

# The Art of Acting in the Movies

Requires a Technique Unlike That of the Operatic Stage

By GERALDINE FARRAR



Geraldine Farrar and Milton Sills, in "The Hell Cat," her most recent Goldwyn picture, taken in Cody, Wyoming. Miss Farrar refers to this drama in her article printed below

MR. TELLEGEN really started it. It happened at the moving picture studio. As it was his first visit there, he had some difficulty in finding my dressing room. After wandering about through a labyrinth of alley-ways, he was finally guided to my door by a melody that chanced to be issuing from that corner of the studio. You see, in between "takes", I sometimes find time to study some of my operatic rôles.

"Truly," he exclaimed banteringly, "you are an artist lost in a movie manufactory!"

"Not lost, my dear," I retorted, "an artist is not lost, but multiplied, in the cinema." Then followed one of our many and endless discussions on the subject of the film drama; for, while Mr. Tellegen believes in the art of the cinema as a potentiality only, to be developed later into something artistically static, I always contend that it is already an established art, not brought to its maximum of perfection, perhaps, but moving very rapidly and surely in that direction.

ONE cannot blame Mr. Tellegen, however, for calling our studio a "movie manufactory". The huge, barn-like, glass-enclosed workshop looks more like a storage house for electrical lighting appliances and furniture, than a temple of dramatic art. In the center

of all this mechanical confusion, the visitor is hypnotized by an island of light, so bright, that it is difficult at first, for the unaccustomed eye, to note that it envelopes an elegantly appointed drawing-room, enclosed by three walls, close to which are planted the clinical looking "broad-sides", "mercury lights" and "flaming arcs", all of which contribute to the island of blinding light.

The "domelight" overhead not only adds to the luminosity, but alas, to the great heat of the place as well.

Mr. Barker, the director of my picture, "The Turn of the Wheel," which was filmed at Fort Lee during the burning days of June and July, jokingly remarked that he wore his broad-brimmed Panama hat throughout the day in order not to get sun-burned!

The great heat and excessive light, so hard on one's eyes, also acts as a disintegrating force upon one's make-up. Grease-paint and powder, diluted by perspiration, have an alarming way of disappearing in little rivulets, so that if one is to achieve the smooth and pearly complexion so alluring on the screen, one must stop every five minutes or so and repair the ravages of these artificial tropics.

Another thing that adds to the confusion is the fact that, while the scenes are rehearsed and "shot", a dozen or so electricians are con-

stantly moving back and forth, adjusting their lights, shifting this fuse or that. Overall, begrimed with the ear-marks of their trade, they move about with fine unconcern and a nonchalance that a débutante might well envy.

Very soon, however, one learns not to mind these conditions, and, as time goes on, one becomes oblivious to everything, except the scene that one is enacting.

THE dramatic technique involved in operatic acting is often complex, and nerve-taxing, by reason of its combination of singing and acting. I find that the simplicity of acting for motion pictures is a great relief to me after an arduous winter at the Metropolitan. My "movie" season is really my annual period of relaxation, for, having been blessed at birth with a super-abundance of vitality, the work at the studio seems more like recreation to me than actual labor.

Compared to the spoken drama, the opera in reality offers one a restricted sphere of dramatic expression, while the movies are quite the most unrestricted sphere of all drama. The greatest opera singers must all, in the past, have chafed under the dramatic restraint of the opera, many of them have threatened, time and again, to leave the singing stage for the speaking stage—but only (Continued on page 90)

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-the second of two pages-

## The Art of Acting in the Movies

(Continued from page 50)

in the days before the discovery of the kinetoscope.

Nothing, I am sure, would have given Calvé greater joy than to have punctuated her triumphant operatic appearances with opportunities to give full expression to her emotional genius in the movies, provided, of course, that she had a "screen" face and a "screen" personality: for one may be as beautiful as the morning star, possess the combined histrionic genius of a Bernhardt and a Duse, have the carriage and presence of a queen, and yet, by some unexplained trick of photography, appear like a washerwoman on the screen. It is no exaggeration to say that half of our most beautiful and most talented stars of the speaking stage have proved absolute failures on the screen.

If one has the most essential of all attributes for success in the movies—a screen personality—the technicalities of acting are not so different from that of the spoken stage as one might expect. Of course, there are many little things that one must learn—not to open one's mouth wide when making the motions of speech; not to look at the camera; and always to remember, as in the pantomime, that all thought, ideas and expression must be translated into action.

THE greatest difference, perhaps, lies in the make-up, always an important element in the theatrical profession. The size of the Metropolitan Opera House makes color-vividly an essential factor in "getting over". So, cheeks are rouged in an exaggerated way; eye-lashes are heavily beaded, and the outlines of the mouth accentuated by the deepest tones of carmine. Of course, the strong "overheads," and footlights of the operatic stage, tone down these glaring effects so that a make-up that appears fantastic and bizarre when seen at close range looks perfectly natural to the audience in the opera house.

In the movies very little color make-up is used. On the contrary, any natural roses one may possess in one's cheeks are obliterated by a heavy, creamish paste, uniformly applied. Since red, the color, photographs black, rouge on one's cheeks would give the appearance of deep hollows, on the screen. The rouge, instead of being applied to one's cheeks, is worked in very carefully under one's eye-brows, for that is where shadows are desired. Everything is based on the photographic principles of black and white. The eye-lashes and eye-brows are darkened a little, but no more cosmetic is applied than would be needed by a somewhat faded woman at a dinner party.

On the screen every little imperfection of contour or make-up is, of course, magnified, so that the aim of the player should be to look as natural as possible.

What it loses in color and in sound, the photo-drama has to make up in speed and in action. By alternating the scenes rapidly, flash after flash, we are treated to a conversation between scenes and places rather than between the actors. By alternating a flash of the heroine, for instance, and a flash of the bracelet that is the clue to a dastardly murder, we have the heroine's soliloquy.

IT takes anywhere from six weeks to six months of study and rehearsal, to bring an untried opera to a sufficient state of perfection for its first public performance. At every presentation thereafter, it must be reproduced faithfully in all its elaborate details of scenery, costuming, singing, acting, lighting, and stage management.

In the movies, it takes about six weeks to film a complete photo-drama, but, after that, thousands of copies are distributed all over the world, and more than a million performances are given, without further trouble to the actors.

directors or any of the participants involved.

It is truly marvelous! Moving picture acting is much like the acting in the so-called *commedia dell'arte*, which flourished throughout Italy during the 16th century. A synopsis of the play—partly narrative and partly expository—was posted up behind the scenes. This account of what was to happen on the stage was known technically as a *scenarrio*. The actors consulted this scenario before they made an entrance and then, in acting out the scene, spoke whatever words happened to seem appropriate to them.

Technically, the same thing happens in the movies, with this difference: the action of the movie does not, like that of the spoken stage, march forward and gather momentum as it approaches its climax. Continuity of plot, while a film drama is in rehearsal, is chiefly conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, the scenes are acted bit by bit—rehearsed many times over—and, as each bit becomes perfect (in the eyes of the director), it is registered on the film and then forgotten.

Oftentimes, for practical reasons, the tail-end of the story is enacted first, and the beginning not touched until the last day of rehearsal.

And here is where the director makes himself felt. He must not only see that the plot of the scenario is logically worked out, despite the rather inverted, illogical method of rehearsal, but he must so enthrall and hypnotize his players, that he will infallibly bring them to the creative pitch required for effective and telling acting.

If a motion picture star has this self-starting dynamo, or power of self-hypnosis within her, so that she need not rely on the director for her artistic stimulus, so much the better for her and for all concerned.

The photo-drama is the most intimate form of the drama. It brings a star dangerously close to her audience. For instance, one may see a star in the opera, or on the stage, for years, without knowing that she has a most ravishing dimple at the corner of her mouth; that her hair grows in a widow's peak; that her eye-lashes have an individual and utterly disarming way of curling upwards; that her finger-nails are exquisite; or that three or four freckles on her nose add a piquancy to her face that is extremely alluring.

There are a hundred intimate expressions of the eyes, the mouth, the hands, that can only be transmitted through the camera, and the strong and sometimes merciless light of the projection machine. And this is what the motion picture actress must clearly and everlastingly keep in mind—she is acting for an audience which is near enough to detect any insincerity of feeling; or any sham in make-up.

The drooping mouth and lifeless eyes which can be hidden under colorful make-up on the speaking stage, the faint lines that one gets around one's eyes from lack of sleep—all these things are accentuated and magnified on the screen.

ON the other hand, there are little movie studio secrets which are a great aid in obliterating defects of pulchritude, either temporary or permanent. Working on the principle that red photographs black, and that black (except against a light background) fades right into the atmosphere, rouge can often be successfully applied to blot out some offending portion of one's physiognomy. In order that I may not be accused of "giving away" the secrets of other film stars, I will tell a little story, from my own experience. Recovering, this year, from a somewhat severe accident in Wyoming, I found that, although my nose was in its right (Continued on page 92)



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