

Theatre Magazine

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Talkie-Town—

A critical estimate of the Hollywood manner



TO a regular cinemagoer in the era of silent films attendance at the motion-picture playhouses today is a continuously disturbing experience. With somewhat phenomenal vigor the screen show shops have recast the entire scope and quality of their entertainments in a bit over two years. The discovery that the shadowy images of the screen could be made articulate was as fruitful for exploitation to the captains of the cinema industry as was the realization that women would wear long skirts to the couturiers. They slowed up production for about six months and then resumed full-size schedules with altered studios and theatres and virtually a new medium.

So far as the externals are concerned, this extraordinary metamorphosis of the fifth largest industry in the country can be pretty clearly traced and evaluated. Film manufacture has become closely affiliated with our huge public-service combines, which furnish the machinery for sound reproduction and synchronization. It has increasingly fallen under the domination of Wall Street until there are practically no concerns today with powerful individual executives. And, above all, the whole medium of sound pictures has become inevitably concerned with the goings-on of the theatre proper, being at one and the same time a menace to the stage and its dependent and benefactor. With the vast expansion of motion-picture playhouse construction, studios are now forced to turn out an enormous schedule of entertainments. Paramount alone has already announced 243 releases for next season, double the number issued this year, and other companies are following suit.

Such matters are of passing interest, we may assume, only to a zealous film fan. His concern is, as it was in the heyday of silence, with the finished product of the screen. A large number of the silent screen's most valiant defenders attended the first sound pictures with some bewilderment. There are some who will remember that very bad picture, *Old San Francisco*, a little over two years ago, where sound accompaniment to the earth-

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quake made a startlingly effective climax. For a time it was in sound only that the films experimented, and no one was particularly disturbed by the phenomenon. With the introduction of speech, however, the screen became as inarticulate in form as it was articulate in function.

Sloppy synchronization, faulty and frequently ugly sound recording and altogether unskillful manufacture of these early dialogue films drove the cinema's most intelligent followers into voluntary exile from the movie playhouses. That body of cinemagoers who liked to make it a topic of parlor conversation deserted the new medium in droves. Motion-picture critics who, for the most part, had very clear ideas of what constituted the screen's æsthetics, were left in considerable perplexity in a discussion of the new medium. Most of them waged a rather gallant and fruitless war against the "talkies," reminisced fondly on the grand old days of the silent pictures, and then capitulated to the new form, content to decide its possibilities for entertainment and forget all about artistic potentialities or achievements. So far as one can see, the public generally was practically ignored in the transition period. Only last winter an extensive poll of film fans showed them relatively unsatisfied with sound pictures and desirous of once more seeing silent pictures. The answer of the producers was to increase dialogue picture schedules.

To those few screen enthusiasts who still think the motion picture one of the most exciting and interesting expressions of contemporary civilization, the sound picture medium is at best largely an unfulfilled promise. To complicate matters enormously, not even the brightest adherents of the cinema are very sure of just what this promise of the audible screen holds in achievement. A scattered handful of sound pictures have won critical acclaim and have established something of a basis for discussion and speculation. Where, in the days of silent pictures, the average film could be counted on for brief intervals of exciting and compelling beauty, however, the general run of sound pictures offers nothing but a hodge-podge of familiar stage and screen techniques. Even those who are still convinced that the films are potent to turn out distinguished and beautiful products have abandoned constant attendance, and the screen is in imminent peril of losing that imperative need of a growing art form, an intelligently interested, particular, and critical audience.

The silent photoplay, whatever else one may have thought of it, had developed definite forms and exceedingly skilled craftsmanship within the confines of the medium, before the overnight advent of sound. The best of the industry's artisans had been trained through the rapid but painful adolescence of the screen until they were accomplished in practically every function of writing, directing, act-

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ing, and photography. For many years producers, workers, and the public considered the form fit only for the most ignorant and insensitive branch of amusement seekers. Then, with the gradual building up of a small but loyal, intelligent audience and the example of foreign film importations, Hollywood producers heard murmurs that they were dealing in an art form. Greedily they seized on the magical word and its connotations, and in a surprisingly large number of cases artistic quality was placed above all other considerations.

Under these circumstances the films were latent with untold possibilities. A remarkable glamour settled over nearly everything issuing from Hollywood. Chaplin was called a genius and many considered the comedies of Raymond Griffith and screen dramas of Menjou the equal of stage works. Lubitsch, Von Stroheim, and Jannings, fresh from foreign achievements, were brought to Hollywood to do anything they wished. Among American directors there were King Vidor, Monta Bell, Val St. Clair, Brenon, and a score of others who considered their work as an art process, and the same applied to such players as Garbo, Menjou, Fairbanks, Talmadge, and Pickford.

It took no high-sounding phrases of the high brow critics to explain to these people what they were doing in pictures. The screen, for all its limitations, had a variety of techniques at its command altogether unique in dramatic history. It could express pantomime magnificently, far better than the stage had ever dreamed of. The single gigantic figure of the films, Chaplin, carried this form to its ultimate in his great series of comedies. Under him a whole school of comedy arose, utilizing the same peculiar technique.

At the same time the screen, through the convention of the close-up, could achieve extraordinarily effective results. The greatest of French pictures, *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc*, made by the great Danish director, Carl Dreyer, was done almost entirely in this form with brilliant artistic success, if none too gratifying a commercial return. This concentration on the close-up, aptly described by one commentator as "living sculpture," was at the same time used sparingly but effectively in all the finest program pictures of the period.

In addition to the remarkable techniques of pantomime and close-up the screen achieved probably its most splendid effects through its ability to reproduce panoramic effects, either of mob scenes or activity across distance. The Western pictures carried this form to its most popular expression, while the great foreign films, such as *Variety*, *Potemkin*, *The End of St. Petersburg*, were the most magnificent expressions of

A few months after the discovery that

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the screen could be made audible, however, all this accumulated talent in picture-making, distilled from years of experimentation with the silent screen, was scrapped. Workers in the industry were told to forget the qualities that set aside the movies as a unique and tremendously exciting art form and concentrate instead on the attributes of Broadway offerings. From being a distinctive expression with its own peculiar problems and capacities for fine achievement, the films suddenly were placed in the not particularly enviable position of camera and phonograph for stage plays and musical shows.

The tremendous vigor of the films, however, coupled with the supreme ignorance of many screen workers, have saved them for the most part from a rather stupid two-dimensional recording of the theatre's three-dimensional products. It is true that such a result is, generally, their avowed intent and function today, but with one or two notable exceptions they have failed to turn out even a competent aping of the stage. The failure is responsible for what is perhaps the worst lot of dramatic truck ever foisted wholesale on a supposedly adult lot of amusement seekers. At the same time it is the most encouraging sign to some of us that the motion picture is still capable of arousing us, moving us deeply, and compelling our admiration in its own right and in its own peculiar terms.

What happened in the first days of talking picture manufacture is not difficult to trace. Always a far more shipshape industry than the theatre, the cinema seized upon the exploitation values of sound pictures with considerable glee. They gave promise of satisfying a public's abnormal tastes for novelty and at the same time they offered a far more deadly weapon than the old silent pictures in the screen's desultory competition with the stage for popular patronage. Untrained in the mysteries of dialogue writ-



ing or acting or musical show production, Hollywood decided to transport Broadway almost bodily to the picture studios. Playwrights, players, directors, even producers, were lured with golden baits from the theatre to the screen, old and new plays were bought wholesale, and the film producers sat back, confident that the talking motion picture would emerge immediately as a finished product.

It happened, however, that the silent film workers' ignorance of the living stage was as nothing to the theatre workers' ignorance of film technique. The result has been as inevitable as it has been painful. Most of the pictures have been as uninteresting in the régime of sound as they were exciting in the silent days. They have fallen, roughly, into two groups—those pictures made with a clear sense

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of cinematic values and no conception of the exigencies of dialogue and tight, clearly motivated drama and wearisome reproductions of plays, as unskillfully directed and acted as they have been carelessly adapted from their originals.

In general, one can observe the influence of Broadway on Hollywood most clearly in the two dominant forms of talking picture entertainment today, the more or less polite drama with its recurring themes of infidelity backstage or college romance or gangster activity to give it zest, and the musical extravaganzas. In the first of these forms there is still a preponderance of screen workers, who are content to handle any dramatic material, no matter how unsuited to the screen, and constantly interrupt whatever thin line of dramatic progression is present with camera effects and insignificant details. With musical shows, the Broadway showmen are generally responsible for the finished product and their efforts are even more stupid, confined as they are to an unimaginative reproduction of operatic spectacles with no attempt to arrange them in an interesting screen pattern.

To their immense credit, however, the films have already plunged deep into uncharted reaches of their new medium in a few examples, giving the talking picture precedents for distinguished successors and creating a whole new body of aesthetics for a new medium. To realize fully the extent of this achievement, it has been necessary to attend a large majority of the pictures that have stopped in New York on their extended rounds of exhibition. The first brilliant efforts of the talking pictures were with a wide variety of themes. There were those two exciting and compelling melodramas, *Alibi* and *Bull Dog Drummond*, in which, for the first time, stage plays were converted intelligently into fast-paced working scripts for the screen. Ably directed and acted, these pictures had all the quality of pantomime, the deft use of close-ups and significant movement that characterized the silent pictures and had, in addition, a fascinating new range of sound values. The amazingly effective climactic value of sound distortion was apparent in a policeman's tapping on a sidewalk curb with his nightstick, the curious screen equivalents of a powerful motor car rushing through space or even the mere ticking of a clock in a third degree scene.

Then there was King Vidor's *Hallelujah*, one of the most moving and absorbing of all screen dramas, adding a sparing and effective sound accompaniment to a distinctly cinematic narrative and catching more of the spirit of the Negro than the stage ever dreamed of achieving until the stage presentation of *The Green Pastures*. As an inconspicuous little program picture there came *The Shopworn Angel*, part silent and part sound picture, with the latter portion skillfully woven into a compassionate

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and simply moving drama with extraordinary effectiveness. Jeanne

Monta Bell, the show's director, made a splendid dialogue out of Somerset Maugham's stage play, *The Letter*, by converting the material rigidly to cinematic terms and Rouben Mamoulian made an absorbing and distinctive photoplay in *Applause* by forgetting his stage training except in so far as it enabled him to heighten his cinematic efforts.

Since that time there have been such worthwhile products of the sound screen as *Fast Company*, *Thunderbolt*, *The Valiant*, *Men Without Women*, *Street of Chance*, and the recently released *The Devil's Holiday*. In musical shows, *The Vagabond King* and *The Rogue Song* showed that the cinema was potent to mold the operatic form to its own terms at least part of the time and Mr. Lubitsch went considerably farther in the Maurice Chevalier picture, *The Love Parade*, by pointing the way clearly to an interesting compromise between stage and screen techniques in musical shows. Meanwhile there were able recordings of stage works, with George Arliss's perfect reproduction of *Disraeli* on the screen, Ruth Chatterton's assured performance in the skillfully done *Madame X*, and *Journey's End*, although at the best they were merely faithful copies of stage works confined to the same limitations as the theatre and lacking the vitality of living performance.

Probably the most heartening event in the history of the motion picture since it became audible is Lewis Milestone's magnificent production of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. An admiring observer of the techniques of Eisenstein and Pudowkin, Mr. Milestone took a written record which

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(LOST)

By HOWARD BARNES