THE DEVIL HORSE (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1926) Directed by Fred Jackman; story by Hal Roach; Camera, Floyd Jackman, George Stevens; 65 mins. With: Yakima Canutt (Dave Garson); Gladys Hare (Marian Hare); Robert Kortman (Prowling Wolf); Roy Clements (Major Morrow); Fred Jackson (Young Dave) and the horses Rex, Lady, and The Killer.

By far the best and most elaborate of the several westerns that Hal Roach made with Rex (a vicious and literally man-killing horse, but who enjoyed a short vogue and even co-starred in a serial with Rin Tin Tin!) "The Devil Horse" is totally unsophisticated and full of action. Superb camerawork and excellent locations combine to give it almost epic status, although the no-nonsense story-line soon puts paid to any such pretensions. Quite incidentally, for historians it fills one crying need. One is always hearing stories about all the anti-indian films that were produced but, frankly, they just don't exist. We know there are anti-indian elements, there are usually mitigating and compensating factors. Here, however, is the (and possibly only) definitive anti-indian film. Not only does the heroine firmly tell the Indian heavy to "keep his place" (a reasonable enough statement, with leering Robert Kortman playing the indian who wants to make her his squaw), but titles constantly reinforce the motif by reminding us of Rex's good reasons for hating Indians and even "the Indian smell". When the film was last shown in New York (at a Museum of Modern Art tribute to Hal Roach some 16 years ago) audiences took it all quite seriously and presented its incoherents of any such intentions, and merely needed an excuse to keep Rex constantly on the rampage. Yakima Canutt, dean of stuntmen, starred in many silent westerns, with sound switching to acting bits and villain roles, stunt doubling (especially at Monogram and Republic) for John Wayne and others, and also directing. Later he organised stunt work on a massive scale, and was the second unit director on many major films ("Ben Hur", "Ivanhoe", "Stagecoach" etc.). For a fascinating and detailed rundown on both Canutt and Rex's films, we recommend Kevin Brownlow's excellent book "The War, The West and the Wilderness". The print of "The Devil Horse" by the way is a beautiful original in which the camerawork is seen to its best advantage.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE FIRE BRIGADE (MG M, 1926) Directed by William Nigh; Scenario, Robert N. Lee; Camera, John Arnold (originally with Technicolor sequences); 93 mins. With May McAvoy (Helen Corwin); Charles Ray (Terry O'Neill); Holman Hobbs (James Corwin); Tom O'Brien (Joe O'Neill); Eugene Besserer (Mrs O'Neill); Warner Richmond (Jim O'Neill); Bert Woodruff (Captain O'Neill); Vivia Ogden (Bridget); Dewitt Jennings (Fire Chief Woodruff); Dan Mason (Feg Leg Murphy); Erwin Connelly (Thomas Wainwright).

Tepping even circus pictures in popularity, the fire-fighting thriller was one of the sure-fire attractions in the 20's. So many were made that one or two directors (Emory Johnson in particular) specialised in the genre, and despite the repetition of characters (the fire-fighting family was one) and the unavoidable sameness of the action, they never lost their appeal. Most of them were programmed on Universal and the smaller companies, but when MGM decided to enter the fray, they couldn't help but make the biggest and longest of the lot. It would be a little peppier if shorter, but on the other hand the big fire scenes are worth waiting for — and also worth studying for their ingenious trick effects. Everybody knows that orphans burn best, so the climactic fire here (as also in "Mighty Joe Young" more than 20 years later) is a three-alarm as an orphanage goes up, and old horse-drawn engines as well as more modern motorised ones are brought into action. Incidentally, it is implied that the villain — whose sub-standard material is a practical joke — will cause the fire — will atone by committing suicide. But since he is the heroine's father, and the film clearly will have a big juvenile audience, this is softened a little, his demise being by implication only. "The Fire Brigade" premiered in NY in December of 1926, only three months after "The Devil Horse" was released, but each film was probably too big (then) to be double-billed in what was still essentially a single bill market, so this may well be the first time that these two typical action-genre specials have been shown together.

— William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.24; discussion period follows.

The Spring Series will be listed on the notes issues for our two remaining shows this semester.

A postscript to "The Fire Brigade": in the sound period William Nigh became one of the most prolific but also one of the blandest "B" directors. At Monogram he directed Boris Karloff in five Mr. Wong mysteries in a row, followed by a Karloff horror film "The Ape", and didn't create a spark of excitement or flavor. He creates far more sparks — no pun intended — in "The Fire Brigade", though by MGM standards he was still a routine director.