WILD HORSE MESA (Paramount, 1925) Presented by Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky; Directed by George B. Seitz; Screenplay by Lucien Hubbard from the story by Zane Grey; Camera, Bert Glennon; 80 minutes.

The Cast: Jack Holt (Charles Maloney), Bud McPherson; Billie Dove (Sue); Douglas Fairbanks Jr. (Chester Weynner); George Maguire (Bert Manerule); George Irving (Lige Melborne); Edith Yorke (Grandma Melborne); Bernard Siegel (Todd Nokin); Margaret Morris (Sis); Eugene Pallette (neighbor).

Piano Score arranged and played by STUART ODERMAN

Paramount's long-running series of Zane Grey westerns began early in the 20's as "specials," and concluded in 1940, by which time they had changed into high quality "B" pictures. For years we were frustrated by the virtual total absence of the stories of the silents, which had received both critical and popular acclaim, and had been the means of building the careers of several major directors and stars. Adding to the frustration was the frequent use of stock footage from these elaborate silents by their more economical sound remakes, and they looked as good as they were supposed to be. Thus, the two films that did finally emerge were perhaps the two most unrepresentative and worst of the series. Now, finally, good cross-section illustrations to date. Those of us who have waited such a long time, it is perhaps a little disappointing. To others, however, it will serve as a confirmation as to what a good and carefully produced series this was.

True to its nature, the film is nearly packed with action, and it takes its time getting underway; neither hero nor villain appears until the end of the film. But let's talk about the film. The original Grey story, few very "adaptations" have done more than pay lip service to the original story, and even given the same story has been remade several times, each with a totally different plot. Sometimes the film "originals" on which they were based just do not exist at all, and Grey was paid merely for the use of his name, or a plot outline scribbled on the back of an envelope. "Wild Horse Mesa" however, is about the most faithful of all Grey adaptations, and contains most of his feelings about the West as well as some of his racial and moral quibbles. He was on location with the film for much of its shooting in Arizona, and presumably must have been well pleased by it. Although leisurely in its pacing, it makes up for it with a good solid story and action sequences that are well done. Virtually all exteriors, beautifully photographed by Bert Glennon, later a John Ford regular, with "Stagecoach" among his credits. Jack Holt is such a manly and virile hero that there's no need to underline his heroics, and opportunities to spotlight him, via such services as riding close-ups, are seemingly deliberately ignored. And Noah Beery as always is a marvelous villain, obviously having the time of his life hunting enemies that are usually as weak as they are illegal. So expressive is that face of his that the subtitles seem to disappear, as he makes his entrance, and his mobile features alone tell us much of what is going on! Douglas Fairbanks Jr., in his third film, has seldom looked so young and boyish, and it's always a pleasure to see Billie Dove, albeit with the somewhat unbecoming hair-style she sports here. Bernard Siegel here plays one of the first of his several "faithful Indian" roles, the most colorful of which appeared in Frank Lloyd's mid-30's "Wells Fargo". With its naturalism, it stands alone as the film in a contemporary (1925) setting, rendering some of it a little anachronistic, but that was a fairly regular trait with Grey. With its careful production and notable cast, "Wild Horse Mesa" is a welcome if not overpowering rediscovery; now let's hope for "The Thundering Herd" and "The Border Legion" (both directed by William K. Howard) and some of the others.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

KING SOLOMON'S MINES (Gaumont-British, 1937) Directed by Robert Stevenson; Screenplay and additional dialogue: Charles Bennett, A.R. Rawlison, Roland Pertwee, Ralph Spence; From the novel by Sir H. Rider Haggard; Camera: Bernard Knowles; Music: Michael Spoliansky; Director of African footage: Geoffery Barkas; 80 minutes.

The Cast: Paul Robeson (Umbopa); Sir Cedric Hardwicke (Allan Quartermain); Roland Young (Commander Good); John Loder (Sir Henry Curtis); Anna Lee (Kathy O'Brien); Sydney Fairbrother (Gagool); Makubalo Hlubi (Kapise); Ecco Homo Toto (Infadoso); Robert Adams (Twala); Frederick Lexon (Scotch wholesaler); Alf Goddard (Red); Arthur Sinclair (O'Brien); Arthur Goulett (Sylvestra).

"King Solomon's Mines" represented something of a climax to Gaumont-British's attempts to catch the American market with Hollywood-caliber pictures, a pattern that had already embraced the horror film ("The Ghouls"), the western ("The Great Barrier"), science-fiction ("Transatlantic Tunnel"), Historical epic ("The Heroes of Arica"), war ("O.H.M.S."), glossy crime-thriller ("Non-Stop New York") and of the highly successful Jessie Matthews musicals. Although its cast was British, four of its stars had established Hollywood reputations, and to its lineup of impressive writing talents were renowned veteran Hollywood writer, Ralph Spence. Oddly enough, although there had been several earlier versions of Haggard's "She", this was the first filming of "King Solomon's Mines", and it came at an apt time,

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when full-blooded adventure tales were largely absent from the screen. After his initial burst of swashbuckling, Errol Flynn had retreated into comedy and drama; "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer" was in the past, "Gunga Din" and "The Four Feathers" still very much in the future. Even Tarzan was absent from the screen in 1937. The film thus found a whopping market, and was a resounding success commercially. It didn't prove that Britain could do this kind of thing better than Hollywood, but at least it was doing it, and Hollywood wasn't. The critics, who suddenly developed literary conscienties on behalf of Rider Haggard, felt that he had been betrayed — not least in the addition of a heroine, something he hadn't felt necessary, though something that MGM followed through on in their much later remake. But even the critical brickbats — coupled with praise for the film's simple and honest entertainment values — seemed to push the film into the realm of expert Hollywood hokum. Despite some excellent African location work, none of the stars left England, and the film is somewhat studio-bound. Anna Lee certainly remains far too dainty for all the privations she endures, although at least she attracts a modicum of dust and perspiration, which is more than Dietrich permitted in "The Garden of Allah". Today, this kind of fare, when made at all, is usually played for sensation, camp or lampoon. (A notable exception is "Shoot at the Devil", but what has happened to it?) To its credit, "King Solomon's Mines" plays it straight. Its director, Robert Stevenson, was Gaumont's most valued director next to Hitchcock, so Hollywood-oriented that he soon migrated there (with Anna Lee as his wife) to make films as varied as "Jane Eyre" and "Mary Poppins". And even if the film has shortcomings as an adventure film, it retains interest as a Robeson vehicle. Paraphrasing W.C. Fields' comments about Dickens failing to give Miceawber any juggling, one feels that Haggard might well have included Robeson's decidedly non-African songs into his narrative had he happened to think of it!

"King Solomon's Mines" has been missing for some 35 years, and tonight's showing is its first reappearance. 35 years is long enough for us to have missed it, but not long enough to have built up too many false expectations. Those of us who saw it then, and found it more "fun" than MGM's more bloody production, probably weren't expecting too much of it today. I find today that the scenes that impressed themselves on a childish mind in 1937 still hold up well. Much of it is bland and surprisingly downplayed; to a child of 52, the trek across the desert seemed a long, harrowing highlight. Today it is short, unnecessarilly fake, and distinguished in a cinematic way only by the elementary but effective editing that accompanies the discovery of water. On the other hand, the climactic earthquake inside the mountain is still exciting stuff; we knew it was fake then, and we still know it, but the set is handsome, and the thrill is real. The film takes an effective leaf out of the Tarzan notebook too in having the witch doctor despatch several hapless natives, giving time for suspense to build before she turns her attention to the white captives. The witch-doctor with her sinister little rattle, coming through her "smelling out the evil-doers" ritual, was a chilling scene in '37, and it still packs quite a wallop. The big battle scenes disappoint however because they are so cursory, and the spectacular action scenes done in Africa so badly intercut with the studio material. On the other hand, these are not the scenes one remembered. With its amusing dialogue, songs, rapidly changing locales and variety of incident, "King Solomon's Mines" still makes for thoroughly enjoyable hokum entertainment.

Note: although this is a brand new print, labs today are notoriously lax in working with old printing material, and the print isn't as well-timed as it might be. Hopefully, later prints will be better and lighter, but the defects aren't that serious. The print also contains a hilarious and quite paranoid warning of the dire effects of copyright violation, but it too is something of a historical footnote since it does present a major problem today. Few distributors, and quite understandably, want to invest money in purchasing films that have gone into the public domain — and then have pirates around the country make cheap, inferior dopes, hurting not only the legitimate distributor but also the reputation of the films themselves. Hitchcock's British films are an especial martyr to this particular evil.

William K. Everson