

THE LITERARY DIGEST

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MOVIES

&

MYTHS

(AS SEEN BY
AN INSIDER)

THE "VAST QUANTITIES OF UTTER NONSENSE regarding picture-making" that are regularly poured into the newspapers and magazines stirs Benjamin B. Hampton, "one of the pioneers of motion-picture industry," to make some remarks "based on a complete knowledge of the facts." His facts, in some cases, might be considered revolutionary. He announces, for instance, in italics: "*The movies need the nice girl. They need the girl that comes from a good family with education and tradition back of her.*" The old adage which declares that "a silk purse can not be made of leather," he says, might be paraphrased into a modern statement that a fine screen actress can not be fashioned out of coarse material. There are many "nice girls" in the movies to-day, he declares, "and there are many opportunities for more nice girls who have in them a spark of talent and the willingness to work."

Perhaps the visitors who write the ordinary magazine and newspaper yarns about the movies, opines Mr. Hampton, can't prevent themselves from being swept off their feet by the unusual spectacle of those great picture "lots" which are to be found nowhere on earth except in Los Angeles. A "lot," be it known, is a tract of land on which the "studio" buildings are located. The lots range in size from five to as much as fifty acres. The writer goes on, in *The Pictorial Review*:

Once past the guards at the gate of a busy studio, the visitor is bewildered by the panorama spread before him. It is as if sections of a world's fair had been mixed with a performance of grand opera, a circus, and several spectacular theatrical productions. Fairyland and wonderland join with the activities of a small city of factories. Carpenters, painters, plumbers, furniture-makers, mechanics, artists, and artizans of many kinds mingle with men in evening clothes, pirates from the Spanish Main, cowboys, New York gangsters, soldiers from almost any page of history, preachers, show-girls, women in gay evening frocks, and girls in Turkish harem costumes. Every variety of human being walks the streets of the studio lots. Every age, from the incubator baby carefully attended by trained nurses to the little chap of eight, who between scenes studies his school lessons with a tutor; from young girls studying toe-dancing to old men who earn a living because of their "character" beards—every age, and perhaps every nationality, does its day's work "on the lot."


It almost seems as if it must be unfashionable to speak or write soberly of the movies, or to tell the plain truth about studio life, observes Mr. Hampton:

The public has been convinced that studio-land is filled with arrogant, unlettered, autocratic directors who wear sporty clothes and bellow loudly through megaphones; with ex-barbers who have become stars and who have only a nodding acquaintance with good manners, good English, or good morals; and with young women who spend most of their waking hours lolling in boudoirs waiting to vamp strange men.

All of which is far from the truth—and all of which injures the movies in various ways, among others, in that the nice girl, ambitious to become a screen actress, is almost invariably discouraged by her family and her friends.

The best way to pick a thistle, the writer goes on, is to grab it quickly and firmly. By way of trying that method with the thistle label, "bad reputation of movie-players," he goes on:

The reputation is unjust, unfair, and undeserved. Most of the picture-players are decent, well-behaved men and women. A few are tough-minded, as William James might have classified them, or "hard-boiled," as present slang would express it. This minority is noisy and active. In New York this tough or fast crowd would be swallowed up in the vastness of the city. As Los Angeles is a much smaller city than New York, the plain, unvarnished truth is that noisiness and naughtiness are much more conspicuous in the California movie capital than in Manhattan.



Benjamin B. Hampton

Bearing these facts in mind, it is quite easy to understand that the small percentage of movie-players who give loud parties and otherwise misconduct themselves receive much more public attention than the overwhelming majority who live quiet lives, and interest themselves in the affairs of their homes, their children, their country clubs, and their churches.

The writers on motion-picture subjects keep the reading public all worked up over the fancy lingerie and decorative limousine upholstery, the bucketfuls of jewels and menageries of Persian pussies of the movie stars—but somehow or other they never seem to write about the church attendance of these players or the number of babies reared per annum in the Hollywood studio families. Yet there are churches that draw very heavily on the picture colony. Well-known players whom you know only as heavy-browed villains and society ladies are earnest churchgoers. Not just a handful of them, but many of them.

Los Angeles charities find the picture people prompt to give their studios, their talent, their time, and their money to every worthy object. The greatest stars in filmdom join with the cowboy "extras" in presenting entertainments that turn many thousands of dollars into the bank-accounts of institutions working for the common good. I know of no kindlier, more decent, more generous class of people on earth than the picture group of Los Angeles; and I lose my temper and boil with wrath when I think that a few rotten apples in a barrel can give an entire orchard a bad name.

Let me say plainly to the girl who wants to get into the movies that she alone can determine what her life will be after she reaches Los Angeles. She runs no more risk in the movies than she would encounter in the shoe factories of Lynn, Mass., the carpet factories of Yonkers, N. Y., or a wholesale drug establishment in Atlanta, Ga. After she is in the movies, if she chooses she can go to church every Sunday. If she wants to live quietly, she can do so. If she wants to be fast or tough, she will find sets to satisfy this longing, but if she chooses to play the tough game in her personal life she can be sure that she will soon portray none but that type of rôle on the screen. Little parties at the beach, late hours, and undesirable habits may not interfere with the career of a society butterfly, but they are an insuperable obstacle to the girl who wants to make good in pictures. The camera coldly records that which it finds in a girl's face, and no make-up and no tricks of lighting can deceive the lens very long.

To say that "beauty fades like a flower" is not poetry in movie language. It is hard, practical sense. The camera demands the beauty of freshness and sweetness. The movie magnate pays high prices for these qualities, and once the freshness has faded or the sweetness has started to sour—the icy-hearted movie magnate moves the girl downward into lower-priced rôles.

The old story of a pull gaining foothold in pictures still persists, we are told. Girls with no talent, often with physical

Movies & Myths

blemishes, who fail to make engagements in Los Angeles spread the report that their failures were due to lack of influence. Mr. Hampton comments:

Half a dozen years ago a girl might have gone to Los Angeles and easily secured a job on a lot—to use studio idiom—at twenty-five dollars a week. She would appear in mob scenes as a cow-girl, or a Venetian lady-in-waiting, or whatever might be the rôle of the day or the week. If her work happened to attract the attention of a director she might be given a small acting part, and if she handled this rôle effectively she would be promoted. Many of the famous men and women stars of to-day won their positions by making good in small parts in program pictures. In the old days each time a player was advanced the whisper of “pull” spread through the dressing-rooms. If favoritism existed then, it certainly is not an active factor to-day, as may be proved by the “stars” that have disappeared. The chances are that faulty judgment rather than friendship created these short-lived celebrities. However, whether favoritism or errors in judgment were responsible, the day of “pulls” disappeared just about the time when the expensive photoplays of the present appeared.

No producer to-day dares risk \$100,000 to \$200,000 on a weak star or on an all-star cast in which an inefficient player may injure the entire picture. Making pictures has grown to be a definite business, subject to the same rules that govern all commercial undertakings. Favoritism may help a boy or a girl to get a chance at the outset, but unless he or she makes good, the opportunity comes to a prompt conclusion.

The new, expensive, all-star picture has changed the method of employing players. The large “stock companies” with actors and actresses on a more or less permanent pay-roll have disappeared. One studio, at which several hundred men and women were formerly members of a stock company, now has perhaps a dozen players under contract, and each of these is a highly efficient specialist. The casting of small parts and extras in the large studios is usually in charge of a “casting director,” who selects the players because of their fitness for the rôles. In the small companies the producer or the director does his own casting, and the work has grown so impersonal that several producers will not employ a player unless they have actually seen how she looks in a motion-picture. Friendship and pull are not worth a bean under such methods.

“Pull” is not necessary to make good in the movies, but proper physical equipment, a germ of talent or genius, and an everlasting willingness to work and to learn are essential.

Getting down to the actual consideration of engagements and salaries, you can accept it as a fact, says the writer, that as a general rule, “If you are very tall or very short, or very heavy or very lean, your chances for success in pictures are very remote.” He goes on:

And now let us talk about wages. Most girls have a hazy idea that all motion-picture actresses are stars and rolling in wealth. They read stories of some girl from Ashtabula, Ohio, who came to Los Angeles and earned ten dollars a day as an extra because she had some nice gowns.

“Ten dollars a day equals sixty dollars a week, or \$3,000 a year,” clicks the adding-machine in the dreamer’s mind. “I could live nicely on that until I become a star at \$3,000 a week.”

All of which is far from the facts—the hard, board-and-room-shoes-and-stockings truth.

Perhaps a fair-sized section of misunderstanding is due to the careless use of the word “star.”

Girls get an impression that nearly all players are stars and that all stars receive enormous salaries. This form of thinking, or lack of thinking, creates a set of beliefs regarding movie-land similar to the ignorance of European immigrants who used to flock to America confident that gold nuggets could be picked up in the streets of New York.

The real stars *are* really well paid. They work under yearly contracts and receive salaries ranging from several hundred to several thousand dollars a week each week in the year. There are comparatively few of these star positions; perhaps two hundred or three hundred names would complete the list. There are several thousand—maybe six or eight thousand—players and “extras” working in pictures more or less regularly. These people work as “free lances”; that is, they work when

Movies & Myths

they can secure engagements. The best of them work by the week, and the minor parts and extras are paid by the day.

Extras—the men and women who fill a drawing-room, or constitute a company of soldiers, or fill up any “mob scene”—receive from \$3 to \$10 a day while they work. Thus, if Mary Jones is used for four days in a scene in a restaurant and supplies her own costume she probably receives \$7.50 a day, or a total of \$30 for the engagement. When that job is ended she tramps the round of the casting offices or agencies looking for more work. If she has good luck she may succeed in getting two hundred days of work a year; with fair luck she may get one hundred and fifty days; with poor luck, or in hard times, her \$7.50-a-day payments may be few and far between.

Not all extras receive \$7.50 a day. Many men and women are paid \$5 a day, and the great mob scenes using hundreds of people are composed largely of extras at \$3 a day. The average player doing extra work will earn perhaps \$5 a day, or possibly \$800 to \$1,200 a year. And on top of that this class of player often has to pay an agent 5 to 10 per cent. commission.

The glamour of the movies fades away rapidly when the young aspirant in Athens, Ga., or Biddeford, Me., or Rome, N. Y., learns that with fair luck she may rise to the dizzy heights of \$800 to \$1,200 a year.

Let us assume that she persists in her determination to get into the movies, and that she has an attractive personality and good habits, and that she is willing to work. What then?

Her first promotion will be upward through the list of “extra girls” to that of small parts. Her salary will advance from \$5 or \$7.50 a day to \$10 or \$15 a day. She will continue to be paid by the day until she has made a little reputation for herself, and then she will be able to secure engagements by the week and will be paid \$75 to \$125 a week. Her engagement will be during the life of the part; that is, if the character portrayed requires two or four or six weeks of camera work she will receive wages during that period. Then she, or her agent for her, must hunt out another engagement.

In various cities, we are told, concerns are urging girls to have “tests” made. A test is a motion-picture, just long enough to give an idea of the girl’s actual appearance in the film:

The girl poses before a motion-picture camera and a film of a hundred or several hundred feet is made. The matter of tests is complicated and tests themselves are expensive. To be properly tested, a girl must be “made up” carefully, that is, she must apply the precise grease-paint, powders, etc., needed to permit attractive photography. The natural skin of a white person photographs gray or black unless cosmetics are applied. Make-up is an art by itself, and it is such a difficult art that even experienced actresses are sometimes baffled by it. Consequently the “testing” of novices is a matter requiring skill or the candidate’s test may not be fair to her.

Photographs and snap-shots mailed to a producer or to a reliable agent will accomplish all the necessary preliminaries. If the producer feels that he can use you, he will tell you how to proceed, or if the agent finds that you have a chance in Los Angeles, he will so advise you. Then will be time enough to consider all the other details.

The best advice is to stay at home until you are sure that an opportunity is open to you. Even then, when you go to Los Angeles take enough money to make sure you can live decently until you have passed the initial period of your experience.

Also, bring mother to Los Angeles with you, and keep her with you. Mother’s watchfulness and friendship and advice are an invaluable asset to the girl in the movies. If mother is not available, bring auntie, or a trusted middle-aged woman whose friendship is approved by your mother. The girl who lives with mother

Movies & Myths

but the men who are watching young women working their way up are struck by the fact that a large proportion of the actresses who are winning success to-day are the ones who live with mother and follow mother's advice.

And whatever you do, do not go to Los Angeles alone and with slender financial resources, hoping that fortune will smile on you. Many girls make this error, and often the results are tragic. The best advice is not to go to Los Angeles until you have definite encouragement from a reliable producer or reliable agent. Then, when you do go, take your mother or auntie with you—and *live with her*.



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