

# SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

## Irwin Shaw's "Siege" Lets Us Down

IRWIN SHAW'S *Siege* represents a pretty shameful let-down from the high ambition of *Bury the Dead*. The flaming playwright of that impassioned anti-war drama has become lazy and ineffectual in his latest effort, a "neutral" treatment of the Spanish civil war. Faced with an issue which is definite to the man in the street, he has chosen an oblique and unreal approach, expressing himself in terms of human beings involved in a war—not any particular war. Apparently his comet career has gone to his head and softened by flattery, and Hollywood and local subsidizing, he has made a temporary (to be hoped) retrogression. Success has been too easy for the Shaw who followed *Bury the Dead* with an unproduced script about how a Red scare can be developed by the reactionary press, and who then wrote a football picture for the film industry. Once this youngster knew what was going on in the world, but he has either forgotten or deliberately chosen to ignore the political values known to anyone who cares to read the papers or who listens to the conversation of informed citizens. There is no character in *Siege* who gives any indication of knowing what the war is about.

Shaw's approach to the problem is to treat people as human beings who fight only because they must. In a war which is one of the most political ever waged, one which has a crystal clear premise, the author has his characters mumble that they fight for everything except political reasons. A possible theme for a treatment somewhat like Mr. Shaw's attempt, would be to present people's small troubles as a sort of counterpoint to the larger issue of the Spanish people versus fascism, but Shaw chooses to ignore the larger point altogether.

The result of this avoidance of political values is that *Siege* appears not to be about anything. It's echoing flatulence was apparent to the most confused of the bourgeois critics who condemned the play to an early death. After four performances it was carted off to the warehouse.

It is to be hoped that the Shaw of the sincerity, vehemence, and power of *Bury the Dead* will take thought about himself after the reception of *Siege*. He has pungent things to say and has shown so clearly his abilities to write in the correct direction that it would be a distinct loss for him to be discouraged into silence.

The setting of *Siege* is an old Moorish fortress in which are trapped a band of loyalists. The producer, Norman Bel Geddes, saw fit to use a revolving stage upon which was mounted a ponderous, solid heap of rubble, stones, guns, broken arches. This mass moved back and

forth at such frequent intervals that it seemed as if the producer was delighted with his monstrous mechanical contrivance. Incidentally, a shell registered a direct hit at one point in the dialogue and everything went black. But when the curtain rose again the arches were still in place. The whole show had that air of trickery.

Mr. Shaw coops up in his fortress a bull fighter, a pacifist, and a "Communist" worker. They all talk, and the bull fighter makes conversational and other passes at the wife of the pacifist. In the end when all are hungry and despairing, the pacifist becomes militant to the extent of shooting the bull fighter whose delirious babblings have begun to demoralize the remaining soldiers.

The author's uncertainties about what he is thinking, or rather his clumsy attempts to say something he really cannot believe, have been reflected in every department of his play. Construction doesn't exist, and the dialogue is preposterously bad. It is fumbling of the worst sort. As hinted above, no one cared for the work except perhaps Mr. Bel Geddes who has never demonstrated any theater intelligence anyway. The best thing Mr. Shaw can do is to leave the architectural genius and mull over his relation to the theater. He has too much to say and a first-rate talent for expression.

If you want to know about the actors, be assured that they were innocent people, who couldn't help it if no one knew what to tell them to do. They certainly didn't look like Spaniards, act like Spaniards, or remind you of Spaniards. The director apparently simply took care to see that only one spoke at once. As for the producer, he will never get over the fact that the script is generally written before the scenery can be built.

The only excitement afforded this correspondent during the week was a second trip to

Marc Blitzstein's magnificent operetta, *The Cradle Will Rock*, at the Mercury Theatre, N. Y. It will be performed again this Sunday night, December 19, and is soon to be given a production of eight performances a week at the hands of a regular commercial manager.

JACK BURROWS.

## Retrospect and Forecast

THE annual pre-Christmas season brings with it the usual slump in motion pictures. Within the past few weeks there has been nothing first rate released. The high point was reached with M.G.M.'s *The Last Gangster* which, at its best, is second-rate film fare. It is essentially a male version of *Stella Dallas*. A hard-boiled racketeer (Edward G. Robinson) gets put away for a ten-year term on the good old income-tax charge. He turns soft and sacrifices his life for his son, who during the jail sentence had acquired a new father and a respectable life.

If you insist on going to movies, you'd better stick to the older product. If you go to the first-run palaces, you'll find tripe like *45 Fathers* (20th Century-Fox) in which Jane Withers is still trying to be cute, or *Dinner at the Ritz* (New World—made in England) on which I am unable to report in great detail for the simple reason that it is so inexpertly recorded, directed, and acted that it is impossible to follow the story or understand what is being said.

Maybe this lack of good productions is a producers' trick to allow critics enough leisure to consider and choose the ten best pictures of the year. I don't know if I could pick the ten best pictures, but there should certainly be no difficulty in finding some. Hollywood gave us a few films which are not to be sneezed at. The Soviet Union reached a new peak with *Baltic Deputy* and gave us a memorable film in *The Return of Maxim*. But what is most encouraging was the emergence of Frontier Films with their two extraordinary documentaries *Heart of Spain* and *China Strikes Back*.

The future looks bright, too. Not only for the films Frontier now has in production (a short on the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and a film based on the findings of the LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee), not only for foreign film field (especially Amkino's *Peter the First* which opens in twenty-four cities on December 24), not only because the government through its Farm Security Administration has given us another beautiful and stirring documentary in *The River* (which will shortly be reviewed in these pages), but also because of certain productions being contemplated in Hollywood.

The one that excites me most is the announcement from Grand National that James



Helen Ludwig

Cagney's next vehicle is to be a film written and directed by Rowland Brown with the wonderful title, *Angels with Dirty Faces*. I don't know what the story is about, but the Cagney-Brown combination is exciting. Brown, about whom very little is known, is as far as I'm concerned one of the finest directors working in Hollywood. His first film, *Quick Millions*, is the finest gangster film that has been made. He made next, for Darryl Zanuck, an extraordinary study of bail-bondsmen called *Blood Money*. Despite Zanuck's mutilation, the fresh and dynamic qualities of the film came through. Since then he hasn't been on good terms with the Hollywood producers, having walked out of several productions. Of course, I may be wrong, but if the Cagney-Brown partnership holds together, we can expect many exciting things.

PETER ELLIS.

## Phonograph Records: A Christmas Crop

THE land-office business in records at this season last year may not be matched in 1937, but it won't be the fault of the manufacturers: never have they turned out so many releases nor, on the whole, such interesting and significant material. In addition to the regular December issues and a Victor special list of repressed European H.M.V. recordings, now on sale, the January releases have been speeded up to appear around December 15. There are so many items in all that I shall cover the highlights only in a condensed list of recommendations (plus a few black sheep to avoid).

**Bach.** The best bets are the A-major piano concerto by Edwin Fischer (Victor set 368), thirteen chorale-preludes by Dr. Schweitzer (Columbia Bach Organ Society, Vol. II), and three flute sonatas by Barrère (Victor Set 406). The best-seller will be a new album of Stokowski transcriptions (Victor set 401), but those who prefer Bach straight to Bach in Hollywood grease-paint are given due warning. And avoid the Motet "Sing Ye to the Lord" (Victor 1845 and 14613) like poison. The best gifts albums are still the older issues of the complete Brandenburg concertos and *The Art of Fugue* (Columbia sets 249-50 and 206).

**Beethoven.** Good: first piano concerto by Giesekeing (Columbia set 308); great: Opus 131, string quartet by the Busch foursome (Victor set 369). I don't care much for Schnabel's version of the "Hammerclavier" Sonata (Victor set 403). For the symphonies (no new releases) you can't go wrong with the Weingartner Columbia series, although Toscanini's high-voltage version of the seventh (Victor) is hard to resist.

**Bloch.** Gamut achieves a scoop with the first recording of the savage violin sonata played by Harold and Marion Kahn Berkley (set 3).

**Brahms.** Beecham's "Tragic" overture (Columbia set X85), but not the Kreisler violin concerto (Victor set 402) unless you're a more avid Kreislerian than I am. Bruno

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