Monday next, Dec. 15th: A program of schoolboy-adventure: Curwood's "THE COUNTRY BEYOND" (1936, Eugene Porda) with Rochelle Hudson, Paul Kelly, Alan Dinehart; and Stevenson's "TREASURE ISLAND" (1934, Victor Fleming): Beery, Cooper, Barrymore, etc.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Dec. 8 1969

Two from the mid-20's

"BLACK CYCLONE" (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1925) Directed by Fred Jackman
Story by Hal Roach; Camera: Fred Jackman and George Stevens; edited by Carl Himm and Richard Currier; Titles: H.M. Walker & M.S. Boylan; 6 reels
With: Rex, Lady, Guinn Williams, Kathleen Collins, Christian Frank, Noah Young.

Although only "The Devil Horse" was an exceptional western, truly superior in terms of production values, all of Hal Roach's "Rex" westerns made small fortunes, and continued to bring in revenue from the talkie era. However, when their wild horse footage was constantly re-used as stock by other producers, "Black Cyclone" is pleasing and unpretentious, with first-rate locations and fine photography; it must have been a real crowd-pleaser at Saturday matinees in the 20's, and is still most entertaining. All one can really carp at is the too-accentuated comedy in the studio scenes; the weak painted backdrops are just too obvious in all the closeups used in the horse fight scenes, and one horse-mountain lion fight is done without the proper care in its utilisation of models and stop-motion technique. For one awful moment, the lighting even picks out the four wires manipulating the model lion! But otherwise there is only one interior scene in the entire film, and the whole thing keeps nicely on the move against its majestic locations. It's almost two reels before the first humans appear; another reel before the hero's entrance and the start of the plot proper. Guinn Williams (more familiar as a western hero in the 30's) is quite a physically rugged hero, managing most of his riding (even the bareback stuff), horse falls and battling stunts without a double. And Christian Frank is a marvellous old-time villain, totally unmotivated in his hatred for the hero, his lechery for the heroine, and his resolve never to fight fair when kicks and eye-gouging seem to get better results. It's good to see such sheer meanness (for its own sake) again, without having to have it explained away in psychiatric jargon. Psychological problems are left to Rex, who, like Jin Tin Tin in "Tracked by the Police", is finally faced with the dilemma of having to choose between saving his beloved master or his equally beloved mare.

- intermission -

"MISS BLUEBEARD" (Paramount, 1924; rel: January 1925) Director: Frank Tuttle
Script by Townsend Martin, based on Avery Hopwood's play "Little Miss Bluebeard", itself based on "Der Gatte des Frauleins" by Gabriel Dragoley;
Original length: 7 reels; this Kodascope edited version, 5 reels.
With: Bebe Daniels, Robert Frazer, Raymond Griffith, Kenneth MacKenna, Lawrence O'Crasy, Daisy Kane, Martha Madison, Florence Billings, Ivan Simpson, Lucien Prival

Both Hopwood's play and this screen adaptation of it were enormous commercial hits in their day, and while it's hard to see any unusual merit in the film today, it's still possible to understand its popularity then. This kind of marital farce of misunderstandings was still relatively new fodder for the screen, and must have seemed a welcome and sophisticated change from the purely sight-gag comedies that predominated -- and which of course, today, stand up rather better! The trouble with "Miss Bluebeard" is that it now seems not an else attempt in standard farce mechanics, but rather like an elongated Leni Errol 2-reeler of the 40's, with only one gag on the hero in the wrong order, with its multiplicity of characters and constant running in and out of doors, not only did it seem to play just as well out of sequence, but it also wasn't that easy to find out where to make the re-arrangements! It is now in sequence of course, though like most Kodascope prints, it has been edited down to 5 reels, with most of the missing footage apparently occurring at the end of the first reel, when there might have been some mildly risque stuff, usually the first casualty of Kodascope editing, since schools and homes were such a big factor. Perhaps deliberately, the whole film is constructed just like a play, with a maximum of doors and other exits, painted corridors, and some sets even framed by curtains, so that the few actuality shots - railway stations for example - seem quite out of place. By today's standards, the material itself is hardly inspired, but it's a polished little fil with most of the entertainment values coming from the players. With almost none of her silent starring vehicles available today, it's a real pleasure to see Bebe Daniels in a lead again - looking beautiful in many closeups - and while her comedy sequences are thin, Ray Griffith's acting, even in scenes where he can get out of them. Robert Frazer, so soon to be reduced to villains in westerns and serials, is pleasant enough but quite overshadowed by these two trouper. "Miss Bluebeard" doesn't add much lustre to Frank Tuttle's rather indistinguishable career, but it's a pleasant trifle; the rich toning and the charm of Daniels and Griffith helping a great deal to make it an enjoyable frolic that we can soon forget, but are still pleased to be able to bring out into the great world again for this short lease on life.

--Harold Vernon--