

The Museum of Modern Art

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUSEUM TRIBUTE TO EDWIN S. PORTER REVIEWS THE MOVIES' EARLIEST YEARS

As part of A TRIBUTE TO EDWIN S. PORTER, The Museum of Modern Art will present a lecture/symposium on Friday, December 8 at 6:00 p.m., when the seminal classic, "The Great Train Robbery" from 1903, will be shown and discussed in relation to other Porter works, subsequent developments in film, and the entertainment traditions out of which the cinema arose.

This lecture--one of several such events planned for December at the Museum--represents a re-evaluation of Porter's work in the 75th year after its original release. The figure of Edwin S. Porter looms large in the cinema of the first decade of the 20th century, when film directors were beginning to develop a cinematic language emerging from other entertainment forms, such as magic lantern shows, vaudeville and the theatre.

One of the pioneer innovators of American film, Porter, who worked with the Edison Company, was first recognized by The Museum of Modern Art when its film archives began to take shape in the 1930s, and "The Great Train Robbery" appeared as part of the Film Department's first major archive exhibition, THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE, in 1940. In an essay for that occasion, the Museum's first film curator, Iris Barry, noted that in "blood and thunder melodramas which were enjoyed rather than admired, such as the rightly famous 'Great Train Robbery' of Edwin S. Porter--we see a bold attempt to tell a story full of action in an original manner and with distinctly cinematic freedom. The limitations of space and time are bravely thrown away: the action whisks from point to point as the director chooses. Porter had definitely found a technique proper to the screen and like nothing else in the world."

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Screenings in connection with A TRIBUTE TO EDWIN S. PORTER are scheduled to occupy the Museum's ongoing Requests from the Archives series on Tuesdays at 2:30 and Fridays at 6:00 from December 1 through December 22. Films for these screenings of Porter's works made between 1898 and 1909 are organized into four programs according to the dates of their original production and release (1898-1902; 1903; 1904-05; and 1906-09 respectively). A number of these films have been acquired from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection; others are 35 mm prints, some available for the first time in forty years, printed from original Edison nitrate negatives in the Museum's collection and restored by guest programmer Charles Musser using written records of the Edison Company and contemporaneous reviews.

For their aid in the preparation of this program, the Film Department wishes to thank Reed Abel, Archivist, The Edison National Historic Site; David Reese and Paul Spehr of the Library of Congress Division of Motion Picture, Broadcast, and Recorded Sound; Audrey Kupferberg of the American Film Institute Archives; William K. Everson; Marshall Deutelbaum of the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House; Christine Kirby of the National Film Archives of the British Film Institute; Joe Koch of the Magic Lantern Society of the United States and Canada; and Charles Musser, guest programmer for the exhibition, whose efforts over the last two years have been the major factor in making the exhibition possible, and whose program notes accompany the screenings. This show is coordinated by Jon Gartenberg, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Film, who has written an introductory essay for the program. Complete schedule information for A TRIBUTE TO EDWIN S. PORTER follows on the reverse side of this page.

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For further information, please contact Lillian Gerard, Special Projects Coordinator (212) 956-7296 or Kent Wittrup (212) 956-7501, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019. Photographs available on request.

A TRIBUTE TO EDWIN S. PORTER

Schedule

Friday, December 1

6:00 Program I. 1898-1902. Short films including "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Life of an American Fireman." ca 100 min.*

Tuesday, December 5

2:30 Program I. 1898-1902. Short films including "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Life of an American Fireman." ca 100 min.**

Friday, December 8

6:00 Program II. 1903. Short films including "The Great Train Robbery" and "The Gay Shoe Clerk." Lectures and a symposium will be held in conjunction with the screening of films. ca 180 min.*

Tuesday, December 12

2:30 Program II. 1903. Short films including "The Great Train Robbery" and "The Gay Shoe Clerk." ca 100 min.**

Friday, December 15

6:00 Program III. 1904-05. Short films including "The Ex-Convict" and "Stolen by Gypsies." ca 100 min.*

Tuesday, December 19

2:30 Program III. 1904-05. Short films including "The Ex-Convict" and "Stolen by Gypsies." ca 100 min.**

Friday, December 22

6:00 Program IV. 1906-09. Short films including "Rescued from an Eagle's Nest" and "Cupid's Pranks" (with D.W. Griffith as an actor). ca 100 min.*

*Silent; piano by William Perry

**Silent; no piano

A TRIBUTE TO EDWIN S. PORTER: THE EDISON YEARS

Edwin S. Porter began his film career as a moving picture operator in June, 1896, two months after the successful premiere of Edison's Vitascope at Koster and Bial's Theatre in New York City. As a projectionist, he traveled extensively, not only in the United States, but also in Canada and the Caribbean. In 1898, he settled in New York, working as a projectionist for the Eden Musee, an Edison licensee, and picking up occasional work as a cameraman. Towards the end of 1900, he was hired by the Edison Manufacturing Company to head its New York studio on East 21 Street. With the company's resources behind him, Porter developed rapidly as a filmmaker, making a series of increasingly ambitious films, including "Execution of Czolgosz" (1901), "Jack and the Beanstalk" (1902), and "Life of an American Fireman" (1903), which outlined an approach to filmmaking that was radically different from techniques evolved by D.W. Griffith and other directors in ensuing years. "The Great Train Robbery" (1903) remains Porter's best-known film. During his next six years at Edison, Porter retained a distinctive style as he focused on particularly American themes: from social dramas like "The Ex-Convict" (1904) and "The Kleptomaniac" (1904) to the pro-vigilante "The White Caps" (1905). Films like "Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend" (1906) and "Life of a Cowboy" (1906) were commercial successes. During the winter of 1907-08, D.W. Griffith, an actor for the Edison Company before working as a director at Biograph, appeared in two Porter films, "Rescued from an Eagle's Nest" and "Cupid's Pranks." The boom in motion picture theatres meant a growing demand for product: by 1908, Porter was forced to produce films more quickly and supervise production by new personnel. Increasingly dissatisfied, Porter stepped down, becoming technical advisor in 1909, then leaving the Edison Studio completely to go into independent production.