

# SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

*A magnificent Soviet film arrives—The Broadway season opens—Retrospect and prospect in the dance*

**C**HAPAYEV, *The Youth of Maxim*, and *Peasants* were produced by the Lenfilm studios at Leningrad. The Soviet Union awarded their makers and the studio the Order of Lenin. Here, we raved about them and called them great. Similar praise came from the Soviet Union about another Lenfilm production called *Baltic Deputy*. A picture of high quality was expected. A film as good as the earlier prize-winners would be wonderful. But after seeing *Baltic Deputy* (Amkino), I am at a loss for adequate words of praise. We have used all of our glowing adjectives on films of lesser stature. There is nothing left to say except that this film is simply magnificent.

The cultural level of the Soviet cinema has been on a very high plane. Except for some rare cases, the films have been very simple. The best sound films on an extremely high artistic level were produced for the Soviet masses. Most films were about workers, peasants, heroes of socialism, or heroes of the revolution. *Baltic Deputy* is not only a "different" film in its artistic make-up, but it is the first Soviet film to consider the problem of the intellectual in relation to the new society. The subject-matter of the film is extremely complex. The hero is Dmitri Polezhayev, professor of botany at the University of Petrograd, doctor of natural science at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and deputy to the Petrograd Soviet from the sailors of the Baltic fleet. (The character of Professor Polezhayev had its prototype in the actual Academician K. A. Timiryazev, a great scientist and scholar, who was a hero of the revolution, to whom this film is dedicated.)

The film opens on a dismal cold rainy day in the fall of 1917. People are in line waiting for their rations of bread and herring. It is on the eve of Professor Polezhayev's seventy-fifth birthday. He has written an article in praise of the Bolsheviks. His colleagues are flabbergasted. The professor of medicine says that he is entering his second childhood; the professor of history admits that perhaps he is a great naturalist, "but as a historian he's nothing." The Menshevik students refuse to take examinations under the professor on the ground that they won't give answers to "Bolshevik intrigues and German spies."

There are several especially interesting sequences in this film. One bears on the relationship between the professor and his assistant Vorobiev. This man considers himself a martyr to science. He and the professor are always getting into arguments whenever they talk about anything else. He has been associated with the professor for years and is trusted. As a matter of fact, he is entrusted with Polezhayev's manuscript in order to get it to the university printer. But he is an enemy of the revolution. He feels that science will be dead under the Bolsheviks. Vorobiev tries

to persuade the professor to withdraw the article he wrote for the newspaper. "I was for you when you fought with the czarist ministers, when you were driven out of the university, then I was for you . . . when they wanted to take your laboratory. For your sake I accepted everything. . . . exclusion from the university, yes, almost exile." In his high pitched and dynamic manner, Polezhayev replies, "Almost . . . almost. With you it's always 'almost'!"

Then there is the sequence in which Polezhayev speaks to a group of sailors from the Baltic fleet. We see the old man in the ante-room on the battleship. He is straightening his Prince Albert coat; he is making his last-minute notes; he trims his beard. We see the sailors, dirty with the grime of work and battle. The professor enters the room, gets up on an improvised platform. This lanky intellectual with the beautifully sensitive face says "Comrades!" and there is a burst of applause from his audience. He says:

"I'll lecture to you as if you were my students. It is already seven years that I have been working on my book. I sit at my desk so that the plowman should find it easier to work the soil. Such geniuses of science as Faraday, Claude Bernard, Huxley, and others have long been trying to make science come down from its pedestal; free itself of the whip of obscurantism, hysteria, and to speak the language of the people. All my life I also have fought for this . . . well I will tell you about the color red . . . the foundation of the life of plants. . . ."

This brings us to the next phase of the film. The table at the professor's home is set and everything is in readiness for the celebration of the completion of his manuscript, which has taken seven years' work. But no one shows up. The professor is anathema to his colleagues. His wife cannot console him. Finally there is a knock on the door. Polezhayev tells his wife to go to the piano and play something cheerful. He goes out in the foyer and closes the door behind him. He will have guests even if he has to pretend. It is Vorobiev, who has

come back to make one more effort to win the professor away from the Bolsheviks. But Vorobiev is annoyed that the professor has "guests." They get into the usual argument. This time Vorobiev insults Polezhayev and is practically thrown out by the old man. The Faust ballet music stops and Polezhayev says to his wife: "Alone now, as if for good. What did I give you. . . .? The treachery of friends, loneliness in old age. Well, what can I do for you while I'm still alive?" And so they both sit down at a piano to play four-handed. This is one of the tenderest and most touching sequences that has ever been recorded on film.

But he is not alone. Bocharov, a former student who has returned from Siberia to take charge of Bolshevik propaganda, comes to the house. They talk about old times and of the future. They sing "Gaudeamus Igitur." During the night Lenin telephones to see if there is anything the professor wants and to congratulate him on his book. And so we come to the climax of the film. The sailors from the Baltic fleet elect the professor as their deputy to represent them in the Petrograd Soviet. Polezhayev, against the doctor's orders, makes the trip to speak. It is a triumphant meeting. The sailors and soldiers march off to defend the city and Polezhayev goes back to his study to keep his promise: "As long as I hold a pen, as long as my eyes decipher letters, I will defend the revolution. . . ."

It is difficult to describe the film. There is nothing startling about it. It is quiet, human, humorous, and tragic. It is as full of passion as it is lyric. There are no evidences of crude naturalism. There are no displays of formal fireworks or flashy symbolism. It is based on fact. There is an abundance of historical and human detail. The scenarists have used their history with great freedom, yet never distort the historical facts.

*Baltic Deputy* was directed by two young men, both members of the Young Communist League, I. Heifetz and A. Zarkhi. They have given us a film of which any director would be proud. Hollywood would be wise to examine this film very closely. Especially in the light of such productions as *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and *The Life of Emile Zola*. These films, fine as they are, suffer by comparison with *Baltic Deputy*.

In all this time I have neglected to discuss the work of Nikolai Cherkassov, who portrays Professor Polezhayev-Timiryazev. If it were possible to single out the one single element in the film that contributes most to its success, it would undoubtedly be Cherkassov. American audiences have seen him before in a minor bad film by the directors of *Baltic Deputy*: a film called *Red Army Days*. For years he has been known as a specialist in eccentric roles. When you behold Polezhayev's gait, hear his voice, you will find it difficult to believe, that



First Nighters William Hernandez

the actor who endows this seventy-five-year-old professor with life is only thirty-two years old. It is not merely a trick in make-up. The books and writings of Academician Timiryazev and his biography; the facts of the revolution itself; finally the high ideological content of the scenario itself gave Cherkassov the necessary source material for the creation of one of the most memorable roles in the theater.

This film should run as long as it takes every worker, every scientist, every intellectual, to see it.

PETER ELLIS.

An interesting contrast to *Baltic Deputy* in the treatment of historical material is *Firefly*, the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musical starring Jeannette MacDonald, which treats of Napoleon's invasion of Spain and the popular rising against him. This time Miss MacDonald dances a lot as well as sings (her duet partner is Allan Jones), and this, with a love-spy story, is supposed to be the main interest of the film. But the producers have missed a trick. What seems to have the most interest (at least for a large section of the audience) is the feeling of a unified people in arms resisting an aggressor. The emphasis on traditional musical comedy-melodrama material casts a pall over everything else.

R. W.

## THE THEATER

PROBABLY the best thing that can be said for *Virginia*, the super-musical that opened the Broadway season at Mr. Rockefeller's Center Theater, is that it is giving employment to a great many people. A minor blessing (for those who can afford it) is that it is giving to the citizenry of New York and its environs a pleasant, air-conditioned opportunity for sleep. Those are harsh words, but *Virginia* is really nothing but a long-drawn-out bore in the manner of the stage "presentations" which impede the flow of cinema at Mr. Rockefeller's other palace, the Radio City Music Hall. *Virginia* is definitely a cut below last season's soporific inhabitant of the Center, *White Horse Inn*.

Lee Simonson's mounting is fresh and vivid and by and large is the best thing about the show. There are a few details that are interesting: Laurence Stallings and Owen Davis, who did the book, have not, in treating of the rising of the American revolution in Virginia, attempted to mask its genuinely revolutionary character. The revolutionary agitator on stage has many lineaments that will suggest at once to a modern audience the revolutionary agitator of today. And twice in his speeches he brings in a matter that is largely overlooked in the popular literature on the American revolution: the fact that the revolutionary commonalty of that day included as a plank in their platform the freeing of the slaves. The best of the other details are purely fortuitous: the fire-eating, juggling, and puppet show which are incidental to a scene located at a country fair. The NEW MASSES reviewer almost missed these details, because he was greatly minded to leave at the intermission. What gave him strength to go on was a visit to the second mezzanine;

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