

# SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

Joris Ivens's "The Spanish Earth" and Hollywood's "Dead End"—The good and bad of Gershwin

**N**EW YORKERS are indeed privileged. Joris Ivens's long-awaited film, *The Spanish Earth* (released by Contemporary Historians), is now running at the 55th Street Playhouse. Every true friend of the Spanish people, every lover of democracy, everyone who is vitally interested in great art in the cinema, should see this film. It is regrettable, therefore, that the film could not open simultaneously in every city and town in the United States. It is common knowledge by now that the commercial distributors reacted very favorably toward the film, but that they were afraid to handle it for fear of the attitude the Legion of Decency and other reactionary organizations might take.

It is difficult to find adequate expressions to describe the film. The old clichés have become shop-worn. And yet, one must of necessity resort to them. For the film is moving and stirring. And it is also sensitive, poetic, hard, terrifying, and optimistic about the fate of the Spanish people. Those are queer terms to apply to a film that deals with a war.

Those who saw the Ivens's films for the first time last year (NEW MASSES, March 31, 1936) will recognize the artist. Not only is he the creator of the most important documentary film that has been made, but also a man who began as a sensitive amateur with *Rain* and developed to a mature artist with *The Spanish Earth*. In giving me his views on the documentary film about a year ago, Ivens remarked that: "All we can do with it is to accuse and show the way. Unlike the acted film, there was no possibility of identification with the actor, or emotional relationship to the development of the plot. Thus we can never indicate the future."

And so, before he left for Spain, Ivens, together with Lillian Hellman and Archibald MacLeish, wrote a scenario. It was to be an enacted film. A film that would attempt to create the widest possible sympathy for the Spanish people in the same way most movies establish sympathy for their heroes. But when Ivens got to Spain, when he saw the war at the front and the battle with the land at the rear, he soon realized that "men cannot act before the camera in the presence of death." Instead he saw that the "Spanish earth is dry and hard, and the faces of the men who work that earth are hard and dry from the sun."

Thus he abandoned the original script for one determined by actuality. With Hemingway he set about planning a film on the basis of what was then taking place. Together with John Ferno, a young Dutch photographer who had worked with Ivens before, they made their film. They went into the front-line trenches and worked and fought on an equal basis with the defenders of Madrid, and the brave defenders of the Madrid-Valencia highway. After several months in Spain, Ivens and Hemingway came back with ten thousand feet of film. With his most capable co-

worker, Helen van Dongen, Ivens turned his raw film into a brilliant motion picture. It represents a wonderful example of cooperative effort. Marc Blitzstein and Virgil Thompson arranged the music, and Irving Reis, of the Columbia Broadcasting System, supervised the recording. Everyone connected with the film understood what was wanted. They all believed in what the film had to depict: "The men, who never fought before, who were not trained in arms, who only wanted work and food, fight on."

*The Spanish Earth* does everything Ivens maintained a documentary film could not do. There may be no identification with any one actor, but there most certainly is a very positive identification with the people of Spain. There is every identification with the peasants who for fifty years wanted to irrigate their land but were held back by the landlords. There is every identification, both intellectual and emotional, with the people of Madrid who stay in their city under the barbaric shelling by the fascists because (as Hemingway says): "These are their homes. Here is their war. This is their fight. The fight to be allowed to live as human beings."

In the first minutes of the film, we are shown soldiers going into battle. The off-screen voice says: "This is the true face of men going into action. It is a little different from any other face you will ever see." *The Spanish Earth*, in the same way, is different from any other film you have ever seen.

This has really been a swell season for the motion pictures. In addition to *The Spanish Earth*, we have had in little more than a month *They Won't Forget*, *The Life of Emile Zola*, and now Samuel Goldwyn's production of *Dead End* (United Artists). Produced with the care that is typical of Mr. Goldwyn, the film speaks out openly against poverty, the slums, and their consequences. Its major message, of course, is that slums breed crime. It also brings into sharp contrast the lives of the rich (who live next door to the tenements) with those tough little kids of the street. Lillian Hellman, who has written a swell

script, preserves the minor motif of police brutality in a strike situation which was in playwright Kingsley's original.

This version will inevitably be compared with the Norman Bel Geddes's stage production. As such it will suffer. It isn't that the film has lost any dynamic quality in the process of cleaning up the street language, but rather that, except for a few small passages, Director William Wyler's production hasn't too much imagination. The set on the stage had terrific realism. But the same set (it is even a little more elaborate) on the screen remains only a set, artificial. It is very much like the motion-picture set of *Winterset*. But *Winterset* at least, consciously formalized the set into a symbol. After the first half hour I felt as though I were being hemmed in by the set and the rectangular screen. The spectator actually got a *feeling* for the slum; you were actually able to smell the place.

On the other hand, Wyler gives us two very remarkable scenes: the first between Baby-Face Martin (Humphrey Bogart) and his mother; the second between Martin and his former girl friend turned prostitute. When she says, "You're looking at me as I was; look at me now!", and throws her face from the shadow into the hard sunlight, the effect is tremendous. Sylvia Sydney plays the sister of the gang leader. Her part has been enlarged to suit the film and its new romantic needs. She doesn't have much opportunity for extended acting, but she does succeed in giving a warm characterization of a typical New York working girl.

PETER ELLIS.

## GERSHWIN'S MUSIC

**I**F the audience of over twenty thousand that jammed the Lewisohn Stadium in New York on August 9 came to praise Gershwin, it was immediately obvious that the musicians were expressly out to bury him. The Gershwin Memorial Concert incidentally broke the Stadium attendance record (set at one of Gershwin's own evenings in 1932), but its objective—despite all well-meaning motives—was iconoclastic: smashing a legend, throwing a cruelly harsh spotlight on the feet of clay that had lately supported the god of Tin Pan Alley. Ferde Grofé and Alexander Smallens conducted, Harry Kaufman played the piano, Ethel Merman and members of the original *Porgy and Bess* cast sang. All of them are presumably great admirers of the composer, but they could hardly have done him greater disservice than by their clumsy performances that exposed every flaw and patch of the *Concerto in F*, *Porgy and Bess*, *An American in Paris*; even the *Rhapsody in Blue* seemed to justify the most disparaging criticism that has been heaped on these works in the past. The latent enthusiasm of the crowd evaporated and only an occasional



Milt Groth

magical moment gave an indication of its potential force: Todd Duncan's incomparable projection of "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'" and Ethel Merman (woefully miscast in "The Man I Love" and "You Can't Take That Away From Me") going at last to town in "I Got Rhythm." At the 1932 concert I had one of the most literally thrilling musical experiences I had ever known when thousands of subdued hummed voices took up the andante tune of the *Rhapsody* and transfigured it from sloppy lushness into an incredibly rich and strange wave of song, a tonal tide that flooded the entire stadium. The other evening it was taken up again, but a large part of the audience was filing impatiently to the gates; no longer a miracle, the old sorcery was blurred and nearly impotent.

Bored and disheartened I watched the thunderclouds gather in the darkening sultry sky, and I thought the interruption of a storm would be perfectly appropriate to this anticlimactic end of a career. Since the audacious clarinet glissando of the white hope of jazz first signed (in Goldberg's\* phrase) American music's Declaration of Independence, the deflating process has worked even more steadily than Gershwin's creative activity. The *Second Rhapsody* and *Rhumba* have already been forgotten, the great American folk opera was a sputtering rocket that didn't quite go off, even the songsmith's craftsmanship seemed sterile and shaky in the *Shall We Dance* film music. Perhaps Gershwin was written out, perhaps he had never fully found himself. His death in Hollywood removed any possibility of an answer. All we know is that an astonishing career ended "not with a bang, but with a whimper."

CRITICAL GRAVE-DIGGERS and autopsy performers are always on the job, indeed they have seldom been known to wait until the death certificate is signed. They had marked out Gershwin long ago, and he played into their hands as prodigally as into those of his ecstatic admirers. There never was any concealment of his weaknesses, and one has only to reread the premiere reviews of his major works to be reminded that the critical fraternity missed no frailty. Then, too, Gershwin was led on by his ambition and his intellectual friends to overreach himself. He had to wrestle with the wraith of symphonic jazz, to have a fling at the great American opera. He used the rewards of his early success to study hard and work hard, but a grasp of the large forms isn't something that can be learned. He attained enough of a grasp of instrumentation to belie the Grofé legend, but orchestration is much more than instrumentation and it, too, is nothing that can be acquired. Grofé himself, for all his exciting Pandora's bag of tricks, hasn't got it, whereas Duke Ellington apparently was blessed with it from the cradle. The gods omitted some gifts from the largesse they showered on Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and Wolf; Gershwin could hardly have been expected to

\* GEORGE GERSHWIN: A STUDY IN AMERICAN MUSIC, by Isaac Goldberg. Simon and Schuster.

succeed where they failed. A few of the larger works hang on by virtue of a few pregnant passages, even the *Rhapsody* exists as an entity because (again to quote Gershwin's biographer) "the whole of the *Rhapsody* is greater than the sum of its parts."

It is impossible for any American growing up in the twenties to evaluate the *Rhapsody in Blue* with any degree of dispassion. We can't pass impartial, critical judgment on music that has so much extra-musical meaning for us. Like so many of the Gershwin songs, the *Rhapsody* has resounded in our ears, on our tongues, and under our fingers so long that it has passed into our bloodstreams. And it would be beside the point to dissect it; its faults and merits by themselves give no indication of the significance it assumed from the very first performance in 1924. It said something we were waiting to hear, in our own voices and our own language, and we cannot forget it.

Apart from the *Rhapsody*, the accepted Gershwin legacy simmers down to the songs, and even his detractors, reluctantly agreeing to their perfection, are forced to change their ground and belittle the form itself. Which is ridiculous. The cult of size is an untenable one in any art. We do not esteem Dowland, Wolf, Duparc, and Fauré the less because their finest work was in the song form. Like them Gershwin was born to it, and perfected himself in its particular craftsmanship. A creator of ideas and motifs rather than long lines and elaborate webs, his best tonal inventions are sharp, many-faceted gems, cut and polished with painstaking care and taste. Yet they have none of the icy sparkle of jewels; there is true warmth and glowing fire in their depths. He turned out many synthetic stones in the Broadway tradition, some mediocre, others good representative examples of their genre. But there is also a handful marked by genius, and one has only to run through the *Gershwin Song Book* to recognize its unmistakable stamp.

It is ironic that Gershwin critics have denied him or ignored one of the two finest qualities in his best songs, the delicacy of sentiment, the masculine tenderness that distinguishes this Jewish boy (born Jacob Gershwin in Brooklyn, brought up as a Tin Pan Alley plugger), as heir to one of the great traditions of English music. Daniel Gregory Mason, in his *Tune In, America*, pontificates at length over the poisonous domination of Jewish tastes and standards on music in America, and particularly New York—"Oriental extravagance, sensuous brilliancy and intellectual facility and superficiality . . . general tendency to exaggeration and disproportion . . . poignant eroticism and pessimism." If Gershwin's work had no other significance it would still be of vital importance in refuting such Ur-Nazism. His songs—concerned as they are with the popular convention of love—are far removed from both eroticism and sentimentality. Hear again "Do Do Do," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "So Are You," "My One and Only" to see how remote Gershwin is from both the usual Alley

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caterwauling and the stickiness of many a famous "serious" song writer. In their simplicity, directness, and freshness it is no affectation to say they are akin (for all the difference in idiom) to many of the Elizabethan airs, still the purest treasure of English song. There are extravagance, superficiality, disproportion enough in his larger works, but there he was floundering. In the songs he is economic, sure-handed, and sure-headed, and he strikes cleanly home. As for pessimism, the other great quality of Gershwin's best work is its exuberant spontaneity, the gusty lift one finds in the opening of the *Rhapsody*, "Clap Yo' Hands," "I Got Rhythm," the "Winter-green for President" parade in *Of Thee I Sing*—all of them in his own (and our) musical speech, not merely vulgar or high-spirited, but a distinctive and optimistic utterance, as American-to-the-core as that of Mark Twain, or—in music—"Turkey in the Straw" and "Oh, Susanna."

Gershwin's lively mind was prey to too many influences: the manifestos of such lively art spokesmen as Seldes and Van Vechten, the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, foreign contemporaries such as Milhaud (whose *Création du Monde*, written a year before the *Rhapsody in Blue*, echoes in many of the latter work's most characteristic passages), the cult of the pseudo-spiritual exhibited so strongly in *Porgy and Bess*. But subtract them all and there is a residue, small but precious, of pure Gershwiniana, and it is for that he will be remembered.

For that (in actual achievement) and for what he meant to us. Many a popular tune-smith has influenced us more than we realize. The tune hits that everyone hears and sings and thinks he forgets sink into our subconscious. Gershwin more than any other has shaped our experience, for his were not only tunes that we remembered longer than others: their greater solidity and pointedness, their moving grace and tenderness struck more deeply than the rest, permitted a greater accretion of feeling and association. He gave voice to something that was inexpressible in ourselves, shop girl and street cleaner and intellectual alike. For the first time since Stephen Foster, Americans and the American temperament found musical expression. All our "serious" composers, the MacDowells, the Parkers, the Chadwicks, and the more or less hard-boiled composers of today have missed it, just as Gershwin did when he tried hardest to write "American music." But when he whipped up the *Rhapsody in Blue* to meet Whiteman's rapidly approaching concert date, when he busily manufactured the Broadway show "numbers" by which he made his living, he became articulate.



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