

The Monstrous Movies

Hollywood is Like Nothing So Much As Old Home-Week in Bedlam

By CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

THERE is a delightful story to the effect that when a young woman disappeared from New York some years ago, and every corner of the earth, seemingly, had been searched for her, Finley Peter Dunne suggested, "Has anyone thought of looking in the gallery of the Century Theatre?"

Certain actor friends of mine have similarly disappeared from time to time. A deep, abysmal silence has followed their strange absence from the usual haunts of the metropolis. But now, at last, the mystery is solved. I know where they all are. They are in the movies—and most of them are in California, in a spot called Hollywood.

I had been prepared, on my first visit to the Coast, for the giant trees, the giant flowers, the colossal foliage and fruit that cause one to think he is living in a fairy-tale; I was certain of the great, wide-open hospitality—the big hearts and the abundant beauty I should see. But I was not prepared for the giant fungus growth, the monstrous mushroom that has sprung up overnight, as it were, in California—the most amazing and startling manifestation of the age: the movies.

Nothing can be small in California. Everything is magnified ten-fold or more; but the motion-picture industry has gone Nature one better; and the overwhelming scale on which it is run is something that the imagination cannot grasp at once.

The New El Dorado

AS the old Forty-niners rushed to the gold fields in search of El Dorado, so now actors, actresses and managers, cameramen and directors, writers, artists and continuity folk, flock to that same section of the country; and they have built cities overnight, just as the gold-seekers did, and camped on the Coast. But with this definite difference: they have gone there to stay. They may rear a Spanish town this afternoon and demolish it next week; but something else will take its place within another twenty-four hours. A pavilion which is an exact replica of one in Italy, let us say, may be erected for one scene in a play, and be absolutely valueless tomorrow. Money is thrown away as chaff before the wind. Almost it would seem that it would be more sensible to send a whole company to Italy than thus to toss gold into the Pacific. But no—all the paraphernalia is here—including the light that Nature has so thoughtfully and lavishly bestowed. Instead of actors being transported to Italy, therefore, Italy is brought to America—for a week or two; and nothing is thought of the miracle. Next to it, rubbing elbows with it, a Greek village may be in process of construction.

"The world is too much with us," one might say of Hollywood; and indeed the whole world seems literally to be here, concentrated in one tiny corner of the earth. So many assortments are here that it reminds one of those ingenious prisoners who, with nothing else to do, crowd the words of the Lord's Prayer on a pin-head. Hollywood is a contracted dance floor, on which everyone in the world is dancing; and the jazz goes on incessantly. There seems no rhyme or reason here, no method, no system,

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no direction; it appears a madhouse—as it is, and isn't; and a visitor finds it difficult to adjust himself at first, to fall into step on the crowded, nervous floor.

Is it any wonder? For hodge-podge is Hollywood's first, middle and last name. Confusion is the god that in some mysterious way runs this crazy universe.

What shall be said of a judgment that exploits the so-called "personalities" of little girls with weak chins but big black eyes that "film" well, in stories dashed off like penny-dreadfuls, with ungrammatical captions and incoherent "continuity?" Of actors who care only for the money that they earn, and wouldn't give tuppence for the studios unless their pay-envelope bulged at the end of the week and they could ride back and forth in a ten-thousand-dollar car? Of the younger group of perfect cameo-like profiles who leave shops and offices to go into the films, with no knowledge of the technique of acting, and who, when they have a priceless opportunity to watch a really great artist before the camera (for there are such), sit behind clumps of scenery and smoke innumerable cigarettes?

A Critical Close-up

It is the movies themselves which have invented and invited the close-up. They must not complain, then, if we tear down all obstructing barriers, and seek to view them as they are, through a microscope; revealing every wrinkle as a crevasse, every shadow as a mountain, every least gesture as a tempestuous orgy of emotion.

Yet I repeat that this phenomenon of the movies must be taken seriously. When one goes, as I did recently, to a city like Chicago and finds on the South Side, a district equivalent to New York's Harlem, a two-million-dollar building of magnificence housing nothing but photoplays, and sees over four thousand people packed in, watching and listening and obviously amused and thrilled, he asks what all this means, and admits, unless he is a *Dumbkopf*, the coming in of a new order. Particularly is he amazed and bewildered when, in the same city, he witnesses a brilliant spoken farce-comedy, deftly played by distinguished actors, given before half-empty benches—yet in the very heart of the town. What is one to say in the light of such overwhelming evidence? Simply that something has entered the world, suddenly, which grips the people, appeals to them, rivets their attention, and drives them out of the old established theatres. The galleries went long ago. Perhaps the balconies and orchestras will leave next. Then what?

One explanation comes, of course, instantly to the observer's rescue. That farce-comedy cost \$3.30 to see; the movie house asked only fifty-five cents for the best seat in a gorgeous auditorium. And not only was a good picture revealed, but operatic music was charmingly sung, and an orchestra of over sixty pieces, led by a trained director, rendered excellent music. The seats, I may add, were the last word in comfort, better than those in the "legitimate" house, and the sense of charm and barbaric glory was all about—too much of the latter to suit my quiet taste, but there, nevertheless, for the multitude that drinks in such surroundings and takes home the memory of a palace hitherto undreamed of.

It is disillusioning and sometimes disheartening to see a picture in the process of making; to hear hammers sounding in some great studio

while an actress behind a pasteboard set registers all the deeper emotions and permits her beautiful face—yes, beautiful at even eight in the morning!—to be daubed with glycerine tears, and, to the plaintive tune of a cheap violin, falls back on her couch of pain, while the camera inexorably turns, and men from the wings and ceiling pour merciless rays of light on her lovely head. I should think it would be anything but fun to “emote” like this, with no applause at the end of the scene. Wasn't it Whitman who said that if we are to have great poets, we must have great audiences, too? How much more this applies to actors!

The One Thing Missing

THEY told me a tale in Hollywood of an old tragedian who, down and out, came to this cardboard city to eke out a living at the tail end of a rather brilliant career on the legitimate stage. He had supported Booth and Barrett, Mojeska and other renowned stars. At first he was thrilled by all the clamour and glamour of this new world. The novelty of the business appealed to his imagination, and he ranted and raved with fervour and gusto, as of old. But he missed the resounding lines of Shakespeare—I think he was mostly cast as the grandfather in tawdry pieces like *The Vengeance of Somebody*, or *The Perils of Somebody Else*; but bravely he did his duty. He was never late, he was always on hand when the scene was set. At the end of a month, however, he found there was something lacking. He could not quite tell what it was. Then, one day, it came to him. Of course—the clapping of hands, the whistle of the gallery-gods. What were a few electricians, a director, however sympathetic, and stray cameramen in shining puttees (heaven only knows why!) to those stormy audiences to which he had for so long been gloriously accustomed? He missed the repeated curtain calls, the instant response to his art across that golden semi-circle of footlights; and even when he saw himself projected upon the screen, he heard little or no applause in the big movie palaces. What though Keats had told him that “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”? Bosh! it was not true. He craved, he demanded, the instant response that had always been his. He could not stand this silent drama; and, heartsick and homesick, he crawled back East, to talk over old times in the Actors' Home, with cronies who had flourished with him in those days of the Seventies when gaslight was the only illumination and the costume play was the joyous, youthful, inspiring thing.

Seriously, I marvel at the histrionic ability that can give a passionate performance just after breakfast. It is true that practically every screen actor and actress of note now demands accompanying music in order to work up to a trying scene. The honest Chaplin told me, however, that he seldom resorts to this artificial stimulus. “It's mostly bunk,” he was frank enough to say, “pose of the most obvious kind. It is a detriment, rather than a help, for one is apt to get the wrong tempo, to keep his mind too insistently on the music, which soon becomes mechanical.”

I quite agree with him, after observing various performers indulging in this dissipation. Still, musicians con-

stantly travel from one studio to another to contribute their lyric strains to the vast enterprises at Hollywood. But the aristocrats of the films carry their own private orchestras, and are not dependent upon itinerant players. It is but a part of the enormous entourage of a successful star.

Money pours in like a cataract; it pours out in the same reckless fashion. The more prominent you are, the better you must live. The dear public likes to think of its idols resting, in their off moments, in palatial homes; and, once having seen these costly houses, it does not forget them. It is royal advertising.

And oh, how they work! It is not a life of ease and indolence. It consists of days and nights crowded with thrilling scenes; but many hours are spent in the difficult business of waiting about—the hardest task anyone can be given to do. They journey miles and miles in the course of taking of, perhaps, only a few scenes; and they work themselves up to a high pitch of energy many times during an afternoon. The perspiration pours from their foreheads. The strenuous life, indeed, and no profession for anyone to follow, male or female, unless there is a natural endowment of health and strength.

If it is difficult for the stars, who are given every consideration, and whose pay-envelopes doubtless make amends for much physical effort, it is heart-breaking to see the supernumeraries who journey from lot to lot, seeking any kind of job. While youth is a great asset, there are just as many places where tired and wrinkled faces fit in; and the middle-aged "extra" has as good a chance as the vivacious and vapid looking flapper. The movies are a great democracy. They give employment to people of all kinds, since they are trying to photograph the world as it is. An old washerwoman who had been earning about ten dollars a week wandering from house to house doing up the beautiful linen of her customers, now earns ten dollars a day as one of the mob.

And many a mother rents out her baby, and knows just how to make it weep and smile at the proper moment, winning thereby the gratitude of a hard-pressed cameraman. Children, of course, are constantly in demand.

A certain Frenchman is supported by a remarkable dog that brings him in one hundred and twenty-five dollars a week; and there are those who allow parrots and monkeys to be their meal-tickets. "My cat is sick this week." I overheard a matron saying to a director. "Darn it all, I wish he'd pick up, for I need the dough!" It is hardly necessary to say that these animals are given every care, watched and coddled and daintily fed, lest some untoward accident or illness overtake them.