"SENOR AMERICANO" (Universal, 1929) Dir: Harry Joe Brown; story, Helmer Bergman, Henry McCarty; 6 reels; starring Ken Maynard, with Kathryn Crawford, J.P. McGowan, Gino Corrado, Frank Peale, Frank Yaconelli, Lafe McKee

Bill Hart excepted, it has been some time since we had a western at the Huff Society, and while "Senor Americano" is hardly an unusual horse opera, it is a lively and spirited one, done with style and a certain amount of production polish. Maynard's best silent westerns (and indeed, the best of his career) were those that he made for First National immediately prior to this series. Produced on a very lavish scale, they - together with Tim McCoy's series at KGW - remain some of the best westerns ever made, and of course were far from "P" either in design or in boxoffice importance. Maynard's subsequent series for Universal, of which this is a good sample, were less expensive, more standardised, but still well done. Harry Joe Pown (who had been a production supervisor on many of the First Nationals, and who was much later to tie up with Randolph Scott in his Columbia series) directed several of them, but he was better employed on the production side; his direction, though competent, lacked the finesse of other western directors. "Senor Americano" actually came out in two versions - sound and silent. Ours is the latter, and probably trimmed a little. Maynard, you'll notice, does a fair amount of singing in this film - but all we get are the beginnings or ends of songs. His voice wasn't bad, and he took pride in being the first to exploit sound in westerns by using songs. And since Maynard (then at least) had pretty much of a free hand in the way his westerns were made, we can be fairly sure that he had at least a couple of full length songs. Otherwise, the film shows no signs of having been a talkie; there is continuous camera movement, no long dialogue exchanges, and none of those box-like sound sets which gave the game away in earlier part-talkie Maynards.

The film keeps nicely on the move, with some good riding stunts by Maynard, who was then still a top trick rider and rodeo performer. However, there is a pretty obvious double in some of the acrobatics in the final reel -- a double who seems to have learned quite a bit from Doug! More amusing than thrilling is a duel in the earlier reels, when Ken takes on "the finest swordman in all California" -- played by Gino Corrado, just after playing one of the Musketeers in Doug's "The Iron Mask". A double is neatly used in the medium and long shots, but poor Ken in the closeups, despite the fact that he is supposed to be winning, looks so scared, worried and altogether incompetent with a rapier in his hand, that his final victory is far from convincing!

Maynard was an abysmally poor actor, and he lost a great deal of his appeal when talkies came in. Given to ad-libbing all his dialogue, and writing many of his own scripts (some of them rivalled Stroheim's flights of fancy!) he was also rather a heavy drinker, and lost the ability to handle riding stunts without the use of doubles. However, he had his own production unit for many years, and remained a popular western star for such diverse companies as Tiffany, Amity, Mascot, Universal, Columbia and Monogram right through the 40's.

---

Intermission

---
"LUCKY DEVIL" (Paramount, 1925) Producer/director: Frank Tuttle; story by Eyron Morgan, screenplay by Townsend Martin; starring Richard Dix, with Esther Ralston, Edna May Oliver, Thomas Findlay, Anthony Jowitt, Mary Foy, Charles Sellon, Joe Burke, Gunboat Smith. Original length: 7 reels; length of this print, 6 reels.

The combination of Richard Dix, lovely Esther Ralston and a motor-racing story ought to produce first-rate results. It doesn't. When I first saw this film, I was so disappointed as to initially strike it off our schedule. Then, as has happened before in such cases, I pre-screened it to two or three of our members to see what they thought. All of them thought that it had more merit than I had led them to believe, and that it was well worth showing. Certainly, they pointed out, the Motion Picture had shown far worse films! That of course was not the deciding factor -- but since there seemed to be more people for it than against it, it seemed best to present it on such a show as this -- a show making no claims for particular merit, but just offering typical programmers of a period. I think that if you approach it expecting not too much, you may be pleasantly surprised.

We've commented before on Paramount's economy-conscious policy of the 20's -- when the aim seemed to be to make as many pictures as cheaply as possible -- merchandising plain and simple. Study their release-schedules of the period and you'll see how meticulously this was applied. The "big" pictures, as for instance "The Covered Wagon" and "Old Ironsides" -- were notably light on big names. And the reliable stars -- like Richard Dix, even Swanson and Valentino, were shunted through endless "vehicles", eight out of ten of which were far inferior to their talents. Not that there were no good Paramount pictures -- but they were mighty few, and you usually found a top director behind them -- a Cruze or a Brennon -- a man who was powerful enough to spend money and get the talent he needed to work with him -- without being stopped cold by the accountants.

"The Lucky Devil" certainly is a good example of Paramount's short-sighted policies on money matters. It has a couple of good stars, a story that Doug Fairbanks could really have made come to life, and other elements that could have made it into a good movie. But hurried writing and production took all the zest out of it; even the locations seem to have been chosen for the sake of convenience, and are often drab and colorless. A lengthy cross-country pursuit à la "It Happened One Night" all too obviously never gets out of New Jersey! Incidentally, it's interesting to note that one location is a repeat from "Second Fiddle" -- also made by Frank Tuttle, some three years earlier.

It's formula all the way -- and largely formula borrowed from the earlier Wallace Reid pictures at that. But there are redeeming features. The opening is a cheerful plagiarism from Douglas Fairbanks' "Wild and Woolly". The pleasant faces -- and equally pleasant acting styles -- of Dix and Esther Ralston are always good to look upon. (As well they need to be, for everybody else in the film seems to be singularly and unnecessarily unpleasant!) The motor race finish, though again marred by cheapness (and incredibly obvious cycloramas), has excitement -- and a typically incredible (and enjoyable) windup.

"The Lucky Devil" is not a bad picture. (For really bad silent programmers, we recommend a look at "The Shamrock and the Rose", "Nobody's Mother" or "Keddington Women".) It is a neutral picture, of interest primarily because of its players, and as an example of the assembly-line fodder of the 20's which still managed to be popular because of its players.

Next program -- Tuesday next -- May 3rd -- THE CARTOON FILM - From Edison through Felix to Disney and the Freling/Jones madcaps.