

KEM

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THE BOX OFFICE BLUES



Movie public, exhibitors have no rights Hollywood is bound to respect. So long wave the box office deterrents. The 55c public be damned. After us, the—

BY THE INNOCENT BYSTANDER

FILM stars, objects of letter carriers' morning devotions, are doing a little letter writing themselves. The hearts of feminine congressional secretaries were all aflutter when the morning's mail was found to contain impassioned pleas from such Hollywood notables as Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy.

The occasion? A modest piece of legislation known as the Neely Bill.

Said Mr. Gable, referring to the bill: "It proposes to place the exhibitor in the position of dictating what pictures he will agree to accept from producers."

Mr. Tracy wrote: "It will bring about a lowering of picture production standards and thus cause a loss in public favor which means economic loss to the producer and the exhibitor of motion picture films."

You will have inferred, no doubt that the Neely Bill is indeed a dastardly bit of legislation. It actually proposes to prohibit compulsory block-booking and blind selling, thus making it possible for the independent exhibitor to select the pictures he will show without being compelled to accept a specified number of other films for which there is no demand.

Suppose you were in the grocery business and found that your customers demanded lots of fresh vegetables but were not interested in rock salt except on rare occasions. Naturally you would buy accordingly. Your job-

the Neely Bill

Ken in an article, "B. O. Before Beauty," quoted exhibitors as saying that the appearance of certain stars was the signal for a vanishing act on the part of the patrons.

Following almost in the footsteps of Ken's article, a Hollywood trade paper carried a full page advertisement inserted by the Independent Theatre Owners Association. This expressed, in no uncertain terms, the attitude of the independent exhibitor toward the opulent producers. For exhibitors to use Hollywood's own back stoop as the base for launching an attack against trade practice was unthinkable. To make matters worse, the composer of the advertisement was far from subtle. The I.T.O.A. named Greta Garbo, Edward Arnold, Mae West, Kay Francis, Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn as examples of "box office deterrents" and let it be known that the bride wasn't the only thing in red after the Joan Crawford epics left town.

That the glitter of several of the stars named might be more than slightly tarnished is not without substantiation right here in Hollywood. For instance, the local version of "live alone and like it," Marlene, parted company with her old studio some time ago. True, Helpful Harry Cohn of Columbia pictures, who is proving a haven of refuge for descending satellites, has signed Miss Dietrich, but the fact remains, her former bosses didn't renew her contract.

Rated as a "poor" drawing attraction by Michigan's largest theatre chain, her picture *Angel*—reported in Ken as "punishment that should not be inflicted on the public," Marlene still has sufficient socks-appeal in Hollywood to sign with Cohn and to be under consideration for an ether airing next fall.

In the absence of television the Innocent Bystander wonders what tricks will replace those gorgeous underpins which distract attention from the inadequacy of other requisites.

It was only a coincidence that Katey Hepburn and R.K.O. parted company on the very day the I.T.O.A. advertisement appeared.

Kay Francis and her studio, have been in the same boat with Brother Crawford's wife for some time now and there should be no regrets on either side when Miss Francis finishes her last picture under the current arrangement.

Joan Crawford was lucky. After bickering back and forth with M.G.M., she copped a lucrative contract only slightly in advance of the present adverse notices.

Genial Edward Arnold, of the belly laugh routine, enjoys the questionable distinction of being the only male listed by name in the select group. Perchance he finds solace in the fact that time and space limited a complete listing of the so-called deterrents and that the "many, many others" referred to in the advertisement unquestionably would catch a goodly number of antedated Romeos.

Always a question mark is the extorsorial artist who has been engaged in a game of "follow the leader" with the aging Stokowski. For years this

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elusive Nordic has held some unfathomable grasp on Hollywood. It is a safe bet that she and the veteran maestro will be seen together in films if producers can possibly arrange it. The rendezvous in the land of fascism was worth a lot of publicity in spite of the chaperone.

"In keeping with the policy of avoiding controversies with the customers," says a Hearst and studio-controlled L.A. newshawk, "the stars who have been so unjustly criticized are reserving comment." Not so the ten percenters whose nocturnal and race track activities are dependent upon the earning capacities of the cinema darlings. This vociferous gentry roundly condemn any insinuations that would tend to place their favorites in the lower earning brackets.

A flood of letters from indignant fans, says the head of a female columnist dynasty now ruling in Hollywood, proves that the stars named by the I.T.O.A. have a host of friends and admirers. Louella seems to have lost sight of the fact that 84 million persons are alleged to have attended motion picture theatres each week in 1937. With this thought in mind it is probable that the "flood" would become a mere trickle by comparison.

Meck is the usually verbose Jimmy Fidler. Jimmy reported the news as he saw it from time to time and as a result Connie Bennett has made him the object of her litigating efforts for many a month. Contending that Fidler had held her up for public ridicule, this member of the divorcing Bennetts filed suit for 250 grand. That case having been thrown out of court, another suit was filed in the form of an amended petition.

Litigation is an expensive hobby and a columnist subjected to continued doses of attorney fees is apt to begin seeing eye to eye with the powers that be.

To the Innocent Bystander, the picture industry's domination of matters politic, their indifference toward exhibitors' requests, and their ability to disregard most of the sounder business principles is hard to understand.

Yet, so it is in Hollywood, a veritable fairyland. Talent scouts tour the world in search of new faces to bring to Hollywood, already filled to overflowing with talent of every sort. New faces and figures are imported by airplane, tested, signed and promptly relegated to the background.

Foreign importations exhibit attractive torsos, wax eloquent in a lingo the audience can't possibly understand, buy gold keys for friends and ship American shekels to foreign climes.

If a star flops the blame is always on the story. Give her a good picture to work in and she'll be O. K., is a stock phrase. The truth of the matter is that there are hundreds of little ladies out here signed at nominal sums who could go to town in a big way if given a good picture, proper direction and camera effects.

In the meantime, "variety is the spice of life" and in addition to the pulchritude of a feminine variety with which producers must surround them-

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selves for inspiration, there are always the relatives and friends to keep on the payroll.

When exhibitors can exercise the same rights enjoyed by other business men, the right to buy what they want and when they want it, the producers will probably turn more thought and energy to the business of turning out good pictures at nominal prices.

We'll have no Cousin Hymie directing at \$5,000 a week; no Uncle Moe in public relations at so much per; no nieces in the supporting cast, and no box office deterrents on the payroll at more per picture than the average fan earns in a lifetime. ●

(Pictures on Pages 27-37)