

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

Two plays about two kinds of war—Some extra-curricular film doings—Books on music

VIRTUOSITY and virtue again go separate ways in the theater offerings of the week. There is small virtue in *Young Madame Conti*, Bruno Frank's play about a beautiful and honest young prostitute and her *crime passionnel*, and yet the virtuosity of Constance Cummings's performance and the verbal talents of the play's adapters, Hubert Griffith and Benn W. Levy, go far toward making it worth seeing. Miss Cummings furrows her smooth brow and tosses her red-gold locks with great effect in a piece of bravura acting that must be grueling in its demands upon her. But don't get the idea that her style is all *Sturm und Drang*; her quiet moments are there too, and just as effective. There seems little doubt that she is now in the top flight of our dramatic actresses. There is no doubt at all that it is she who gives life to this dramatic *tour de force*, which employs for its major effect one of those tricks which enrage some playgoers and delight others. Mr. Levy's direction, of course, is smooth and precise, and shares the laurels for virtuosity.

The virtue of the raw stuff of life infuses the rambling *Red Harvest*, a play based on "pages from a Red Cross diary" kept in a war hospital behind the Chateau Thierry push, and makes it, in spite of certain silly surrenders to traditional theater, something worth seeing. It is a disappointment to hopes, rather than to expectations, that the political insight of the script does not reach the level made possible by its facts, and yet we are somewhat rewarded by the fact that the war-time President of the United States, the members of Congress, and kings and their cabinets the world over are pointedly addressed as sons of bitches by a nurse who has begun to see through the whole lousy racket. The Frederic Tozere whose portrayal of Pharaoh brightened the scenes of the W.P.A.'s production of *The Sun and I* when it opened, does a good job in the male lead of *Red Harvest* as a snotty, lecherous surgeon who turns out to have a heart of gold. Leona Powers, head nurse in the hospital, is the chief character, and manages to convey without offensive theatricality the terrific stress of hospital work within sound of the drumfire and under appalling conditions of overcrowding, understaffing, shortage of equipment, and the human breakdown that such conditions produce. The outbreak of almost sheer animal protest against these conditions and against the constant stream of dead and dying humanity is handled by Margaret Mullen, who for once in a way managed to make stage hysterics something deeply terrifying. Antoinette Perry's control of pace, moreover, finally brought into vigorous motion a play that started out twiddling its thumbs with overacting and flat talk.

Another play dealing with the stress of war is Michael Blankfort's *The Brave and the Blind*, put on by the Rebel Arts Players at the

Labor Stage Studios in New York. It takes us into the fascist-held Alcazar on the fiftieth day of the siege by the Spanish loyalists, and shows us a cross-section of the population under conditions of fascist rule and anti-fascist beleaguement. The folks in the room of the old fortress are there at the behest of the fascist-military clique who have told them that the "Reds" will strip them of land, property, religion, and other things they hold dear. As the play progresses, with the loyalists' mining operations plainly audible, it becomes clear to the besieged that the thing they hold dearest is life, and when at last the loyalist loudspeaker tells them they have five minutes to surrender or be blown to bits, their choice is clear despite their political views or misapprehensions. It is at this point that the fascists clear up a lot of their followers' political confusions by a wholesale execution of those in the room, including fascist sympathizers. The execution of a priest by the fascists for trying to fulfill his priestly duty of administering extreme unction to a Catholic loyalist prisoner also has its political effect on those besieged in the Alcazar. This play is especially valuable in showing the patterns of human reaction among the population behind the fascist lines in Spain, and how through trickery, force, and, finally, wanton desperation, the fascist leadership attempts to maintain its rule. The continuing sound of the loyalists' mining operations and the final loudspeaker are historic facts which are effectively used as dramatic material. At this writing, the Rebel Arts group was uncertain whether further performances would be shown, but readers in New York can phone them to find out. It is to be hoped that this play will go the rounds

under the auspices of trade unions that are supporting the cause of Spanish democracy.

Taking a merited cue from its audiences, *Farewell, Summer* closed after a week's run. Miss Lois Wilson's talents were incapable of lending life to this embarrassing still-birth about a girl who fell fruitlessly in love with a scientist who was satisfied with his wife.

ALEXANDER TAYLOR.

THE SCREEN

FIRST let us take a look at the films of the week, and then turn to some other interesting phases of the film world.

Elephant Boy (London Films-United Artists): Based on Kipling's *Toomai of the Elephants*, this is the product of John Collier (scenario), Alexander Korda (producer), and Zoltan Korda as co-director with Robert Flaherty. At the mention of the last name we think of an important figure in the development of documentary film and of something "higher" than the usual synthetic Hollywood product. Compared with *Elephant Boy*, Flaherty's *Man of Aran* was a sensitive and honest film. The former smacks entirely (in spite of a sprinkling of academic landscape cinematography) of class-B London production, with "Oxford in the jungle" and a goodly share of British imperialism and chauvinism. The story is simple enough, being only about a little boy who wants to become a great hunter. But it is the British attitude toward "natives" that makes this film what it is. It is evident either that it is mainly Zoltan Korda's work (for it resembles his *Sanders of the River*), or that Robert Flaherty lost his artistic integrity in the Indian jungle. I'd like to believe the former.

Maytime (M.G.M.): An operetta; entertainment galore if you like Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy; a potpourri of Tschai-kowski's Fifth Symphony, Sigmund Romberg's *Maytime*, Meyerbeer's *Huguenots*, Tin Pan Alley's "Virginia Ham and Eggs," "Santa Lucia," and some folk music à la "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny."

Now to other matters. An important development is the formation of the Associated Film Audiences and the publication of their first bulletin, *Film Survey*. It is encouraging to see that finally there will be an attempt to do one of the most important jobs in the interest of pro-labor, anti-war, and generally progressive films of all types: the job of *organizing the audience*. The Associated Film Audiences is a body composed (so far) of the American Jewish Congress, American League Against War and Fascism, American Youth Congress, Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, Teachers' Union Local 5, International Ladies' Garment Workers'



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You might have got the idea that the ivory-tower notion of the artist's and writer's function was not being argued publicly these days with any conviction, but it seems that it has broken out in Hollywood with a bang. The March issue of the *Screen Guild Magazine* carries an article by Donald Ogden Stewart, outstanding American humorist and one of the top-rank screen writers in Hollywood, which is a vigorous reply to an article by Mary McCall, Jr., in the February issue of the same magazine. Miss McCall had complained bitterly, speaking of the actors, writers, and directors in the screen colony, that "We're up to our necks in politics and morality just now. Nobody goes to anybody's house any more to sit and talk and have fun. There's a master of ceremonies and a collection basket, because there are no good gatherings now except for a Good Cause." What got Miss McCall's goat, among other things, was that Mr. Stewart was assigned by the Screen Writers' Guild (of which he is an executive board member) to attend a mass meeting at which Ralph Bates spoke in behalf of the Spanish government. In expounding her position, she quoted William Butler Yeats to the effect that "art knows no politics, art knows no morality," and remarked that there would some day be a showdown between the Right and the Left in which the Rights would "tar, feather, and mutilate the staff of some Liberal newspaper," and in which the Lefts would "go berserk and sack the Metropolitan Museum." As a writer, she remarked, her job would not be to take part in such a conflict, but to view it from the sidelines and report it.

Replying, Mr. Stewart remarked that Miss McCall could say, if she liked, that non-participation was the writer's role, but pointed to the facts of life to prove her wrong. He mentioned the part Ralph Bates, Ralph Fox, André Malraux, and other writers had played, and were playing in the Spanish situation, and reminded her of the great tradition of writers' fighting for freedom in which Byron, Shelley, Thomas Moore, Voltaire, and others had played a part. "The example of these men," Mr. Stewart remarked, "would seem to give some small excuse at least for a Hollywood writer to interest himself in what is going on

HAROLD J. LASKI

Professor of Political Science at London School of Economics, Member of British Labor Party, Author of "The State in Theory and Practice" and other works.

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PETER ELLIS.

CONCERT MUSIC

PARSIFAL (Act III on the New York Philharmonic-Symphony's March 28 program in toto at the Metropolitan Opera House) held no temptation to break a welcome Easter vacation from concert-going; neither did the New York Women's Symphony March 30 presentation of Horatio Parker's frequently praised and rarely performed *Hora Novissima*. I weakened momentarily to the extent of tuning in on the ever-admirable WQXR (New York) for the latter work, but the best broadcasting in the world can't make a rankly incompetent performance any more palatable, and in any case a Puritan sneaking in his operatic exhibitionism under the cover of a churchly text was offensive enough in itself. So, while waiting to hear the sonorously fanfared Symphony by Samuel Barber, and Ernest Bloch's new *Voice in the Wilderness* (scheduled by the Philharmonic-Symphony for April 3 and 4, a couple of days too late for reporting in this issue), I found a not too impertinent subject for these notes in an uncommonly substantial book on music.

B. H. Haggin's *A Book of the Symphony* (Oxford University Press, \$5) is not to be confused with Charles O'Connell's *The Victor Book of the Symphony*, published by Simon & Schuster a couple of years ago. The latter work is essentially a collection of program notes on the standard symphonic repertory, seeking, in the author's words, to "stimulate the reader's own emotional and imaginative responses to music." Haggin sets out on sounder ground with a text that bears quoting:

A statement about music will mean nothing to a person who reads it unless he has heard the music or can hear it when he reads the statement. . . . To understand what a phrase of music conveys he needs only to hear it; and there is, in fact, no other way: the meaning of the phrase consists in subtleties of feeling for which there are no words, and which are conveyed through music precisely because they cannot be conveyed in any other way. . . . What Mozart has to say, then, only he can say for himself (and one must doubt that he intended or would accept the interpretations of some who undertake to speak for him).

It is not the single phrase which causes any difficulty to the person who has not studied music (he has only to hear it), but the "aggregate, the succession of phrases that gives him trouble." Unlike pictures, for example, which can be studied in their entirety merely by standing and looking at them, a symphony exists in the dimension of time: "For the untrained listener there are too many details that succeed each other too rapidly; so that his ear misses some of them, and in the end he is left with an impression of a number of unconnected, unorganized fragments." Haggin's ideal solution to this old problem is the tonally illustrated lecture; his substitute in the present book is to key his discussion of the details of a work to illustrations in music notation plus

LOUIS FISCHER and BENJAMIN STOLBERG take opposing points of view on their discussion of the new book by LEON TROTSKY

In his review, Louis Fischer describes the progress of the Soviet Union and vigorously refutes Trotsky's charges against the present regime as opposed to the arguments put forward by Benjamin Stolberg supporting Trotsky's viewpoint.

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