

# SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

*The first offering of Frontier Films—Some recent dance recitals and two new plays*

**R**ECENTLY Will H. Hays delivered his annual report to the motion-picture industry. As usual, it was full of many brilliant and original remarks about the medium and the artistic progress of Hollywood. But one of the brighter spots in the speech was that "the American film industry has endeavored to produce its pictures on a high plane of entertainment and artistic merit, with complete freedom from propaganda and objectionable matter." Well, perhaps it is better that we leave the matters of "art" and "quality pictures" to Hollywood and the Hays office. In my discussion of *The Wave*, I mentioned the newly organized Frontier Films. In spite of the fact that this organization did not announce a film universe full of stars, it is, nevertheless, of great importance to the movie-goers of America. The purpose of this group of progressive professional scenarists, directors, dramatists, and cameramen is to produce realistic films of American life. In their announcement they state that

There are many aspects of American life ignored by the film industry. In the stirring events that overflow our newspapers . . . in the vivid reality of our everyday lives . . . in the rich and robust traditions of the American people . . . there exists a wealth of dramatic material. This is the subject matter that needs to be dramatized in America's most popular medium of entertainment. It is this America—the world we actually live in—that Frontier Films will portray.

And in New York's Roosevelt Theater the first film to come from this organization is on

view: a short entitled *The World Today*. This film shows every indication that Frontier Films will keep its promise.

In form, *The World Today* bears a superficial resemblance to *The March of Time*. Just as *The March of Time* revolutionized the newsreels, so will *The World Today* revolutionize the method of dramatizing actual news events and happenings. As a matter of fact, it was very easy for *The March of Time* to advance over the conventional newsreel. It eliminated the "entertainment" values of the newsreel and presented "news" and "educational" features in a fresh manner. It proved that the reenacted newsreel, the dramatic documentary, need not necessarily detract from the actuality of the event. As a matter of fact, it added the welcome dramatic punch. But in the name of objectivity and honest reporting, *The March of Time* went the way of the rest of the *Time-Fortune-Life* enterprises: flirting with Reaction. In addition to this ideological danger, *The March of Time* landed in a well-worn rut. By this time their method has lost its freshness and their technique has become stale, conventionalized, and uninteresting. On a smaller scale they are doing exactly what Hollywood is doing: avoiding or distorting reality.

The first issue of *The World Today* contains two subjects: a re-creation of the fight against the mortgage companies by the residents of New York's middle-class suburb, Sunnyside, L. I., and a frank reenactment of the activities of the Black Legion and the mur-

der of W.P.A. worker Poole by Black Legion killer Dean. In the Sunnyside sequence, the makers went to the scenes of the actual eviction for their material. The script was written with the assistance of the dispossessed home-owners and was shot with the same people reenacting their own fight. The result is extraordinary. It is so realistic, that when this sequence was shown to the "actors" they refused to believe their eyes—that this was *not* the actual eviction. The Black Legion sequence was obviously done entirely by actors. But in spite of that, it looks like a documentary film and functions like one. The initiation scene, for instance, is more vivid than anything in the Warner Brothers' version of *The Black Legion*.

This first issue has its faults; to deny them would be unfair to the members of the staff of Frontier Films, since in ideas and technique they have advanced beyond this film, made months ago. Nevertheless, it is strong enough, fresh enough, and exciting enough to amaze many members of *The March of Time* staff when it was shown to them. This is truly a bold new step in the field of the American movies and it is up to us to support it for all we're worth. PETER ELLIS.

## THE DANCE

**I**N its last concert, the New Dance League (now merged with the American Dance Association, which convenes May 14, 15, 16 at the New School for Social Research in New York) presented, among others, Jane Dudley in her *Songs of Protest*, from Lawrence Gellert's collection (Tamiris and her W.P.A. group, incidentally, are giving their *Songs of Protest* at the Nora Bayes Theater in New York on May 5), Lily Mehlman in a lyrical *Harvest Song*, Miriam Blecher in her gay and earthy folk dance, *From Biro-Bidjan in the Field*. Malvena Fried, a newcomer, offered a thoroughly amusing, burlesqued *Portrait of an American Lady* (petty bourgeoisie); Bill Matons one of the best of his protests, *Letter to a Policeman in Kansas City*; and Blanche Evan a rhythmically good but somewhat dated *An Office Girl Dreams*.

Technically and artistically, the dancers have moved forward. Gestures have grown more sparing, movement more incisive; the patterns of their dances have lost the ingenuous qualities of obviously sloganed pantomime and their choreography has lost whatever tendency it might have had to swing into equivocal abstractions. The concert was perhaps not the most exciting that the New Dance League has presented since its first production at the Civic Repertory only a little over two years ago, but certainly it was one of its most polished performances.

Another young dancer, Lillian Shapero,



Joseph Serrano

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who has worked considerably with the Yiddish theater and with the Freiheit Gezang Farein, was seen with her group, in a concert given over to such excellent thematic material as *Jingoist, Proletarian Songs, Crisis* and a *Trilogy* on women and war.

But the choreography of the compositions was top-heavy with abstract patterns, and the patterns weren't particularly exciting nor very clear in their meaning. A more logical development of the theme contest of her work might have helped considerably. Whatever the case, Lillian Shapero has accepted uncritically the whole Graham technique and manner; and her idiom, for the most part, smacks much of the first art-for-art's-sake days of the modern-dance movement. The technical approach of the young dancer is essentially escapist and has little in common with the ideological militancy of her themes. The concert wasn't a particularly happy one. Lillian Shapero has done better; she can do better, and should.

OWEN BURKE.

## THE THEATER

IN keeping with the spirit of lassitude induced by maturing spring, apparently, the Federal Theater Project in New York has installed in the Provincetown Playhouse (of hallowed memory) a play by James Bridie called *Tobias and the Angel*, which is a tale of human fate and foibles presided over in good style by the Archangel Raphael, who manages to put to rout the demons of flesh and spirit that badger the characters of the play. Cast in the general mold of Hebrew lore of biblical days, this easy-going little pilgrim's progress yet manages to have much freshness and charm for the contemporary audience. It is hardly a full-bodied dramatic effort, however, and never gets to the point of taking on the flesh and blood of life. The same leisurely good humor and sense of human



Milton Hebard

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