

# SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

*Movies in theaters and in your home—A W.P.A. play on the Negro question*

A GROUP of second and third rate movies served to make this a very distressing and discouraging week for your reviewer. The very best (and that is by no means too good) is a cute little whimsy of a ghost story based on a novel by the late Thorne Smith called *Topper* (M.G.M.). It is about a young married couple (rich, of course) who live high, wide, and handsome. One wild night they wrap their car around a tree and proceed to leave this earth, by way of double exposure, as astral bodies. Before they leave for good, however, they decide to see what they can do for a conservative banker (Roland Young) in making him more human and relieving him of his henpecked wife. And so the rest of the film is filled with trick photography which always seems to make an audience laugh.

In all the years Hollywood has been making films, I can recall only one instance (that splendid film, *Gentlemen Are Born*) when they treated college students and their problems with any seriousness. College has either been a football team or a musical comedy, with variations on both themes. *Varsity Show* (Warner Bros.) is obvious. The best that can be said for it is that it is an extended act by Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians with some laughs furnished by Ted Healy.

*Bad Guy* (M.G.M.), about electrical line-men, is a very poor copy of *Slim* (Warner Bros.) while *Dark Journey* (London Films-United Artists) is a conventional spy-counter-spy melodrama directed by Victor Saville, the man who made *I Was a Spy*. At its best it is only momentarily exciting. The film is photographed with the usual overemphasis on dramatic lighting and has been horribly mutilated in the editing.

DURING THE LAST WEEKS I have received a number of requests for information about films for non-theatrical exhibition (a term used for the showing of films by individuals or groups for non-profit purposes). Most of these requests have come from college clubs, branches of the American League Against War and Fascism, and in one case, from a group in a small mid-western town where nothing but the conventional Hollywood product is shown. The requests varied from a very modest one asking about individual and specific films to a more ambitious one from a farmer-labor club wanting a series of twelve to fifteen complete programs spread over the year. This is a very healthy sign. It means that more and more people are unwilling to accept, or are tired of, the commercial motion picture. It is an indication that there is an increasing audience for independently produced progressive films.

A few years ago such requests came from those groups who could afford to rent a theater and pay for elaborate and expensive equipment, to say nothing of meeting the high cost



Martin

of film rental and shipping. These groups generally comprised only "film students" whose primary interest was in the esoteric and experimental film. The perfection of sixteen-millimeter sound projection equipment (it is difficult for anyone but an expert to find any appreciable difference in picture and sound quality between a good 16 mm. "reduction" and the regular 35 mm. used in theaters) has provided a great impetus to the expansion of this non-theatrical circuit.

Not only is the 16 mm. field almost a major industry for foreign films as well as old Hollywood features, but there is one distributor in New York who releases 16 mm. prints at the same time that he releases the larger size print to regular theaters. Naturally, these "first run" reduction prints are rented to those places that would not ordinarily be in a position to show the film otherwise.

One of the most important developments in the progressive film movement was the establishment of Frontier Films. It is the intention of this non-profit, cooperative company to make all its products available on 16 mm. film. The World Theater, in New York City, has announced that next season 16 mm. films would be a regular part of its programs. This is a wise move, for they will show many films that are not available in any other form. But what is of greater importance, it will bring to the public the work of independent film-makers from all parts of the country. Undoubtedly many theaters, many of the smaller houses, will follow suit. Even with the current equipment it is possible to give a very good show to as many as two thousand persons. Most theaters don't have that seating capacity. And with the most recent perfection of 16 mm. arc light projectors, the possibilities are unlimited.

Good films have now, therefore, become available to everyone, everywhere. With the assistance of others, your reviewer will draw up a series of programs for those who have asked for them. Such a list will include films that are not shown in commercial theaters: fine films such as the French people's-front film, *La Vie Est à Nous* (*Life Is Ours*)

which was supervised by the greatest of contemporary French directors, Jean Renoir. There is also a very splendid anti-war film made in England called *Hell Unlimited*. In light of this, this column will in the future, review or give notice to those films that are available only in this form, or those not intended for regular commercial distribution. From time to time, new developments in 16 mm. equipment will be discussed. In the meantime, this reviewer will be more than happy to suggest programs or individual films for non-theatrical showing. For those who may want to acquaint themselves with the problems and mechanics of such showings, we recommend two very practical pamphlets: *The Motion Picture in Education* (price 10c) and *Teaching with Motion Pictures* (40c). These are published by the American Council on Education, 744 Jackson Place, Washington, D. C. The second pamphlet is a really excellent handbook for anyone planning to use films in the manner discussed.

PETER ELLIS.

## THE THEATER

DR. JOHN BECK, a prominent Negro physician, is accused of killing his wife in their home on 139th Street, in Harlem. Mrs. Beck was a millionairess, having discovered how to straighten Negro people's hair. She had paid for Dr. Beck's last two years in medical school, and as a result tricked him into marrying her. Aside from being tricked, Dr. Beck, a light-skin Negro, does not like black people. And Mrs. Beck was the last word in "dark." It is the state's contention that Dr. Beck killed his wife because she was black, and because he preferred the looks of another—a "high yella."

Thus *The Trial of Dr. Beck*, a first play by Hughes Allison, a young Negro, launches itself into a misleading opus on intra-racial prejudices of the Negro people; a play which seeps with confused thinking and general stupidity. The Federal Theater Project first produced the play in Newark, N. J., where it was a hit. The original cast was invited to New York, and is currently showing at the Maxine Elliott Theater in New York.

The author, following the pattern of other successful court-room murder dramas—a parade of suspects, a second-act surprise witness, and a third-act vindication—apparently thinks the American stage one massive double bed; for with eight out of eleven hapless Negro characters, he runs the gauntlet of the boudoir and sex irregularities of the human race.

Despite an overworked mold, *The Trial of Dr. Beck* does shape itself into a commanding piece. This is due, to a large degree, to the splendid acting of the cast, who reveal again what a mine of talent the W.P.A. theater has unearthed. As for the direction, had he been more informed, Louis M. Simon would



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have seen the glaring misinformation and anti-social propaganda of the script, and therefore, if produce he must, would have played up the many "whodunit" angles rather than its pseudo-knowledge of intra-racial prejudices of Negroes. Played against an excellent set by Rollo Wayne, what *The Trial of Dr. Beck* has to say is all the more credible.

Author Allison, not bothering to acquaint himself with the underlying cause for the general prejudice of Negroes against their darker brothers, puts forth, through Dr. Beck, this solution for the oppressed Negro masses:

Negro men and women in key positions should marry only light-skin opposites, and reject those darker Negroes as totally unfit for reproductive mates. Thus, in time [now get this] the whole level of the race could be raised politically and economically. [!]

Aside from a weak stab at racial discrimination in the courts, this "plan" to liberate the Negro people permeates *The Trial of Dr. Beck*. And when Dr. Beck is proved innocent of killing his wife, the author's ideas, as expressed by Dr. Beck, are also vindicated.

*The Trial of Dr. Beck*, while it doesn't say that Negroes are not human, nevertheless introduces its black characters as the lowest sort of degenerates. One couple has so many children they can't count them. ("They is scattered all over eveywhar," says Mrs. Doolittle.) Their smartest child, John, has the lowest I.Q. of any pupil ever to attend a public school in New York City.

Hughes Allison devotes the first two acts of his play to Dr. Beck's hatred for black people. "When niggers come that black, they got no business living." The third act clears him of the murder charge; but on the other hand, Dr. Beck's ideas of racial emancipation by



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lightening the Negroes' skin go unanswered. If one believed what *The Trial of Dr. Beck* says, one would leave the theater thinking it is hell to be black, and that all problems are solved by the degree to which one looks Caucasian. In the lobby a young man said to me, "Millions of us are unemployed and white. How does Allison account for that?"

SID LAWSON.



### Forthcoming Broadcasts

(Times given are Eastern Daylight, but all programs listed are on coast-to-coast hookups)

**Questions before Congress.** A representative discusses current issues Wednesdays at 3:30 p.m. and a senator on Thursdays at 5 p.m., C.B.S.

**William E. Dodd.** The U. S. ambassador to Germany speaks on "Public Opinion in a Democracy," Fri., Sept. 3, 6:45 p.m. C.B.S.

**Song Festival.** The Workman's German Singing Alliance broadcasts from Cleveland, Sun., Sept. 5, 8 p.m., C.B.S.

**Labor Day.** Addresses by John L. Lewis at 2:30 p.m., Frank Morrison, Secretary of the A.F. of L., 3:30 p.m., and William F. Green, 4:15 p.m., Mon., Sept. 6, N.B.C. blue.

**National Farm Credit Situation.** Talk by Governor W. T. Meyers of the Farm Credit Administration, Tues., Sept. 7, 7:45 p.m., N.B.C. red.

**Constitution Day Program.** Senator Borah speaks on the Constitution, Thurs., Sept. 16, 10 p.m., and President Roosevelt on Fri., Sept. 17, 10:30 p.m., N.B.C. blue.

### Important Opening

**Baltic Deputy**, the widely heralded Amkino film of the Russian Revolution, opens at the New York Cameo, Friday, Sept. 3.

### Recent Recommendations

#### MOVIES

**Fragment of an Empire.** A revival of Friedrich Ermler's brilliant silent film of the Russian revolution.

**The Spanish Earth.** Joris Ivens's much heralded film of the civil war in Spain is a deeply stirring document that you cannot afford to miss.

**Dead End.** The realistic drama of kids from the East Side slums comes to the screen with its impact unimpaired.

**The Life of Emile Zola.** Easily the best film of the year, powerful and profound.

**You Can't Have Everything.** A better than average backstage musical with the hilarious Ritz brothers.

**Ourselves Alone.** Realistic dramatization of the Irish rebellion of 1921. Should be on your "must" list.

**High, Wide and Handsome.** A fairly entertaining story about the Pennsylvania oil boom with music by Jerome Kern.

**They Won't Forget.** A powerful and extremely moving film of a lynching in the deep South.

#### PHONOGRAPH RECORDINGS

**Beethoven.** The A-major quartet, Opus 18, No. 5, is recorded by the Lener foursome on Columbia 301, and the trio in C-minor, Opus 1, No. 3, is played by Milton Kaye, Max Hollander, and Sterling Hunkins on a Musicraft release.

**Handel.** The peerless William Primrose and an orchestra conducted by Walter Goehr make a gem of the concerto in B-minor for viola and small orchestra (Columbia).

**Haydn.** The light choral works, "Die Harmonie in der Ehe," and "Die Beredsamkeit," well sung by Lehman Engel's W.P.A. Madrigal Singers on a Gamut disk.

**Mozart.** The Budapest foursome plays the F-major quartet (Victor Album M-348).

**Scarlatti.** Ernst Victor Wolff at the harpsichord gives us the F-minor sonata (Gamut).

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