

Next program: Monday October 20th: Long unseen, Val Lewton's THE GHOST SHIP (1942, dir: Mark Robson) with Richard Dix, Russell Wade, Lawrence Tierney; and THE PENGUIN POOL MURDER (1932, dir: George Archainbaud) with Edna May Oliver, James Gleason.

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

October 6 1975

Two Stylish "B"s

ROBBERS' ROOST (Fox, 1932, rel: 1933) Directed by Louis King
Screenplay by Dudley Nichols from the novel by Zane Grey; Camera, George Schneiderman; 6 reels

With: George O'Brien, Maureen O'Sullivan, Reginald Owen, Walter McGrail, Maude Eburne, William Pawley, Doris Lloyd, Clifford Stanley, Gilbert Holmes, Frank Rice, Robert Greig, William Nestell, Vinegar Roan, Ted Oliver.

Fox filmed most of their Zane Grey properties three or four times each, but "Robbers' Roost" they did only once, although there was a later version for UA release in 1955. Not up to the standard of the very best George O'Brien westerns for Fox in the early thirties ("Mystery Ranch" and "The Rainbow Trail" being perhaps the very best) it's still well above average, and superior to such still interesting films as "Smoke Lightning", "Frontier Marshal" and "Life in the Raw". Extremely well photographed by John Ford's Fox cameraman (and quite incidentally scripted by a Ford scenarist too), it gets off to a lively start, and maintains solid and careful production values, though suspense and story values are stronger this time than action content. Maude Eburne's name in a western's cast always makes one fear the worst, but O'Brien seemed to like her (he used her well in "Hollywood Cowboy" too) and to be able to utilise her without letting the picture stop dead in its tracks. With an extremely good cast, this "Robbers' Roost" is clearly not a western made just for the juvenile trade, and it holds up well. Unfortunately, along with most of the other Fox O'Briens, it has not been preserved, and by now this 16mm may be all that is left. The original 35mm from which this print was made was very shrunken, this responsible for the occasionally noisy sound-track, and we're very lucky to have it in any form.

-- intermission --

KING OF GAMBLERS (Paramount, 1936) Directed by Robert Florey; Screenplay by Doris Anderson from a story by Tiffany Thayer; Camera, Harry Fischbeck; Art Direction, Hans Dreier, Robert Odell; Music and lyrics, Ralph Rainger, Leo Robin, Richard Whiting, Burton Lane; 7 reels

With Claire Trevor, Lloyd Nolan, Akim Tamiroff, Larry Crabbe, Porter Hall, Harvey Stephens, Barlowe Borland, Helen Burgess, Purhell Pratt, Colin Tapley, Paul Fix, Cecil Cunningham, Robert Gleckler, Frank Puglia, Nick Lukats, Fay Holden, John Patterson, Evelyn Brent, Fred Kohler.

In the past we've made no secret of our admiration of Robert Florey's expertise, and we've shown as many of his Paramount "B"s as we could find. Just how skilled he was at utilising standing sets, the best contract talent, and dressing it all up with fancy lighting and editing, making a mountainous silk-purse out of a molehill of a sow's ear, can be gleaned by comparing this film with another from the same Paramount series, "King of Chinatown" - with Nick Grinde failing to improvise and experiment and build on his material as Florey does. "King of Gamblers" (the title has scant relation to the plot) does almost too good a job on itself; it's almost long enough and big enough to attain "A" status, and some of Florey's breathless pace is lost thereby. But it's one of his most elaborate, full of bravura cuts and angles, a very lively opening, and an adroit way of circumventing the production code and letting the audience know what is really going on. The cast is full of old favorites (one wonders whether Evelyn Brent and Fred Kohler, in their atmospheric scene together, remembered their former glories under von Sternberg in "Underworld"?), though one or two, like Buster Crabbe, seem to get forgotten after they've put in their work.

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