

# THEATRE ARTS MONTHLY

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-the first of five pages-

## THIS YEAR OF SOUND 1928-9 on Broadway

By JOHN S. COHEN

**T**HE past year has been the most chaotic in the history of the movie industry. There have been years when staggering returns were made on capitalized investments, years when returns were meagre, and years when the cinema was more roundly denounced by critics than any other medium was ever denounced.

But it was in the past year that the newest art, that of the silent drama, like prehistoric Man, stood up on its hind legs and began to talk. Like prehistoric man, it talked badly at first. But soon its words came a shade more fluently, and gradually they began, when arranged, to make a small degree of sense.

Things had been going along quietly enough when the Warner Brothers allowed a careless and not particularly interested world to hear the Vitaphone. It was the beginning of the end of silence. With a new dimension—sound—the lack of interest caused by a previously uneventful cinema year was immediately overcome. Sound, talk and fury were in the air.

The first Vitaphone musical scores, recorded opera stars, were quickly followed by a Vitaphone talking drama, *The Lion and the Mouse*. Then came *Lights of New York* and *The Home-Towners*, with varying success. *The Singing Fool* made \$5,000,000. And that, of course, turned every studio to installing sound rooms. "The age of sound, talk and color has now arrived," said Jesse Lasky of Paramount, openly, unashamedly, in the public prints.

Screen stars trouped to vocal teachers and elocutionary maestros to learn to sing and talk. The Fox Company announced that it would make nothing but talking and singing pictures. So did all

THIS YEAR OF SOUND  
-the second of five pages-

5,000 theatres in the United States will be projecting talking films to the exclusion of the silent films still to be released, rather than shelved, by companies that had made them before sound rushed in.

Since the advent of sound and talk, the patronage of the cinema theatres has increased twenty-five percent. And it is next to impossible for a producing company to sell an all-silent photoplay to exhibitors—which, of course, means that, regardless of merit, this new dimension of sound has made a return to silence impossible unless, in the course of the next decade, some cataclysmic reaction on the part of spectators takes place. As the novelty alone will carry the talking films for several years, this is extremely unlikely.

It is doubly interesting, therefore, to see the evolution in scenario form which they have followed. For purposes of comparison, we may take two extremes, both popular successes of the legitimate stage, *The Trial of Mary Dugan* and *Bulldog Drummond*. The first, inasmuch as all its action took place in one set, and inasmuch as it was a mystery melodrama, dependent almost entirely on construction, dramatic "situations" and climaxes for its effect—at least more dependent on them than on characterization and ideas—would be almost the last play one might pick as material for a film, either silent or audible. Fashioned into an all talking photoplay by its author, Bayard Veiller, it made an interesting evening in the cinema—principally because it followed its parent closely. Practically all of it was played in one court room set. Barring the necessary amount of cutting, the original dialogue in its original sequences was retained. In other words, it was an almost literal photograph of the play—its only bows to its new medium being the necessary close-ups of the district attorney as he asked a question of a witness and a close-up of the witness as he replied.

*The Trial of Mary Dugan* was received with acclaim for it was not only well done but its play-story held the attention. It represented a highly skillful recording of a popular melodrama. Yet viewing it in the light of *Alibi* and particularly of *Bulldog Drummond*, which came later, one can appreciate its lapses from an approach to the good scenario of a talking picture. In *Bulldog*

THIS YEAR OF SOUND  
-the third of five pages-

*Drummond* the eye was satisfied as well as the ear. Here one had a play-story with situations, plot frameworks which carried the story forward in numerous instances, and also a motion picture with flow and visual variety. With the main plot steps in view, one had shots of roadsters streaking along white roads through the night, the hum of their engines recorded fascinatingly; one had, in fact, innumerable scenes, in a London club, in an English inn, and all manner of exterior scenes, each lighted and photographed with skill and beauty. In other words, one had a variegated, handsome, and eye-filling motion picture as well as a dialogic cinema and a play foundation.

Here then is, or was at the time it was shown, a close approach to an ideal structure for the dialogue-sound films. *Alibi*, too, was cast in this general mould and plan, visually as well as dramatically. And in addition to these attributes, it showed an attempt to use sound in a stylized sense. A hold-up was pictured, and during the close-ups and medium shots of a few dramatic movements, rapidly flashed, one heard, coming from the screen, an impressionistic wave of sounds—police sirens, whistles, revolver shots, taxi motors, etc.

These two films, when compared to *The Lion and the Mouse*, *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, or even *The Letter*, obviously then illustrate to a certain extent the cycle in evolution of the dialogue photoplays—a cycle as yet uncompleted and one which in the future will show many variegations.

*Madame X*, to illustrate further, was, as presented with Ruth Chatterton (who has emerged more powerfully on the screen than she did on the stage), a combination of a play foundation and a limited variety of scenes, a limited and only partly visual flow. *Gentlemen of the Press* was dramatic in its play-story outline and the drama, projected by words, held the attention. But it lacked all pictorial effectiveness. It seemed to have been photographed in two rooms, a fact which may seem trivial to those bred on the drama of words as the theatre customarily presents it. But the screen is a medium whose chief and distinguishing attribute is the art of pictorial movement; therefore, it is dangerous and affected

## THIS YEAR OF SOUND

-the fourth of five pages-

to begin to omit it, even though a story is carried forward by dialogue now where before it was carried by pantomime plus subtitles.

The dialogic dramas brought forth in the past years offered other productions with interesting features, such as *Hearts in Dixie*, *Through Different Eyes*, *The Valiant*, which recorded a superb performance by Paul Muni (formerly Muni Weisenfreund of the legitimate stage), *Broadway*, *A Dangerous Woman*, *The Man I Love*, and others. All were good enough theatre if not good drama; all showed the possibilities of sound and talk, even if they were not especially fine fibered achievements.

In the realm of the musical cinemas, or those in which the story turns on songs and stage acts, there has also been an evolution. The outstanding musical show is, of course, the enormously successful *The Broadway Melody*, which offers revue acts plus a melodramatic story of backstage life. By these tokens and despite its advertisements, it is not a recorded musical show but a melodrama with musical show interludes. In other words it tells a good enough story to have fitted out an ordinary melodrama, and when that story carries to the opening night of the revue in which the heroine is playing, the revue acts are shown in detail in sight and sound.

A backstage story likewise carries the *Fox Movietone Follies* and *On With the Show*. These films all tell a tale of actors appearing in a certain musical show; and they record revue numbers from the show. By this means they have abolished the musical show's liberty of permitting characters to burst into song and dance—with no excuse save a song or dance cue, a convention which when applied on the screen, immediately becomes grotesque. *On With the Show*, photographed in the now fulsome hues of the Technicolor process, and a pioneer in its field, was also a success. *Close Harmony*, a story of small-time vaudeville actors in Chicago and *My Man*, featuring Fannie Brice, are other examples.

Another plan was tried in *The Desert Song* and *The Cocoanuts*, the latter starring the moonstruck Marx brothers. These two films represented a rather literal photographing of stage musical shows. The screen being essentially a realistic medium—in the sense that a

THIS YEAR OF SOUND  
-the last of five pages-

photograph of a beach is and can and should be a photograph of a real beach and not a photograph of a theatrical backdrop—the conventions and liberties of the musical show destroyed all illusion.

The abolition of these stage conventions has marked the change in the musical entertainments of the audible screen. That the producers have begun to discard the fruitless and needless form of musical comedy is a wise and needful step—especially in this first forward march of talking pictures. Now is the time to move forward logically and to develop logically the forms which can and will be most advantageous and most entertaining.

No resume of the year would be complete without mention at least of three silent films—silent, that is, save for synchronized scores and, perhaps, a few interpolated words of dialogue—*The End of St. Petersburg*, *The Shopworn Angel*, and *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the last of which came from France. The first was a kaleidoscope of revolt, of smoke and steel, which made use of the technique of the brilliant *Potemkin* with a story and a degree of sentiment. *The Shopworn Angel* was a brilliantly executed romantic tragedy about a chorus girl and her two lovers, one rich, the other a gawky Texas doughboy. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* was a rare and original psychological narrative, developed along impressionistic lines and resembling in its visual aspects a mediaeval canvas, or as it was described, "sculpture in motion."

It is more than likely that for some years at least silent films will no longer be made, save by those who, like Chaplin, have made a reputation in solo pantomime. Even Fairbanks, with the forthcoming *Taming of the Shrew*, enters the dialogic drama. And all of the producing companies here and abroad are making audible products. There is no question at this time but that interest in the movies has quickened immeasurably with the coming of sound and that it doubles their possibilities. Nor is there any question but that the past year—chaotic and eventful as it has been, with a medium changing bodily in form and content and potentialities—has been the most interesting year in the cinema since that momentous time when *The Great Train Robbery* startled the world.