Monday next, April 12: Two fascinating misfire musicals: Herbert Wilcox's "HEART OF A MAN" (1959) with Frankie Vaughan, Anne Heywood; preceded by "TAKE A CHANGE" (1933) with Buddy Rogers, June Knight, Dorothy Lee.

April 5, 1971

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE GOLDEN WEST" (Fox, 1932) Directed by David Howard
Scenario by Gordon Rigby, (allegedly) based on a story by Zane Grey; Camera, George Scheniderman; 7 reels
With George O'Brien, Janet Chandler, Marion Burns, Arthur Pierson, Oswald Stevens, Barnett Corrigan, Bert Hanlon, Edmund Breese, Julia Swane Gordon, Dorothy Ward, Maude McDonald, George Rogers, Sam Adams, Eddie Dillon, Stanley Plisstone, Frank Hazen, Chief Big Tree, Iron Eyes Cody, Ed Brady.

None of the early George O'Brien Fox westerns have been seen for some thirty years, and they have never been released to television, so their exceptional production values may come as very much of a surprise. Their plots were unusually strong too, one of the best of them - "Mystery Ranch" - coming as close to a western horror thriller as we've seen! When sound came in, George O'Brien - always one of the most virile Western stars, and certainly one of the most pleasing performers - was still a big name, having worked in prestigious productions for Murman, Corthiz, Snares and most prolifically of all, John Ford. So his Westerns for Fox were no "B" pictures; however, the rapid dissipation of the Western after the first flurry of talkie epics - "Billy the Kid", "The Big Trail", "Cimarron", "The Virginian" - reduced all horse operas (for a while) to a "B" or programmer level, and the O'Briens just couldn't sustain their obviously expensive production costs under this new economy. Gradually they became cheaper and less effective, until Fox abandoned them altogether, though still releasing an independently made series (one of which, "When a Man's a Man", is still something of a minor classic among "B" pictures). Luckily O'Brien had a whole series of really good "B"s for Sako ahead of him. "The Golden West" is one of the most entertaining of all of his early Fox films, though surprisingly light on star names considering that others in the group utilised up-and-coming people like Bogart, George Brent, Myrna Loy, Nauman O'Connel and others. It's allegedly based on a Zane Grey novel, but actually the first no Grey novel - or short story - of this title; it is actually much closer to the book, with the construction of the plot, and the disastrous results of gold mining in the West, than the earlier versions or that bore no resemblance to it whatsoever.

Actually the epic scope of the story is almost too big for its brief (70 minute) running time, causing it to be disjointed and at times out of proportion - although it also causes it to be quite unpredictable too, and there are some real surprises in its story-line. Production values are solid, but they are also boosted by a few establishing shots from "The Big Trail", a climax lifted almost totally from Ford's "The Iron Horse", and an incredible buffalo stampede sequence (partially stock) which is one of the most realistic such sequences ever filmed. Even being aware of the odd tricks of the trade the authenticity such sequences to be shot (including dousing the actors with a scent that is so instinctively repulsive to the buffalo that they go out of their way to avoid it) it's difficult to figure out how one or two of the shots were obtained.

George's colorful role gives him the opportunity to play a gentlemanly Southerner, a rugged man of action and an Indian brave whose near-nudity displays the rugged O'Brien physique at its most imposing best. Western purists may also be a little surprised by the "Son of the Shaik"-like sequence wherein George, as the Indian, and a young boy who has just arrived, go into the woods naked without even the benefit of the forests for camouflage - that marriage which William J. Healthy taught us to expect with earthy realism caught up with him. Our one regret: that the serious plot doesn't allow for the exploitation of George's deliberately self-assured sense of humor.

"JUST PALS" (Fox, 1920) Directed by John Ford
Scenario by Paul Scrofield; original story by John McDermott; Camera, George Scheniderman; 6 reels

Ford's first film for Fox is perhaps a little disappointing in that it partially avoids the rugged action material for which he was already comparatively famous, and combines it - and its semi-Western theme - with a Charles Ray-like story. The wisly-washy and self-pitying Ray character was never a very fortuitous one for Ford to tackle; "Lightning", a film very much in that vein, is one of the weakest of all his films. Ultimately Ford and his star, Buck Jones, seem to realise the irritating qualities of the character, and the absurdity of the extremes of his self-sacrifice and try to overcome it with as much be-au-mou action and gentle humor as the plot will allow. (Obviously, Ford wasn't going to rock the boat too much with his first film under a new contract!) Too, the film suffers (and unfairly) by a comparison with the later, more ambitious and better Borzage-Jones film "Lazy Bones", which we've all seen recently. So the film's shortcomings, if any, are largely those of hindsight - and we have come to expect so much of the silent Fox Pors, it's certainly a pleasing and eventually robust little film, and confirms again what a good and often moving actor Buck Jones could be.