

FUNNY BUSINESS IN THE FILMS



Second Big Week for Nazi Film in Yorkville Theatre in Manhattan

There is no such thing as entertainment value in the Goebbels rating of German films. Awards are given for political before artistic or cultural value; criticism is forbidden by law; laughing in the dark is a crime. Four-fifths of the film production industry is directly controlled by the Minister of Propaganda. MGM, Paramount, and Warners view with interest the fate of the UFA, Tobis, and Bavaria Companies.

BY VERNON MCKENZIE

THREE of the largest film production companies in Germany no longer exist, in a private sense: UFA, Tobis and Bavaria. Dr. Hugenberg, former leader of the Nationalist Party and the most important publishing and film magnate in pre-Hitler Germany, controlled UFA until early in 1937. For four years various pressures had been brought to bear on him and finally he cracked under the strain.

He was "induced" to sell his UFA shares to a bank consortium, obviously acting for the Nazi Party, and is now very little more than a country squire. UFA shares are held today by two German banks which are under the control of the Franz Eher Publishing House. The dominant spirit in this company is Max Amman, who acts as Hitler's "business manager." Hitler's financial participation in the profits of the Eher organization have never been disclosed.

The Tobis concern, which held a monopoly in Germany on sound film patents, has also come under government financial control. The situation of UFA and Tobis has been known for some months, but the facts behind the disaster which befell the Bavaria organization, third largest in the Reich, have not hitherto been related.

Some months ago the insolvency of Bavaria was reported, very briefly, in

FUNNY BUSINESS IN THE FILMS

a Berlin financial paper. Neither the daily papers nor the film trade papers were permitted to comment or enlarge upon this brief item. Bavaria had planned expansion along certain lines which did not give Goebbels control. Considerable foreign capital had been interested, largely British. Negotiations went so far that several leading German actors' services were retained and an ambitious and intelligent program outlined in detail. Blocked marks were to be used to handle the financial end.

Just as the deal was about to be closed Goebbels and other Nazi party leaders stepped in. There was criticism of the impending foreign influence on the ground that the Britishers interested were non-Aryans. In addition, several of the German negotiators were not trusted by Nazi party leaders. At the last minute the Reich Minister of Economics was induced to intervene. He prevented the transfer of the blocked marks. This covered up Goebbels' Machiavellian hand in the deal. Bavaria collapsed. The Government "rescued" it, took it over, and handed it to the Reich Propaganda Minister.

Goebbels has prepared his own scale of awards for German films. He puts them in six categories:

1—Artistically and politically very valuable.

2—Artistically and politically valuable.

3—Politically valuable.

4—Artistically valuable.

5—Culturally valuable.

6—Instructive to the population.

Films receiving award Number One "must conform absolutely to Nazi ideals." There would appear to be no award for "entertainment value."

Some German films in recent years have been of such inferior quality that the Reich and the Nazi Party have taken action along two lines:

1—A law was passed November 26, 1936, prohibiting "art criticism."

By this law "art reports" are substituted for "art criticism." These must be signed by the author, who must be at least 30 years old, and have a permit stating that he is a qualified art reporter. He must not say whether a play or film is good, bad or indifferent. He must restrict himself to listing the cast and narrating the story. The fact that a film or play has been permitted by the Ministry of Propaganda is held to be sufficient indication that it is worthy.

2—Laughter at the wrong places is not permitted. Audiences have been laughing at serious passages, made ludicrous by the ineptness of production, or gratuitous introduction of propaganda, and applauding loudly and ironically where producers had expected silence. Nazi papers initiated a campaign against these "laugh critics" who showed "such courage in the dark." Goering's Essen newspaper, the *National Zeitung*, finds "political significance in this laughter in the dark."

Loyal Nazis are trained to be quite serious in their appreciation of humor. A German youth visiting in London was taken to see the current Marx Brothers film. The German, a fervent Nazi, laughed uproariously for a few minutes, and then said:

"Is it possible that those 'comics' are Jews?"

He was told that there was no doubt but that they were Jews. For the next 20 minutes he kept a straight face. Then he started to chuckle again.

"So you really think they're funny, do you?" his amused friend asked him.

"No, not the 'comics' — but that horse!" The horse, presumably, might be considered Aryan.

Humor is appreciated by Dr. Goebbels but it must be turned in the right direction. The humor of Reinhold Schunzel, for example, did not hit the right spot. Schunzel, who had a Jewish mother but nevertheless retained the patronage of Hitler and Goebbels during the first four years of the Nazi regime, produced a picture called *Country of Love*. Too many of its wisecracks were directed at the Regime or the Party. Goebbels took it in hand and cut 2,550 feet from the final copy of the film.

This so annoyed Schunzel that he took his uncut copy of the film to Vienna. He decided that he had stretched his luck as far as he should, by remaining in Nazi Germany more than four years. Some weeks later he anticipated the Vienna debacle and signed a Hollywood contract.

German cinema proprietors and movie fans are eager for a larger number of first-rate American films. *Now and Forever*, admitted a few months ago, was so welcomed amid the clutter of second-rate films and worse that it opened simultaneously in three Berlin cinemas. Many second-rate American films have been admitted on the quota and first-rate ones rejected without an explanation. Amer-

ican film producers are not ignorant of the reasons:

1—First quality American films show up the usual run of German films so definitely that audiences frequently have protested at the cheapness and absurdities of the native product. Some excellent films must be admitted, but the disparity must not occur too frequently or be made too evident.

2—German officials enforcing the quota find fault with many films because of their "non-Aryan-ness." On this point there is no legislation which I have been able to find in print, but the quota board has a secret list of film producers, authors, composers, directors and actors who are Jewish.

Of course it is impossible to follow out such a ban consistently. There are some Jews against whom the interdiction applies more emphatically than against others.

Last June, owing to wires getting crossed somewhere in the Propaganda Ministry, the working of this secret ban was given international publicity.

The German consul at Los Angeles, George Gyssling, received unexpected notoriety when he warned several players in the film made from Erich Remarque's book *The Road Back* that if they continued to work on it they would be put on the Nazi black list. Remarque is best known as the author of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and his works are prohibited in Germany.

Some of the Hollywood stars who received warnings from Herr Gyssling were John King, Slim Summerville, Andy Devine, Noah Beery, Louise Fazenda and Lionel Atwill. They protested to the State Department.

The Anti-Nazi League in Southern California took a hand. Gyssling shortly received orders from Berlin not to send any more threats to film stars.

Herr Gyssling denies emphatically that he has been rebuked by the Nazi Government for his action. I am inclined to accept his denial. He probably received incomplete or contradictory instructions from Berlin officials. I know of an instance when another consul on the Pacific Coast, early in the Nazi regime, received instructions on the same subject from four German departments dealing with foreign affairs—and none of them

FUNNY BUSINESS IN THE FILMS

quite consistent with any other. Communications to German agents abroad have not yet been canalized through one central bureau.

The agents of Himmler's Gestapo take an interest in what films are admitted into Germany. This frequently put Chief Censor Seeger (who died in August) in a tight spot. Several times in 1936 and 1937 Gestapo agents informed the Propaganda Ministry and the Board of Censors that if pictures showing "signs of Jewish influence" were exhibited, they could not prevent public disturbances taking place.

They said the Secret Police would "hold the Board of Censors responsible" for ensuing disturbances. These public demonstrations, supposedly a spontaneous outburst of Teutonic indignation, are of course usually whipped up by Himmler's minions. Riot instigation has become an art.

Goebbels and his fellow-Nazis have never overlooked the importance of the propaganda value of films. Lack of technical experience and above all, virtual elimination of Jews from the industry in the Reich, have prevented the Nazis achieving any great measure of success in the "film invasion" of foreign lands. But Goebbels has been getting around to that this year.

Production costs have doubled in the past three years—although yet absurdly low by Hollywood standards—and the officers of the Reichsfilm Chamber have been especially perturbed by the fact that, whereas film exports covered about 40% of production costs four years ago, in 1936 and 1937 this proportion dropped to 12%.

Goebbels' scheme for the film export industry is an ingenious one. He plans a "controlled export" of German artists, technicians and apparatus, instead of export of the finished film. Arrangements this year were made for production abroad under special agreements with Italy, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Japan.

The arrangement between Germany and Czechoslovakia, for admission of each other's films, is typical of a larger plan which is envisioned for Southeastern European countries. The German-Czechoslovakian Film Alliance stipulates that five Czech-produced films may be sent into Ger-

FUNNY BUSINESS IN THE FILMS

many each year; in return for which 75 German-produced films may be exported to Czechoslovakia.

As increased imports into Germany of the films of these countries will have to be facilitated, the new exchange arrangements must necessarily mean that even fewer American films henceforth will be admitted. Some bright lad in the Ministry of Propaganda had a brain-wave a short time ago, and decided that he had an idea which might remedy this, and at the same time serve Germany's interests in the United States. The gist of his suggestion was this:

American film producers were complaining about the difficulties involved in getting their films admitted to Germany; and in getting their payment out. So—why not intimate to the United States executives that American films would be admitted freely, the present quota abandoned, and part payment in foreign exchange arranged if Americans would reciprocate by aiding German propaganda efforts?

The following proposition was put to responsible American executives by representatives of the Reichsfilm Chamber:

1—All dubbing of American films destined for Central and Eastern Europe to be done in Germany.

2—If American companies will produce films in Germany, *in line with the views of the Propaganda Ministry* costs may be paid in blocked marks, which will be made available.

3—Germany will generously increase the number of United States films permitted import into Germany, if the United States arranges that one large first-run house, in at least 25 American cities, agrees to run for at least three months in the year German films *selected* by the Propaganda Ministry.

The italics are mine. That such a suggestion could be made seriously shows an almost incomprehensible ignorance of conditions in the United States. Such obliviousness to reality is not an uncommon occurrence among those who control German propaganda efforts.

Imagine the furor that such an arrangement, when it became known as it inevitably must, would make in American film circles! And with the general public! A dozen Dicksteins would call for an immediate Con-

FUNNY BUSINESS IN THE FILMS

gressional investigation. And, can anyone imagine 25 American audiences, in 25 major cities, sitting through approximately 450 showings of films selected by Goebbels?

I would permit foreign governments to send us their propaganda—or cultural—films, and show them wherever they could rent theatres or hire halls.

The only condition I would impose would be that outside the theatre and on the screen there would be notices to this effect:

“This film is being shown under the auspices of the Government, and the cost of production and exhibition have been paid by the Government.” ●