Mystery Ranch (Fox, 1932) Directed by David Howard
Screenplay by Al Cohn from the story "The Killer" by Stewart Edward White;
Camera: George Schneidermann, Joseph August; 5 reels
With George O'Brien, Cecilia Parker, Charles Middleton, Noble Johnson, Charlie Stevens, Forrester Harvey, Roy Stewart, Virginia Hardman, Betty Franciso.

Several of the early Fox sound George O'Brien westerns are available to us now (and we'll be showing others), but by any standards of judging the "B" western action, production values, plot - "Mystery Ranch" is far and away one of the best. An attempt seems to have been made to turn it into much stronger meat than usual, to start it off on the horror film (with atmospheric low-key lighting, eerie music, plantation dialogue, a fine thunderstorm) and thereafter to at least maintain the level of a thriller, with a good deal to move to another genuine menace than was commonplace in the average Western. The opening reel is especially impressive, and full of Ford-like images - silhouettes, shadows, deep focus, ceilings, and even that unique grouping dominated by a lamp in the foreground, a composition that had been something of a specialty of Murnau's in "Sunrise", "City Girl" and others. The Ford echoes of course are not surprising in that the film is photographed by two of his best and regular cameramen, Seitz and August - though unlikely they worked as a team, and it's more probable that one took over when the other had to move to another assignment. Possibly coincidental is the remarkable similarity of certain scenes (particularly the heroine trying to apprise the hero of impending danger while the piano-playing villain watches them both) to parallel scenes in "The Most Dangerous Game". However, "Game" was released some four months later, and those scenes did not form a part of Connell's original short story - so it's quite possible that the scenarists of "Game" picked out those elements from this western that had been masked and exploited to heighten the similarity of course; here he plays Nito, his tongue having been ripped out in his youth for some mild indiscretion, while Charlie Stevens curiously plays an Indian named Tomto.

These two worthies join with Charles Middleton in making such a formidable trio of villains that one can readily forgive the one element that this film lacks - the delightful bantering sense of humor that George O'Brien usually brought to his heroes. Under the circumstances however, the lapse seems understandable. It's a slick, fast Western thriller, and even has the added bonus of an incidental musical score, rare indeed in westerns of the very early 30's.

"She" (Rko Radio, 1935) Directed by Irving Pichel and Lancing C. Holden
Produced by Merian C. Cooper; Screenplay by Ruth Rose from the novel by H. Rider Haggard; Camera, J. Roy Hunt; Dance Direction, Hermes Pan; Music by Max Steiner; 9 reels

Although by far the best of the half-dozen versions of "She", this edition has gained a near-legendary reputation through its long unavailability (the last New York showings were some 20 years ago) that it perhaps doesn't deserve. It was never an outstanding film - but it hasn't dated, and is as good as it ever was. Like the British "King Solomon's Mines" of the same period, it's an essentially sturdy-bound production. It aims at being stylized rather than realistic, and thus works better when it gets to the lost city where the unreal but lavishmated sets work in their own particular context, unlike the mountain and glacial sequences which just look fake. There are of course many echoes of the same team's "Kong" - similar build-up lines of dialogue, similar overall construction, an equally dynamic Steiner score, and even the old "Kong" gate pressed into service again. All it lacks really is some Willis O'Brien showmanship, and one wonders why a giant spider or two couldn't have come lumbering out of the caverns! Incidentally, one of Hermes Pan's sacrificial dance ensembles suffers from the same single fault - they're most sabotaged but lavishly-choreographed. But unfortunately a B身份" Waterfall" number, where a chorus turned left instead of right, but realised her mistake and went right on. Here, in an elaborate sequence obviously too expensive to re-shoot, a parade of priests ceremoniously dip their torches into the flame, hold them aloft, and march off. One torch fails to light - the priest hesitates, as though contemplating a second try - but then marches off in perfect rhythm, his unit torch held proudly aloft! On this European print, dialogue level is sometimes (though not often) low, particularly in the first reel, though Steiner's scores are recorded at a devastating decibels. Those with less than perfect hearing are advised to sit near the sound-box - hence, also, our use of the smaller room. The film is being repeated this Friday at the New School where the amplification on their new $25,000 installation should ensure first-rate sound quality throughout.

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