

The Screen

Movies in Motley

AFTER one ghastly rash of green and orange "extravaganzas" four and five years ago, followed by the rounding out of the process itself, followed a year later by Walt Disney's only partial utilization of it in his Silly Symphonies, followed by the complete snubbing of it for two years by Hollywood's feature producers, the honest to God all-color film, with the release of *Becky Sharp*, gave promise at long last of attaching a new and logical member to the anatomy of the one capitalist-developed art. It can scarcely be trumpeted, with the picture's press agents, that an artistic upheaval momentous and decisive as that of the clanging *Jazz Singer* was wrought by the Thackeray novel overnight and single-handed. It must be conceded, however—granting the devil his all too infrequent due—that as an exercise, signal if not wholly virgin, in what might be termed movie "still life," it sets a standard of purely pictorial excellence way ahead of its horrific analogy in the primitive "squawkie."

There are reasons for this, and integral as they are with the rather queer circumstances under which the picture was made, both will bear listing. Old-line Hollywood heads did not produce this picture. Hollywood, quite the reverse, turned a deaf, if a treasurer's, ear to the whole noisome idea. One might even say that the chief providers of what the public wants felt no need at all of embellishing their art. Thirty percent more expensive in film cost alone, enmeshed in all sorts of strange and fearsome problems, color had proven itself a headache once already; improved now, and inevitable as they might know it in their heart of hearts, it was a luxury still and were best "not thought on." The fine old-line Hollywood heads therewith dug themselves into the Malibu sand—and bowed against hope.

They reckoned, however, without the art-loving Whitneys. Progeny of a clan who had always mixed business with pleasure—on the sound basis that both should make money (self-supporting horses like *Twenty Grand*, for example), the Whitney children, "Sonny" and "Jock," had been trained from birth upwards in riding a hobby. Without completely supplanting the horse, to be sure, their fondness for flying had already helped to build Pan-American Airways into a multi-million dollar bonanza. When a few of their ex-theatre cronies—sun-kissed by then—held forth with fervor on the surety of color's becoming the next cinema revolution, they could almost afford to risk a few million inflated dollars for the sake of Art to the masses.

Rank amateurs in the business (if gamblers of mettle), at the outset they shoved

down the odds with a noteworthy skill. They did not rest with founding Pioneer Pictures, dedicated to technicolored productions. They went in and bought up a sizeable hunk of Technicolor itself. "For"—they must have reasoned in their fumbling way—"technicolor is, after all, the commodity with the bloated percentage; Technicolor, Incorporated, controls the new patented three-component-colored film, the rights to process it, the basic directions; and finally, to put it a bit bluntly, should the aforementioned revolution catch on, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America—in a meekly submissive body—become technicolored vassals."

And having thus vanquished the foe, like the munition men, by the simple expedient of merging with them, they were ready to provoke a war. *Becky Sharp* was the episode at Sarajevo.

For the general public (to adapt the metaphor slightly), it was of course, the recruiting poster. And in this matter, it can now be perceived, the untutored Whitneys were a lot more clairvoyant than their more mellow prognosticators. Forseeing, as their cronies didn't, that the spectrum as a cinema innovation, was substantially less devastating than the amplified human larynx, they took pains to put *their* revolution across with a job just a trifle more suave than the erstwhile sponsors of Al Jolson as cantor. For Samson Raphaelson, accordingly, they substituted W. M. Thackeray; more important by far, for Director Alan Crosland, they picked Colorist (and superb scenic artist) Robert Edmond Jones. Their whole "credit-panel," to become exhaustive, presaged Art to the Hilt. Kenneth MacGowan, their supervisor, was no venal ogre like most of his ilk but the ex-Isaiah of the Little Theatre Movement. And who, I ask you, would dream of accusing Regisseur Rouben Mamoulian, onetime Theatre Guild genius and stout Hollywood pillar of montage and fine composition, of having ever made money?

And Art it was! Theatrical art, to be sure (but after all isn't that the tradition of cinematic revolutions?) and, one is compelled to add, rather *stagey* theatrical art. Such is our confidence in the Whitney omniscience, however, that we believe this to have been intentional also. For had they been so foolhardy as to project for their first attempt a *real* movie, they would have commissioned a *real* movie script. Even *Vanity Fair* in the hands of a gifted scenarist might have passed muster; but it would have been given dramatic progression, filmic mobility if not action, and something of a powerful climax. (And a faithful *Vanity Fair*, if that were not too silly to hope for, would certainly retain

the satiric bite of Thackeray's characterization instead of mulling it down to "whimsical" caricature.) Such, however, was not in the cards (as stacked), and *Becky Sharp* was made instead from an old and bad dramatization.

Its limping episodic structure, its tableaux and virtual processions, its lengthy and sedate conversations were chosen as not unfit means for a prearranged end.

That end (as we have rather belabored, we fear) was to "plug" the "three-component-colored" invention; and in this one respect, it cannot be gainsaid, they have been phenomenally successful. Mechanically, to be sure, there remain a few palpable defects—though, when compared with the painful torture of the childhood of sound, they are mere peccadilloes. And it should be admitted outright that the striving has *not* been for naturalistic coloration but deliberately for ornamental stylization, a frank "illumination," in the mood of medieval parchments—only with animation—of the many-hued pomp of the age's conventions. Within these limits there has been achieved resplendent beauty.

Accessible to the new film process is a vast and gorgeous palette of colors, values both placid and vibrant, even the sheen of fabrics. In their disposition taste has been displayed, subtlety, and a sureness in the blending of pigments which as scene follows ravishing scene, leaves the eye glugged. The new element is introduced gently; the first scenes contain scarcely no tinting at all. Then the pastels of *Becky's* boarding-school yield to the vivid uniforms and the glittering gowns of the salons; and with the one nearly dramatic scene, at the Duchess of Bedford's ball on the eve of Waterloo, when the distant rumble of Napoleon's cannonading turns the gaiety into a moment of sheer pandemonium, the intense blues, greens and scarlets fleeing frenziedly through a pool of reflected red light enter inextricably into the scene, becoming themselves dramatic. This is without doubt the high point of the film's use of color. It is the real augury of the medium's possible future.

It would be pleasant, of course, to feel that all future pigmented films would be composed of the best that this first scene contains.

Marxists know too much to hold such an illusion. An ordering of public advertisement which depends for its merely technical embellishment on the precarious contradictions of commerce can scarcely promise a high dedication to art. Of what, on the other hand, we can expect in the main, we have once before had too eloquent tokens. The panic for color, like the race for sound, will bring down a scourge on the innocent public of gaudy calendar-art from the hands of the "cheap"—if high salaried—"imitators." The cubic cerebral content thereof, because of color thrown in as a premium, will be cut—if that is still possible—even more.

ALLEN CHUMLEY.

Hooray, Etcetera

ROBERT FORSYTHE

HOW it was with you I don't know, but my earliest memories of Fourth of July are inextricably mingled with the picture of a tall, lean man whose Adam's apple bobbed up and down in time with his words and fascinated me. This gentleman was the Congressman from our district. It is inconceivable that all Congressmen were tall and lean and boasted of Adam's apples, but I have only my memory to go on and even though the records show that our representatives in Congress changed much more frequently than one would have believed possible in those days of Republican stability, I must insist on my recollection. Whether all Congressmen fancied they were second Abe Lincolns or the idea was ingrained in my own mind, it is certain beyond a doubt that I still think of them as junior rail-splitters. What they were doing, of course, was making the Fourth of July oration.

I can't remember a word the gentlemen said and I don't believe much attention could have been paid them because in those moments when I could take my gaze away from the Adam's apple, I was joining the other lads in galloping around the bandstand. There was an attempt made to have peace and attention while the great man spoke, but the fathers who held up their infant sons at this fount of patriotic wisdom soon got a pain in the arm and either wandered away or turned the brat back to his mama who would be visiting with the other women near the rear of the crowd. The kids yelled, the next raft of kids almost tore the speakers' stand down with their wild careenings and the young bucks and lassies took advantage of the solemn occasion to disappear in the direction of the pop stand. But the flags were flying, there was generally a baseball game after the speaking and there was always a band and sometimes a parade. In our town the parade never amounted to much because we only had one member of the Grand Army of the Republic and he thought so little of war or the memory of it that he said he'd be damned if he got all dressed up in his uniform and make a show of himself by walking down a dusty road while a lot of people gawked at him. We were also short of Spanish-American veterans and for some reason the Spanish-Americans vets were never popular. People rather held that it was a sorry war at the best and something that nobody had much right to be cocky about. As a consequence, there were years when he had no parade at all. A new Lutheran minister was shocked at this and insisted on taking steps. He got the Spanish-American War vets out but he couldn't budge the G.A.R. gentlemen and the parade rather petered out, with the band coming along bravely enough at the head but the man power soon dwindling and the

process ending with the usual grocery wagons, lumber trucks and other commercial vehicles getting in a little advertising plug for their businesses under the guise of patriotism. Next year the minister let the parade go and confined himself to being chairman of the speaking.

We had no paper in our town, even a weekly, and the Fourth of July oration was never preserved for history, but I see now that the speech was an important matter. It is important now as practically the only thing that has come down to us from the old ceremony. There are probably towns where Fourth of July is still celebrated with a parade, bands and fireworks, but they are becoming fewer with the years. People use the Fourth of July holiday now to get away to the beach or to the mountains. Those who can't get away prefer to hang around the house and rest. The others go to ball games or drink a little beer with the neighbors. The

actual ceremonies are now confined to an unveiling of a plaque or a short service in the park with the band playing and a few hardy old citizens on hand to hear Congressman Blatz making a speech against Communism. What we have of Fourth of July now, as a result, are the Fifth of July newspaper reports of what the Hon. James E. Beck of Pennsylvania had to say about George Washington. It is hardly likely that the Hon. James will mention Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine or Samuel Adams. In Kansas, they will be honoring John Brown in a ceremony as obscene as any mortal man could invent—John Brown the old revolutionary being patted on the head by hypocritical stuffed shirts who would have shot him on sight when he was alive.

The Hon. James E. Beck will be lauding George Washington not as the rebel who defied the King and constituted authority but as George Washington who helped establish the Constitution, which must be upheld against all other men who defy authority when it insists upon being tyranny. What is ironic about the flannel-mouthed orators who bore the populace on the Fourth of July is that they have no one to praise but men they would be turning over to the police if they were alive



INDEPENDENCE DAY

Mackey