

Mae West: A Treatise on Decay

ROBERT FORSYTHE

WHEN you consider Madame Du Barry and Nell Gwynne, it is evident that Mae West has made a mistake in confining her immorality to stage and screen. Granted that a woman of her intelligence could be prevailed upon to favor a Congressman or a Secretary of War, the spectacle of Miss West affecting state policy as well as private temperatures is something which no future historian could afford to overlook. It is plain that on any basis of comparison she belongs to the great line.

There are so many indications of the breakdown of capitalistic civilization that we are inclined to become tender and sympathetic in the midst of the debacle, much in the manner of "don't cheer, boys; the poor devils are dying," but it is obvious that Miss West, more than any of her associates, symbolizes the end of an epoch. Her stage plays, *Sex* and *The Drag*, uncovered such a horrifying picture of homosexuals, Lesbians and ordinary degenerates that Miss West was sentenced to the workhouse for ten days as a way of restoring the faith of the populace in the great city. Her motives in presenting the plays were undoubtedly mercenary, but her attorneys overlooked a great opportunity of establishing her as a sociologist and humanitarian, moved solely by her concern for reform.

The movies were more astute in their management of her films. They retained the spiciness, the lustiness and bawdiness, but they carefully confined them to the past. In a sense it may be said that the golden era of Chuck Connors and the Bowery was bourgeois vigor as its peak. With all its dirt and squalor the Bowery managed to maintain an Elizabethan rowdiness and crudity which could pass as strength. The Puritan was at last defeated; men were again honest animals. They killed, they whored and they flaunted the broken bits of Methodist morality in the faces of the nice people who came down to look with fascinated horror at these mad barbarians.

The Christian fathers are quite correct in worrying about Miss West. Whether the success of her bawdiness is a sign that we have conquered Puritanism and are a mature people at last or whether it represents a complete collapse of morality, it is evident that it reveals the lack of authority of religion. The Catholic campaign for clean films succeeded in changing the title of the latest West film from *It Ain't No Sin* to the *Belle of the Nineties*, but it is still Mae West in *It Ain't No Sin*.

But it is in her stage plays that her significance lies. If we judged alone from her screen comedies we should be tempted to say that she represented sexual honesty in a world given over much too completely to the antics of the fairy. I refer to the world of the

theatre and to the race of people known as pervers. Without seeking to alarm you with a sensational expose of vice conditions in the green room, I may say merely that the condition within the profession is notorious. The facts of the matter are plain enough, but I may not be able to convince you that they have historical importance, and I am not even going to attempt to prove that the bitterly reactionary character of the stage, with the few exceptions you recognize so well, are the result in some small part of this same disease. We know quite well that the reasons for reaction are class reactions and if I make any point at all in this respect it would be to indicate that introversion is essentially a class ailment and the direct result of a sybaritic life which finally results in profound boredom for lack of any further possible stimulation or titillation. It is invariably associated with those twin elements of perversion, sadism and masochism, and generally reveals itself among the thinned-out representatives of a decaying class. The sadistic cruelty of Hitlerism is no accident. It is the unmistakable symptom of an incurable malady.

I am not a psychologist and what I have to say about the coincidences of history in this regard are not to be taken as gospel from the scientific archangels, but three widely separated incidents prior to the World War have always struck me as being significant. There was first the Oscar Wilde case in England. The divorce suit of Sir Charles Dilke with its resultant exposure of the hypocrisy and moral laxness of the aristocracy had been the first break in the dike of British class superiority. It showed that not only were the nobles human but they were something less than admirably human. Even this, however, was outshadowed by the revelations of the Wilde affair. The wave of indignation swept Wilde to jail, but it also revealed the fact that sexual debauchery was so common among the nobility that Frank Harris could report, without legal action being taken against him, that seventy-five members of the House of Lords were notorious pervers.

Not long after Germany was stirred by the revelations that Prince Philip Eulenberg, intimate friend of the Kaiser, had been accused by Maximilian Harden of indulging in unnatural vice. Harden had attacked Eulenberg publicly in his paper *Zukunft*, trying to force a charge of libel. Eulenberg refused and was disgraced. Evidence later produced in another trial at Munich proved conclusively that he was guilty. What was even more damning was the knowledge that others besides Eulenberg of the Imperial court were involved and that conditions were generally bad in high circles. The War came along several years later to place the world's attention on other forms

of perversion such as mass slaughter and it was only with the advent of the *Fuehrer* that homosexuality was raised to the rank of statesmanship.

There was a third case in Russia which practically coincided with the outbreak of the war. By a coincidence France at the same time was so stirred by the sensational trial arising out of the killing of Calmette, editor of *Figaro*, by Madame Caillaux that the death of the Archduke at Sarajevo was almost overlooked by the smartly gowned crowds who gathered in court each day for the details. In the same way the nobility of Russia could scarcely take their fascinated gazes away from the St. Petersburg scandal long enough to watch the troops marching to the front.

What Mae West did in the plays I have mentioned and what she does in her motion pictures is to show in her frank cynical way the depths to which capitalistic morality has come. There is an honesty in her playing which is even more devastating. It is not the bouncing lechery of Ben Jonson but the mean piddling lewdness of the middle classes getting their little hour of sin before the end. Miss West has a marvelous capacity for the theatre and she acts in what might be termed the grand manner, but I can never hear her, "C'm up and see me some time" without thinking of Ruth Snyder carrying on her cheap pathetic romance with Judd Gray. Because she epitomizes so completely the middle class matron in her hour of license I feel that Miss West has never been properly appreciated as the First Artist of the Republic. It is palpable nonsense to be concerned about such children as Katherine Hepburn, who will be as forgotten as Mary Miles Minter in a few years' time, when we possess a lady who could assume her position now as the Statue of Liberty and who so obviously represents bourgeois culture at its apex that she will enter history as a complete treatise on decay.

Cream Puff and Black Bread

WE ARE given an opportunity to compare two films of the same type: *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and the Soviet film *Thunderstorm*. Both are of the theatre rather than the cinema. Both deal with life in the early part of the last century. The plots are similar; the tyrannical parent as opposed to the lovers. But that is where the similarity ends.

Maybe I have no soul. Maybe I'm just a cynic. But the *Barretts*, with a finish like valspar, struck me as the dullest film that has been seen for some time. Sidney Franklin has confined all the "action" to practically one set with occasional closeups of Charles

Laughton. Mr. Franklin feels that "the greatest satisfaction that can come to a director is to hear some one say . . . that 'It was as good as a play!'" If so, he has achieved success—a questionable success for a director. Though *Thunderstorm* fails to make any contribution to the art of the film its cognizance of the social scene lifts it out of banality. Thus we have a complete picture of the structure of the particular society in which the action unfolds. *Thunderstorm* is also favored with some stirring characterizations and a love story that is simple and real and truly tragic. At the same time it is a powerful indictment of the Czarist regime, whereas the concentration on character portrayal and the psycho-analytic approach of the Hollywood film makes it a Victorian cream-puff.

The first program in the new series of showings given by the Film and Photo League at the New School for Social Research will include that extraordinary silent German film, *The Student of Prague*. Saturday, Oct. 13, is the day. Among the other distinguished films are *Beggar on Horseback*, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, *Storm Over Asia*, etc.

PETER ELLIS.

Other New Films

The Blue Light ("Du World"). This tries so hard to tell you that there is romance, mystery, etc., among the Italian peasants. The film is so shallow and the story so decadent that even the bourgeois critics have had to resort to the statement that "it has good photography." But if you are interested in that kind of photography you can go to the library and look through the annual volumes of *American Photography* for the year 1909 or through the several numbers of *Das Deutsche Lichtbild*. You'll get more pleasure out of the books simply because it will be cheaper. The film's German origin is being concealed by the fact that the photographer is listed as John Schneeberger. Come, come Hans, you were the same guy what photographed *The Blue Angel*, *The White Hell of Pitz Palu*, *Sturm Über Mont Blanc*, etc., etc. And Leni Reisefeld director and star of *The Blue Light* has degenerated to the position of Hitler's favorite photographer.

The Count of Monte Cristo (United Artists). For the third time Dumas' red-blooded romantic melodrama of true love, justice, and vengeance, has been transferred to the screen. It's not saying much, but it is the best Hollywood movie on Broadway this week.

Mass Struggle (Ukrainfilm). This new film based upon the peasant revolt during the reign of Catherine the Great is one of the lesser examples of the recent Soviet film. Its technique is a little heavy and too static for comfort. But it does contain (as usual) some excellent characterizations. However it will give you a more vivid and honest picture of the Russia of Catherine the Great than you'll get from the terrible von Sternberg-Legs Dietrich *Scarlet Empress*.

British Agent (Warner Bros). A combination of blind stupidity and malice has produced a film that will be described as being favorable to the Soviet Union and the Revolution. Nothing of the sort. The film is definitely anti-Soviet despite its occasional opportunistic flirtations with Russia. Director Michael Curtiz who also made *Cabin in the Cotton* and his bosses, the Warner Brothers, are no friends of the Soviet Union.

P. E.

Between Ourselves

IN next week's issue Moissaye J. Olgin, editor of the *Freiheit*, writes on the All-Union Writers' Congress in Moscow, under the title *A Pageant of Soviet Literature*. Olgin's article will be the first comprehensive description of the Congress, and of the general cultural atmosphere in which it met, to appear in this country.

Among other articles to appear in the magazine shortly are *The Crisis of Capitalist Culture*, by N. Bukharin; *The End of Bourgeois Poetry*, by D. S. Mirsky; *Capitalism Sterilizes*, by Louise Preece and *The American Spectator—Nazi Sheet*, by Orrick Johns.

Joshua Kunitz's lecture tour takes him to Buffalo on October 8th, under the auspices of the Icor (Jewish-Russian Colonization Organization); to Olean, N. Y., on the 9th, and Cleveland on the 10th. In Cleveland he lectures under the auspices of the John Reed Club in the News Auditorium, 1701 Superior Avenue.

The Artef Players Collective asks us to correct an error in the review of the League of Workers Theatres evening, referring to the satirical skit, *Motl Peise Dem Chazen's in Amerike*. "Your reviewer stated that this lively satire is by Sholem Aleichem, whereas the author is Chaver Paver, a co-worker in The Morning Freiheit, who has used the plot of Sholem Aleichem's *Motl Peise Dem*

Chazen's in Amerika, but the work is ninety percent his," the Artef Players write.

John L. Spivak will be one of the judges at the Labor Defender Masquerade Ball, Sunday night, October 6, at the Manhattan Lyceum, 66 East 4th Street.

The Friends of THE NEW MASSES are giving a Hallowe'en Party, October 31, at Webster Manor, 125 East 11th Street.

We have received the first issue of a new monthly magazine published by the Friends of the Chinese People: *China Today*. Originally issued as a small mimeographed brochure, *China Today* has broadened both its editorial contents and its reader audience and now takes its place as one of the outstanding monthly publications in this country.

Among other reasons, the first issue is notable for the clarity and simplicity with which it treats the complex matters of the Far East. Its contents also include: a discussion of Japan's war activities in China, the original documents of the united front agreement between the Fukien 19th Route Army and Soviet China, detailed reports of Soviet China, Mme. Sun Yat Sen's call to the Chinese workers and peasants. Of particular interest to students of revolutionary literature is the story, *People's Therapy*, which appears here in English for the first time.

ARTISTS and WRITERS BALL

Given by

THE JOHN REED CLUB
Sat. Nite October 20
IRVING PLAZA
Fifteenth Street and Irving Place
KING COLES AND HIS BAND
(Dancing from 9 P. M. on)

Entertainment by
National Negro Theatre performers

Tickets:
Forty-five Cents in Advance
Fifty-five Cents at the Door

On Sale at:
New Masses, 31 East 27th Street
John Reed Club, 430 Sixth Avenue
Workers' Bookshop, 50 E. 13th Street

OUT NOW!

A New Magazine of Proletarian Literature
SCOPE

Containing a psychological, penetrating story
—Study of Police Brutality by Ben Hecht
—: and other stories —:
Single Copy 15c 75c by the Year
(Obtainable at the Workers' Bookstore)
SCOPE 120 W. 28th St. Bayonne, N. J.

NOW IN THE MODERN LIBRARY THE Theory OF THE Leisure Class

by
THORSTEIN VEBLEN

Complete and
unabridged. #63
Send for a list of
214 famous titles.

95¢

MODERN LIBRARY, 20 E. 57 St., N.Y.C.

DIMITROV

By STELLA D. BLAGOYEVA

Here's the life-story of the anti-fascist hero who turned the Leipzig trial into a forum for Communism. The author is a life-long friend of Dimitrov.

Seventy-five Cents

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS
881 FOURTH AVENUE NEW YORK, N. Y.