founders of the Thanhouser Company, who has been working since 1986 to acquire, preserve and restore his film heritage. In 1995, he founded Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc. to continue his work, and, aside from putting together this compilation, the non-profit Organization plans to publish, as a CD-ROM, Q. David Bowers' definitive history of the Thanhouser Company.

The three tapes in the "Thanhouser Classics" collection are available for \$24.95 each, or the complete set can be purchased for \$69.95 from Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, Inc., 8770 NW Kearney Street/Fax (503) 2263-7961. Further information on the CD-ROM is also available from this address.

This is a project well worth supporting. We need more of these types of tape compilations put together with love and respect for the work of the pioneers of the film industry. If nothing else, this set of tape provides a unique record of early film melodramas and disproves the theory that the melodramatics of the story were matched by the melodramatics of the performers. Here, one has a history of the Thanhouser Company in easily digestible form. Most recommended!