Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society  December 28, 1962

THE STUNT MAN

In the course of tonight's three hours of film we hope to bring you a good cross-section of the work of the Hollywood stunt men. You'll see stunts for thrills and stunts for comedy; stunts that work superbly, and at least one that misses badly; and of course you'll see Richard Talmadge, David Sharpe, Yakima Canutt, Tom Steele, Cliff Lyons and many others in action. However, as in any compilation of this sort, there will be some gaps, some missing personalities (no Jock Mahoney for example) and doubtless some missing films that you feel should have been represented. The serial 'The Galloping Ghost' for example, has some marvellous stunt episodes, but we used the best in our first stuntman show, and also in one of our serials; likewise the great climax from 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' has figured twice in our programs, and another repetition seems uncalled for. One omission that we regret -- the players like Douglas Fairbanks, Fred Thomson and Ken Maynard who, on occasion, slammed over tremendous stunt scenes without doubles. Here again, we have played these films at least once in other contexts (Maynard's trick riding and stunts in 'Red Raiders' were really something to see), and not wanting to get out of hand (our Western show a couple of years back ran for almost five saddle-sore hours!), we've just limited our selections to stunt men per se, and wound up with a tight and VERY lively three hours. Even if you disagree with some selections, we don't think you'll be bored!

"LET'S GO" (1923—Carlos Film Corp) Directed by William K. Howard; story by Keene Thompson; photographed by George Benoit; titles by Ralph Spence; 5 reels.


It's a pity that none of Talmadge's later, far more polished, vehicles for FBG seem to have survived, since today we know him only from his cheap silent and talkie vehicles, and as a double for Fairbanks in "The Mollycoddle", "The Mark of Zorro" and "The Gaucho", among many others. "Let's Go", one of the first films directed by William K. Howard, is however a typical enough Talmadge film, consisting of several prolonged and exciting stunt scenes strung together on a slim story and a slim budget. It's light, pleasing, and well-paced; the titles are snappy and often very funny, although as usual there are too many of them and some of the gags fall flat. Like Fairbanks, Talmadge finds props for his acrobatics everywhere -- a ladder, a wagon, bales of hay -- and most of the individual tricks and routines that Fairbanks used can be found in the Talmadge films too, sometimes with more pep, but invariably with far less grace. We'll have a little more to say about Talmadge when we get around to the sound excerpts from his films of the 30's.

Intermission
PART TWO

A short montage of falls, leaps, train, plane, auto and wagon stunts.

"DICK TRACY VS CRIME INC" (Republic, 1941) Directed by William Witney and John English; with Ralph Byrd, Jan Wiley, John Davidson, Jack Mulhall, Ralph Morgan, Robert Fiske, Robert Frazer. EXCERPTS from the 15-episode serial.

Republic serials in the 40's entered into a brief, unappreciated Golden Age in which they combined the magic excitement and imagination of the old serials with the sheer speed and action of the new, and topped it all off with solid production values, good directors (the team of Witney & English were among the best) and strong casts. This Dick Tracy opus is a good example of this interesting Republic period, and our excerpts offer literally every scrap of worthwhile action from the entire serial, and most of the climaxes. Our excerpts total some 45 minutes, but because of a certain amount of unavoidable repetition, to say nothing of the nerve-shattering effect of so much non-stop action and frenzied agitation, we're breaking it up into two segments. The first, here, covers the first third of the serial. Later in the program we'll get back to it, and uncover the mysterious hidden villain "The Ghost". David Sharpe is particularly well in evidence here, not only in some truly spectacular leaps and dives, but also, along with Tom Steele & Dale Van Sickle in the quite stunning fight scenes. It is not too pretentious to refer to "choreography" in these fight scenes; carefully pre-planned, often brilliantly cut, and smoothly intercut between star and double, they are really a model of how such things should be done, and since there are several of them, you'll have a good chance for a careful study. Speed and excitement count for more than realism of course. Any of you who have had the misfortune to witness an aggressive drunk in the subway must know how one careless punch can produce a disgusting mess of blood, pulp and broken tissues. But not at Republic -- here, backed by bone-shattering sound effects, the stuntmen land piledriving haymakers atop kicks in face or groin, and emerge a dusty and unkempt, but rarely bruised or bleeding. And that of course is part of the fun of the whole thing. And serials like this one, with their beautifully staged action and bizarre chapter endings are fun, although the most fun of all is in watching the David Sharpe hurtling across the screen, doubling for heroes and villains with impunity, probably not knowing or caring who he is supposed to be, and relying on the continuity girl to see that he's wearing the right clothes for matching-up purposes.

RICHARD TALMADGE - THE TALKIES

Talmadge never made it in talkies as he deserved, although his Universal serial "Pirate Treasure" was a dilly. The kind of films he made were really (and unfortunately) passé by the thirties, and he was in any case not a good enough actor to rise about the level of such quickie producers as Bernie Ray and Ajax. But he put his stunt background to excellent use as a top-notch second unit director on such films as "Trail of the Lonesome Pine", "Beau Geste", "The Real Glory" and "North to Alaska", often doing stunts in these films himself, and in addition he directed an occasional "B" thriller or western. These excerpts, from some quickies of the mid-30's, show how his format had changed not one whit since "Let's Go" -- nor had his ability lessened. We've left in a couple of dialogue scenes which do rather show why Talmadge didn't make it as an actor! His brothers (the family name as Metzetti) were likewise acrobats, and many of them appear as foils in the stunt scenes. They could take the tumbles beautifully, although none of them ever learned how to mix-it-up convincingly in fist-fights, and even Dick, without good direction and the aid of editing and sound effects, was a little weak in this direction. The first two excerpts are lively sequences from "THE FIGHTING PILOT" (1935). During one tumble here Dick rips his trousers quite noticeably, but emerges from the
the fall in a brand new pair! The second two excerpts are from "NOW OR NEVER", also 1935. In the first chunk, the acrobatics are presented in slow motion; in the second, one is amused by the complete lack of interest of passers-by as Dick leaps and bounds over the sidewalk.

THE CAR CHASE — Example 41

"DESPERATE JOURNEY" (Warner Bros., 1942) Dir: Raoul Walsh

One of the liveliest adventure melodramas of World-War 2 was this dynamically-paced Errol Flynn adventure, which everyone took far too seriously when it should have been taken as a tongue-in-cheek Fairbanksian frolic. This car chase, with Raymond Massey and hordes of snarling Heinies in pursuit, is one of the best things of its kind ever put on film, with beautiful low-angle travelling shots and slick editing joining forces with the stunt men themselves to make it a real thriller.

"GUNGA DIN" (Rko, 1939)

2nd unit director Edward Killy, who directed many of the George O’Brien westerns, here gives George S:evens a hand in slamming over some really peppy action scenes that came comparatively early in the picture and were merely build-up to the big action at the end (which we are not including, since it illustrates 2nd unit rather more than stunt work).

PART THREE

THE WESTERN

Here again it would have been all too easy to load a whole reel full of great action scenes, but we have tried, in the space of about 20 minutes, to cover as much top material as possible — and needless to say, a goodly portion of it comes from Republic. We have kept away from individual stunts such as leaps into the saddle or through windows in favor of short sequences that are interesting in themselves.

We start with Republic’s "The Big Show" (1937), a movie about western movies, in which Gene Autry plays an unpleasant cowboy star who employs a likeable cowboy (also Autry) to double for him. It’s an amusing premise, and of course once Autry no. 2 swings into the saddle, it’s Yakima Canutt that does most of the work under the wagons! However, it’s quite well done, and Autry is a bit more energetic here than he usually was. Then, into a chase scene from Johnny Mack Brown’s Universal "THE SILVER BULLET" (1942). The stunt element here is relatively minor, but it’s an excellent illustration of the way that director Joseph H. Lewis, formerly an editor and later a minor-league Fritz Lang, got real style into "B" westerns. He made three with Brown, and in all of the chase scenes contrived to have trees or fences between rider and cameraman, and also had rider and cameraman on different levels. The added dimension of speed and movement is quite remarkable. Thirdly, a quick glimpse of a high dive from a Buck Jones serial "THE PHANTOM RIDER" (1936), and a stunt that goes spectacularly awry in John Wayne’s "THE TRAIL BEYOND" (1934). But the camera goes on grinding, and the stuntman picks himself up and does it over again! Next, an exciting stunt fight between two men on one horse, allegedly Roy Rogers and Paul Kelly, in "THE MAN FROM MUSIC MOUNTAIN" (1943). More Republic in "GUNSMOKE RANCH" (1937) from the "Three Mesquiteers" series. This was one of the best western series ever put on the market, and this excerpt gives a good idea of the top photography, music, action content, choice of locations and general production values that the series offered. Yakima Canutt is villain Kenneth Harlan’s henchman.
in these scenes, and his hand is well in evidence in the horse fall scenes. (Canutt’s spectacular 2nd unit work can be recalled from "Stagecoach", "Man of Conquest" and of course "Ben Hur"). Further "3 Mesquiteers" action in "RANGE DEFENDERS" (1937), directed by the too-often-ignored Mack V. Wright, one of the most stylish action directors in the business. The excerpt includes one monumental horse fall by Harry Woods’ double, in which the ground-level angle of the camera has the stunt man literally hurled at the audience, 3-D fashion. Fine as they are, there isn’t a single fall in "Taras Bulba" to match this one. And finally, from the 1932 Mascot serial "The Devil Horse", an incredible sequence of Yakima Canutt doubling for Harry Carey and literally fighting a wild horse by hanging on to its neck.

DICK TRACY VS CRIME INC.

Back to Dick Tracy, "The Ghost", and of course David Sharpe, to see how it all comes out?

THE CAR CHASE - Example #8

NEVER GIVE A SUCKER AN EVEN BREAK (Universal, 1942) EXCERPT

2nd unit director Ralph Ceder staged most of this wild Sennett-style slapstick chase on and around the Hollywood Freeway, with David Sharpe well in evidence with several "roles", and Mark Stevens among the bit players. There’s some vintage non-slapstick Fields in there too. Apart from being a welcome note of comedy, this piece of inspired insanity also seemed to be the only way to bring this kind of a program to a halt!

-- Wm. K. Everson --

The next three programs are announced on page one. These are all quite definite and not subject to change. The full schedule for Jan-Feb will be mailed out next week. Among the films to be shown are "Clash of the Wolves" with Rin Tin Tin; Edwin S. Porter’s "Life of an American Policeman"; and a short series of three British programs coupling a relatively unknown British comedy with a Cavalcanti-directed film. The combinations: BULLDOG JACK (Jack Hulbert, Fay Wray, Ralph Richardson) and WENT THE DAY WELL? (Leslie Banks, Elizabeth Allan); IT’S IN THE AIR (George Formby) and THEY MADE ME A FUGITIVE (Trevor Howard, Sally Gray); and THE BLACK SHEEP OF WHITEHALL (Will Hay and John Mills) with FOR THEM THAT TRESPASS (Richard Todd, Stephen Murray).

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ANNOUNCING A NEW MAGAZINE

We direct your attention to some circulars on display this evening concerning a new magazine being put out by Alan Barbour, one of our members. It should, I think, be of particular interest to audiences attracted to our stuntman show this evening. The circular says all that need be said of the contents, so I won’t add to it -- except to wish it well. But a point worth making is that its policy is to devote itself to film history exclusively -- popular as well as highbrow. (E.g., you’ll probably get a Hopalong Cassidy Index with every Dowd/Benko article). And as other magazines are unable to do, or unwilling to do, it guarantees its writers that articles will not be cut, distorted, perverted, editorialised or otherwise changed. So if you’re bored, at least you’ll be bored in the author’s own style