

THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Journalism

MOVIE CRITICS

BY LEDA V. BAUER

I WAS having dinner with a young woman movie critic in a restaurant some time ago when one of her middle-aged confrères entered and seated herself at a nearby table. The newcomer seemed to me to be rather festively arrayed for the hour and the occasion and I called my companion's attention to her.

"Yes," said she, enviously. "It's a little young for her, but isn't it lovely? It is one of Dolores Costello's prettiest evening dresses. Miss X. admired it so much that Dolores just had to take it off and give it to her."

And when I wondered why my companion had been so remiss in her own behalf, "Oh, I could never have got into it," she explained. "It is much too small for me."

Evening dresses, it appears, are only one of the perquisites of lady movie critics. Breakfasts, luncheons, teas and dinners, cigarettes and taxi-rides, Christmas presents and birthday presents, and souvenirs on the opening night of a new picture and on the star's return from Paris with the news that she is going to divorce her new husband—all these things are hers. Last Christmas, one reviewer went from the office of picture company to picture company in a taxi, calmly collecting her loot. Unfortunately for this Lorelei, when the chauffeur considered enough had been gathered together for one year, he took the opportunity, at one of the stops, to drive off with the collection and was never seen again. The lady was loud in her lamentations for some time, but it is not on record that the gifts were duplicated. The gentlemen of the craft are perhaps more

subtly rewarded—but many of them just as surely.

Screen criticism in the daily press and in the magazines is, approximately, where theatrical criticism was twenty years ago, except, of course, from the point of view of good writing. The screen has never produced any William Winters or Percival Pollards—certainly no Hunekers or Shaws. It attracts neither the cynical, clever young fellows who, according to fable, form a waiting-list of thirty thousand to display themselves in the theatrical columns of the *New York Times*, nor the earnest, scholarly young men who want, through the medium of the Little Theatre, to shed the light of truth in shadowed corners.

Twenty years ago, perhaps not so long ago as that, a dramatic critic regarded an invitation to lunch with David Belasco either as an enormous honor or as a bribe to be accepted or resented. A great number always accepted. Today, the integrity of the average dramatic critic is taken for granted, though of course his intelligence may yet be questioned. But, so far, the intelligence of the motion-picture critic has not entered into the question, and the dinner with the picture counterpart of Belasco is neither an honor nor a bribe: it is a perquisite and, without it, the picture is apt to suffer.

There are, to be sure, exceptions. I speak of the average. The occasional impeccable critic is usually of the slanderer type. A handsome liaison officer, employed by a picture company for just such work, once tackled one of these incorruptible reviewers in his own subtle fashion. He invited her to have luncheon with him to discuss the motion-picture art. The lady cannily chose the Colony Club, ordered champagne with her meal, and listened carefully to all

the reasons why her escort believed it her duty to be friendlier to his company. The next day her paper printed the interview in full, including even the price of the meal. But such instances are few.

The reason seems to be that very few movie reviewers have any intention of dying movie reviewers. The work does not breed respect for itself. Young men with the critical urge have only contempt for the screen. The nascent Paul Rosenfelds do not find it a spring-board for their fine writing. The typical picture critic wants, not to be a good picture critic, but to be a scenario writer, or a continuity writer, or even a director. He sees reviewing as the opening wedge to a career in the more lucrative branches of the industry. Through the columns of his newspaper, he can attract attention to himself—not the attention of the public to his erudition or style, but the inflamed notice of a producer or his general manager. His daily comment on the films is thus primarily intended, not as a guide for the picture-going public, but as an exhibition in the face of certain self-conscious plutocrats, sadly aware of their own general ineptness.

It is common knowledge that the average moving-picture producer distrusts himself as artist and is easily psychologised into respecting anyone who despises him. Above all other men, he is impressed by the printed word. When this printed word occurs in his morning paper and refers to his own output, the pressure on his nerves is communicated to his pocket-book. He will buy the services of any newspaper man or woman who, by shouting his pictures down, purports to have a handy solution to the problem. He will buy his (or her) original story, or his adaptation of someone else's story, or anything else he has to sell.

Even such producers as are not convinced that running a movie column in a daily paper automatically gives the writer omniscience are nevertheless of the notion that such a column exerts great influence on the public. Destructive critics must be

appeased. Their scenarios must be paid for even if they are totally unfit for production. An *entente cordiale* must be established between the company and the paper. And it is undoubtedly true that, their efforts to uplift the screen at a tremendous price rejected, several reviewers have retaliated with a wholesale condemnation of the offending company's entire product. On the other hand, a sale has made the company's entire product acceptable. So the producer, considering it the cheapest way out of the matter, buys the story, idea or services offered and thus convinces the critic of his genius. Of course, there is the reverse of the medal—the consistent and honeyed praising by certain critics of everything a company turns out, no matter how lacking in all merit, in the dream that unpaid publicity in the critical columns will meet with its just reward. This, however, is not so generally successful.

One of the big companies, deciding finally to blow up this critical racket, conceived the idea of giving a job to any newspaper man or woman sufficiently vicious on the subject of its pictures. The critic is offered a salary, to him enormous, free transportation to Hollywood, and much handshaking by a producer tearfully grateful to have him give up art for money. While the critic is at the studios, vainly trying to get the doormen to believe he is a member of the organization, his position on the newspaper is filled by someone else—someone who, the producer hopes, will be less inimicable to the company. And, at exactly the same time, the producer finds that he was mistaken about the abilities of the critic. The vitriolic one is out of a job and there is always the chance that his place may be filled by a sister of the young lady on the New York tabloid, who remarked that she took the job only because she "just adored meeting the stars."

This meeting the stars, a national pastime which has taken on fantastic proportions, is another perquisite whose pull cannot be ignored by any save the chastest of critics. In the days when the theatre

was still to be reckoned with, a dramatic critic who took himself seriously could allow himself to be seen in public with no actress under forty years or six feet. But today the ladies who write about the movies use the male stars as their escorts to the theatre or parties and count each other's popularity by the speed of rotation of the pretty fellows. Screen actresses are their pals. They ride in their cars, borrow their underwear, advise them in their love-affairs. A movie actor, on his arrival from Hollywood, is expected to call up the local newspaper girls, assure them of his undying love, and take them to dinner. If the star ignores or is unaware of the custom, he is considered haughty and forthwith attacked as a ham.

This demand for intimacy with the elect is probably the fault of the movie press agents who originated the system of parties to get publicity at the openings of big films. Today it is a social error to say that Susie Blatz is inferior to Sarah Bernhardt, since Susie has just spent a small fortune to amuse her good friends of the press, thoroughly and *en masse*, and Sarah is dead. Unlike the economical theatrical press agents, the picture publicity people have established a routine of entertainment calculated to convince the ladies and gentlemen of the press of their enormous personal charm as well as of their dreadful power.

So lavish have they been with champagne and caviare that the fraternity, thanks to them, has become learnedly critical of food, drink and hotels and may be expected to leave the party in disgust if the refreshments do not approach the standard that this hobnobbing with movie millionaires has erected. Aware of the influence of their journals, which enables them to sit comfortably in half-empty press boxes at the picture cathedrals while hordes of the public mill at the doors for entrance, the critics are fanned by these social activities into a feeling of importance which almost matches that of the stars themselves.

It is a curious commentary on the films

that the lower the newspaper in the literary scale the greater the importance attached by picture producers to its opinions, on the theory, no doubt—and a plausible one—that only the clients of such papers peruse or are influenced by moving-picture columns. For such newspapers, critics are hired whose reactions to the screen will approximate those of their readers and whose style will not confound the most inhibited mentalities. Rhymed reviews are considered very elegant in these circles and the cheapest of wise-cracks pass for wit. Save for pictures unendurable even to the lowest intelligence, praise is spread in superlatives. The worst are passed over noncommittally, the critics filling their space largely with the plot of the story, for the most part in unconscious colloquialisms, though several have created an entirely new vocabulary for the subject, unintelligible save to addicts of this special literature.

The better type of newspaper usually contents itself with a picture reviewer who can be inoffensive and meaningless in words of two or more syllables. Such gifts as are deemed necessary in a dramatic critic—intelligence, style, a point of view—are felt to be superfluous for a study of the drama's illegitimate brother. Even the obvious qualification of a slight technical knowledge of the preparation of scripts, the limitations and possibilities of the camera, the difficulties and opportunities of direction never seems to be of any moment to the editors who engage writers on the subject. The personal idiosyncrasies of certain commonplace young men and women are alone the criteria of the press's taste in motion-pictures. The acting of a Jannings, the direction of an Eisenstein, the camera-work of a Karl Freund, the settings of a Paul Leni are considered, and as a rule dismissed by reviewers who, in many cases, would not be permitted by their own newspapers to write, anonymously, in the news columns.

What exceptions there are seem to be mainly in the weekly, humorous field. An

occasional Robert Sherwood or Charles Brackett here relieves himself of certain keen, if facetious, observations on the current screen fare. But save in the instance of two well-known sheets, the trade and fan magazines, naturally enough, expend themselves in indiscriminate admiration

of their advertisers, or print verbatim the material sent them by the publicity men of the picture companies. And the journals of opinion, only now beginning to exhibit an interest in the vulgarest of the arts, have as yet no departments committed to screen criticism.

Ethnology

TOBACCO AMONG THE INDIANS

BY CORNELIA H. DAM

The people take the smoke both by the mouth and by the nose for pleasure when they desire to see the future in their dreams. For just as the devil is an impostor and knows the virtue of herbs, he has posted them on the power of this plant, for by the illusion of their dreams he deceives the people miserably.

—*Monardes*

THAT tobacco, unknown outside of America before the voyage of Columbus, had been widely used by the Indians from time immemorial is evidenced by the frequent discovery of pipes in very ancient graves, and by the apparent antiquity of many of the myths, beliefs and ceremonies connected with its use which prevailed throughout the continent at the time of the discovery.

For the Indian everywhere it had a sacred and highly mystical character, and in the many myths about its origin it was invariably represented to be divinely created and revealed to man, or first obtained through some miraculous adventure of a legendary hero of the tribe. The Red man's conception of its power is well illustrated in the following Winnebago myth:

After Earthmaker created all things he created man. Man was the last of the created objects. Those created before were spirits, and He put them all in charge of something. Even the smallest insects are able to foresee things four days ahead. The human beings were the least of all Earthmaker's creations. They were put in charge of nothing, and they could not even foresee one day ahead. They were the last created and they were the poorest. Then Earthmaker created a weed with a pleasant odor and all the spirits wanted it. They would each think to themselves, "I am going to be put in charge of that, for I am

one of the greatest spirits in the world." Then the Creator said, "To all of you spirits I have given something valuable. Now you all like this weed and I myself like it. Now this is the way it is going to be used." Then he took one of the leaves and mashed it up. Then, making a pipe, he smoked it, and the odor was pleasant to smell. All of the spirits longed for it. Then he gave each one of them a puff. "Now, whatever the human beings ask from Me, and for which they offer tobacco, I will not be able to refuse it. I Myself will not be in control of this weed. If they give Me a pipeful of this and make a request I will not be able to refuse it. This weed will be called tobacco. The human beings are the only ones of My creation who are poor. I did not give them anything, so therefore this will be their foremost possession and from them we will have to obtain it. If a human being gives a pipeful and makes a request We will always grant it." Thus spoke Earthmaker.¹

The Indian, psychically sensitive, ever conscious of the mysteries of the physical world in which he moved, felt the presence of unseen powers everywhere about him, in animals, the wind, the water, and in the multitudinous operations of nature which he realized himself so pitifully unable to influence or control. He imagined himself in the midst of a vast spirit world, in which "even the smallest insect could see four days ahead," and in which he alone was powerless. But under the narcotic effect of inhaling deep draughts of tobacco smoke, he felt, in the pleasant dizziness that overcame him, a sense of supernatural power, a magic means of entering that spirit world, and a feeling of gentle exaltation and well-being that even the spirits themselves must covet. He came to regard tobacco as a bridge to the spirit world, and the plant itself as a magic weed that in its death, by burning, released a spirit, the smoke, which carried his prayers to the unseen world above.

¹ Radin; "The Winnebago Tribe"; 1923.