ANIMAL STARS OF THE 20's: REX and RIN TIN TIN

Having just come from the New Yorker's showing of "Triumph of the Will", we seem hardly in the right frame of mind to tackle these notes - and, subsequently, scoring the films. (We hope too many Wagnerian strains don't subconsciously intrude!) Right now we feel more inclined to stage massive film student rallies and torch-light processions to Eastman House -- which is a pity, for these two little adventure pictures are darned good pieces of movie-making, and we hope we don't let them down. In any event, we think you'll be surprised by the real craftsmanship (and especially the photographic excellence) that went into these films. It's not hard to see why they were so popular, or why their thrills are so well-remembered. They just stopped making this kind of film when sound came in, more's the pity.


Rin Tin Tin's first starring vehicle (when he came on the scene, Strongheart was the reigning canine star) is also in many ways one of his best. Certainly in production values, it's superior to some of his later (and cheaper) vehicles, although conversely Rinty himself, still a newcomer to the cameras, is less self-assured than in later films. Already he has that knowing way of sizing up a situation carefully before going into action, but frequently he hesitates, waiting for his off-screen directions, before going through his paces. And his big dramatic scenes aren't played with quite the intensity of which he was really capable. (Those who think we're writing this tongue-in-cheek should look at a more experienced Rinty in "The Night Cry" and "Tracked by the Police"; make no mistake about it, he was an actor, and a good one!)

The plot (written by serial veteran Fred Myton, and soon-to-be-a-director Millard Webb) is typical Rinty fare, although it makes a little less use of him than did later entries. Even so, he steals the film quite effortlessly from all the humans (Charlie Stevens excepted perhaps); Pat Hardigan is just too villainous as the heavy, and the heroine is as homely as they come.

Chester Franklin, who directed, was an old Griffith man and something of an expert at animal stuff. He was responsible for the superb "Sequita", and for the animal scenes in films like "The Yearling". Some of his animal footage here (staged in excellently created studio "exterior") is beautifully done, and well photographed by a cameraman who, alas, received no credit even in the original trade reviews, or on the film's credits. Reportedly, Lewis Milestone was called in to "doctor" the film when it was finished, it being considered so bad as to be almost useless. Frankly this seems hard to believe, and is probably a latter-day press agent's story. What, after all, could he have done to improve already completed (and excellent-calibre) footage? The film wasn't important enough to warrant re-shooting or masque, the way Metro did. If he did additional studio stuff, then there's little to his credit, for the few added special effects (the cliff-top fight) are amazingly crude and of pre-
"Rescued from an Eagle's Nest" standard. It's possible of course that Warners didn't realize what a good little subject they had, it being the first in the series; but with the Strongheart films for comparison, even this theory seems weak. Probably Milestone merely worked on the film in an editorial capacity, and later used the story of his having "saved" it solely as a publicity blurb. In any event, "Where The North Begins" is a neat and polished film (even if the snow does rather miraculously disappear in time to facilitate shooting of running inserts for the final chase!) and well worthy of a revival today. Its last NY showing was some five years ago, also by this society, and in the
interim the print has deteriorated somewhat. Its pictorial quality is fine, but it has shrunken slightly, and is full of torn sprockets. We've patched it up as much as is humanly possible and it should project without trouble; however, if there is a break or two we hope you'll bear with us, knowing the circumstances.

- Intermission -

"THE DEVIL HORSE" (Pathé-Hal Roach, 1926) Dir: Fred Jackman; photographed by Floyd Jackman and George Stevens; starring REX with Yakima Canutt, Gladys McConnell, Bob Kortman, Fred Jackman Jr., Roy Clements. 70 mins.

Stuntman, director, and 2nd unit director Canutt (current film, "Ben Hur") somehow never really caught on as a silent western star - perhaps because most of his westerns, made for minor companies (other than Pathé), were really cheap quickies. "The Devil Horse", which is something of a special, and a vehicle for Rex rather than Canutt, is quite the best of all that we've seen; and for that matter, the best of all the Rex westerns too. Canutt's fantastic stunting is well in evidence, but it's not the whole show in the way that Dick Talmadge's acrobatics were all that his starring vehicles had to offer. "The Devil Horse" is a really excellent little western, which has nothing very new to offer, but is put over with scope, sweep, and real style. The action scenes are staged on a truly large scale and without recourse to stock footage (other than the re-using of the same shots once or twice during the film). However, the wild horse footage has been used endlessly since by every western movie-maker in Hollywood - from the Mascot serial "The Devil Horse" (not a remake) through the 2 Lesquitects, Gene Autry and Charles Starrett. It still turns up frequently in TV westerns.

There's too much action on the screen for individuals to matter much, but Yakima, hampered by a rather strange outfit, performs pleasantly. And of course Robert Kortman makes an ideal villain as the Indian whose main aim in life is to grab himself a white squaw.

Photographically, "The Devil Horse" is quite exceptional, with lovely long panoramas, and crystal clear images throughout. It's the work of George Stevens and Floyd Jackman, who, also with director Fred Jackman, shot "Rex, King of the Wild Horses", "Black Cyclone" and other Rex pictures for Roach. This was easily the best of all their films together at that time, and it's pleasant to recall that Stevens continued to use the Jackmans as his associates long after he became a "prestige" director.

Program Notes and enquiries - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

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Programs aren't set for July yet, but we have an abundance of riches this time, with a lot of newly discovered material. Some early Seiter and Mable films; more Langdon and Charlie Chase; a John Bunny; some interesting Fox material; full details in our July notes. First show, as always, will be on the third Tuesday.