April 30, 1973

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

THE UNTAKEN (Fox, 1920) Directed by Emmett Flynn; scenario by H.P. Keeler from a story by Max Brand; camera, Frank B. Good; six reels

With Tom Mix, Pauline Starke, George Siegman, James O. Barrows, Syd Jordan, Pat Chrisman, Philo McCullough, Charles K. French, Jack Connolly, Frank Clark.

"The Untamed" (remade, after a fashion, with George O'Brien in the early 30's) is the earliest of the Fox-Mix westerns thus far uncovered, and perhaps surprisingly it is an anomaly to the westerns which had by then passed their peak but were still regarded as yardsticks by many other Western personalities and directors. Mix's character combines the same kind of near-evangelistic fervor and revenge-motivation that one finds in so many of the Harts. Too, it has the same dusty, unglamorized "look" of the Harts, and the same perhaps rather unlikely proliferation of extras pouring in and out of the saloon. Although there are one or two very lively stunts and plenty of action, the stress this time is on plot and character, and not on the tongue-in-cheek, "fun" approach that was identified with Mix. The action is often savage and bloody, and there are several killings. The plot is sufficiently complicated and over-populated to rank as a kind of horse-opera equivalent to "The Big Sleep." What impresses most of all however, is the really sharp and incisive editing. The story moves fast anyway, but the editing ensures that each individual sequence is physically fast. Oddly enough, this editing style is strangely out of place in a 1920 movie: it is late for the post-"Birth" borrowing of Griffith's cutting patterns (much borrowing reached its peak in 1917-1918), and the film is shot down low on the ground, as if in the sense that this type of cutting did not return to popular favor until after the Russians had revived - and refined - it in the mid-20's. Thus it tracks D.W. Griffith and predates Eisenstein - no mean achievement for a director like Emmett Flynn! (Without wishing to get into an "auteur" controversy, and admitting the importance of the writer and the physical cutter, at the same time the film wouldn't work as well as it does if Flynn hadn't composed and shot it the way he did). The print quality, alas, leaves quite a bit to be desired, and is a further indication that the goody work has been done today. The print is made from a new negative, itself made from an excellent condition 35mm original. It should look at least as good as the print of "Going Crooked" (a reversal dupes made from a 35mm original) and the difference speaks for itself.

Goth. B. Good, a superb if under-rated cameraman who did some really superior work in "B"s of the 30's, does such striking work that one can read between the frames and imagine what the film looked like originally. But one should be able to see it as it was, not merely conjure up visions.

INTERMISSION

GOING CROOKED (Fox, 1926) Directed by George Melford; supervised by Kenneth Hawks; Asst. Dir: Ray Flynn; Scenario by Keene Thompson and Albert Shelby LeVino from the stage play by Aaron Hoffman and William Collier sr.; Cam: Charles Clarke; titles by William M. Conselman; 6 reels


Many of the Fox B's of the late 20's, recently uncovered, prove to be more interesting than their prestige features since - particularly in the transition to sound period - they seem to have been used as sem-experimental vehicles to familiarise their directors with the use of sound. Some of these minor program pictures contain quite astonishingly sophisticated technique for the period, while others admittedly betray the source of their inspiration. (The upcoming "Dressed to Kill" looks quite clearly patterned on von Seyffartitz's "In the Blood," "Going Crooked," in play form a comedy, is a neat transformation into romantic melodrama. It is short, snappy, extremely stylish in its photography, full of enjoyable little plot gimmicks, and winds up with a last-minute rescue from the electric chair which milks that time-honored situation literally to the last second and to a degree that even Griffith wouldn't have risked, since logic - and luck - are stretched pretty thin! All told though, it's a brisk and most enjoyable little film, with Bebe Love looking most attractive, and George Melford proving much more adept at a skilful "B" than he was at prestige "A" films ("The Sheik") in his neglible prime of just a few years earlier.

- Wm. K. Everson

Note: even on a two-shows-a-month basis, time is still at a premium and I must apologise for not having had the time to devote to working out careful musical scores for these films. Luckily, they don't really need it, and I think should score well with the purely ad-libbed scores that they are saddled with. If they don't, please bear with us - be assured that an important film like dehlie's Whispering Ghost will get given proper musical treatment.

In good faith, Wm. K. Everson.