

"THE LITTLE FOXES"

The film version of Lillian Hellman's powerful play lives up to the original. Alvah Bessie calls it "A perfect fable for our times." What the movie industry can really do.

THE text is taken from the Song of Solomon, chapter two, verse fifteen: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes." Lillian Hellman wrote her most accomplished play around this text, and the film that has been made from the play lives up to the original in its power and illumination. Miss Hellman herself wrote the screen play, and she has pulled no punches. This is a picture that will surely influence the millions who see it: influence them to an understanding of the forces at work in our society, and to a determination that is voiced by at least one of the characters—not to be idle or complacent, not to sit around and watch that small minority of the human race who, like the Biblical locust, devours the earth. They will fight these locusts; they will fight the little foxes in the great vineyard of the earth's wealth.

For the purposes of her story, Miss Hellman premised the Hubbard family of the South in the early 1900's. The Hubbards—Ben, Oscar, and his son Leo, and the sister of the two brothers, Regina Giddens—are the little foxes of the title. The brothers' greed is boundless; their ruthlessness in attaining their ends knows no let or hindrance. At the same time, they are thoroughly human beings; their motivation is understandable; they are out to get what they can take, and they are completely class-conscious. Says Ben to Regina, when she has momentarily out-foxed him, "There's a place in the world for people like you and me; we'll get ahead."

Regina Giddens (nee Hubbard) is the villain of the piece. You may feel at times that Miss Hellman has overplayed her hand in this character, who at moments bears no resemblance to the vast majority of human beings. But before the author is through with her, you will understand that Regina Giddens is a thoroughly credible character. She has her counterpart in many men and women of great wealth, just as her brothers, Ben and Oscar, have their aggressive counterparts in our time.

Regina wants the world, and she means to have it. To achieve it, she is willing to sacrifice her brothers, her daughter, her ailing husband, Horace. Him she drives to his death—worse still, she *permits* him to die when it is entirely within her power to prevent his death. And by letting him die, she assures herself of seventy-five percent of the cotton-milling business her brothers are negotiating. Her triumph is empty, however, for her daughter abandons her at the moment of Regina's greatest material success. "I don't want the world," she tells her mother, and she indicates her intention to go somewhere else, asso-

ciate with people, struggle as part of that segment of society which can no longer sit silently and watch the locusts devour the earth that belongs to the majority.

Miss Hellman has written a perfect fable for our times. The little foxes have no concern with their "inferiors" except to keep them in line. They are frequently kind to their Negro servants, but only on condition that the latter "keep their place." The rulers can afford to be charitable so long as the majority upon whom they prey does not challenge their power and their "superiority." The audiences will not only identify many contemporary individuals in the Hubbard brothers and their sister; they will recognize the class nature of our society itself. For the fable is not oversimplified.

The audience can recognize and reecho the sentiments of certain characters; that there are better ways to make a living than to "play one group of workers off against another," to "create sweatshops" and exploit those who must live in them; to oppress the Negro because his skin is black. For the characters in *The Little Foxes* rise from the particular to the general. They are both types and human

beings, individuals as well as symbols.

There are few words adequate to praise the job done by Miss Hellman; by William Wyler, the director; by Gregg Toland, the photographer of *Citizen Kane*; by the ensemble of actors. Mr. Wyler has used his players and Mr. Toland's camera with imagination and intelligence. The film moves from point to point with astonishing fluidity.


Bette Davis, in the role Tallulah Bankhead created on the stage, rarely has been better. She is an actress of enormous sensitivity and power of projection, and although unfortunately made up to look like Miss Bankhead, she gives the role an individual cachet. As Regina Miss Davis has created a character that will live in the annals of the film. The recent stylization of her technique is still evident, but less obtrusive. Many of her neurotic mannerisms have been dropped, and she possesses an authority that confirms once more her preeminent position as an actress of, by, and for the films.

The rest of the cast functions continuously on a high plane of performing skill. As Regina's daughter young Teresa Wright has charm without any ingenué sappiness; charm



THE LITTLE FOXES, and one of their victims. Reading clockwise, Charles Dingle, Patricia Collinge (the victim), Carl Benton Reid, and the vixen-in-chief, Bette Davis.

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and genuine emotion. Herbert Marshall as Horace Giddens, the husband, rises above the usual run of his performances, which have tended to be restrained to the point of woodenness. He is credible and moving. The brothers Hubbard, Charles Dingle and Carl Benton Reid, and the former's son, Dan Duryea, carry their stage roles over to the screen magnificently. The daughter's lover, as played by Richard Carlson, overcomes the screen juvenile's perennial handicap and emerges with a genuine characterization.

But a special place should be reserved for Patricia Collinge, as brother Oscar's wife, Birdie. In a way it is unfortunate for Miss Davis that Miss Collinge plays in this film the same role she had on the stage, for Miss Collinge offers us that extra something which makes the difference between a stunning performance such as Miss Davis', and a true creation. In an emotional scene that runs no more than five minutes, she completely steals the picture from the star. Making all due allowances for the fact that Miss Collinge is playing a sympathetic character against Miss Davis' vixen, you cannot help feeling that where Miss Davis is intelligent and sensitive, Miss Collinge's Birdie is not only intelligent and sensitive, but deeply felt and powerfully projected. The actress has completely understood the character of the defeated wife of the tycoon—the destruction of a woman's fundamental kindness and human potentialities by a brutal husband who mistreats, neglects, and despises her. Few such portraits of human character are seen upon our screens, and if *The Little Foxes* offered nothing more than Miss Collinge's Birdie, you would still have to see it.

But it offers much more. It demonstrates what our film industry can do with a fine, honest script, adapted by an author who possesses a reputation sufficient to prevent her creation from being mishandled; plus a brilliant cast excellently directed and beautifully photographed. *The Little Foxes* is an experience in the cinema as it was in the theater; an experience in the understanding of our life.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'S *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has been filmed by the moving picture industry three times. John Barrymore's horrendous interpretation of the schizophrenic Dr. Jekyll disturbed our youthful dreams. Fredric March essayed the role some years later, made up to look more like an anthropoid than Barrymore's pterodactyl, and now we have poor old Spencer Tracy.

We say poor old Spencer Tracy because he is one of our most charming leading men, with no small amount of masculine appeal and histrionic ability. If I were Mr. Tracy, I'm sure I'd sue Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for what they have wrought this time.

Figurez vous, as the French say. Some brilliant mind in the MGM office decided that in remaking the old yarn—and a swell yarn it is at that—Stevenson's fantasy should be turned to realistic uses. You can just hear the boys in the story conference saying, "Look

—this Dr. Jekyll; he was a guy just like you and me, see? It ain't likely that he would turn into a hydrocephalic idiot like John Barrymore's Mr. Hyde. No siree. The point of Stevenson's story is that there is some evil in the best of us, and some good in the worst of us, and that's the idea to plug." So what did they do? Well, what they did was a caution.

Instead of turning poor Spencer Tracy into a Barrymoreish monster, they merely had the makeup man touch up his gentle, kindly face to look somewhat coarse and brutal. So Jekyll, transformed for the first time into Hyde, looks at himself in the mirror and winks. When he winks, you—and the audience—know just what he is thinking. The good Dr. Jekyll, having given free rein to his baser impulses, is out to pick up a girl, since as his regular self he has to be terribly polite and genteel to Miss Lana Turner, his fiancée. So he goes to a low music hall. There he finds Ingrid Bergman herself, a luscious lady with accommodating morals. Boy, oh boy. The audience howled itself sick at this conception of evil.

Well, of course, the boy grew worse. It got so he not only drank champagne and picked up Ingrid, but even tripped up waiters, beat Ingrid, discovered that he was constantly turning into Hyde even without taking the steaming potion he had concocted, and the first thing you know, he strangled Ingrid. Then he beat Lana Turner's ham-acting papa, Donald Crisp, over the bean, and by that time you knew he was finished.

Spencer Tracy does his best; at moments he is not only convincing, but exciting to watch. Let us say nothing about Miss Lana Turner. Miss Ingrid Bergman, who is a real actress with a real actress' temperament, does the best she can with the mess MGM has tossed at her. But Spencer Tracy; weep for him, if you can keep from busting a stay.

WARNER BROTHERS' most recent anti-Nazi film, *Underground*, is playing the smaller houses, and it might be well here to remind those who have not seen it, to see it now. I, myself, have just got around to it, and I'd like to add a few words of my own to Joy Davidman's review in the July 15 issue.



For, despite some omissions and distortions, *Underground* is an extremely important picture. The major omission, as Miss Davidman pointed out, is the failure to show that this underground movement in Germany is largely organized and directed by the German Communist Party. The distortions are slight, and result from an attempt to point up the drama by circumstances that are not very likely to occur in real life.

But the important thing about *Underground*, aside from its enormous excitement, the excellence of Vincent Sherman's direction, and the sound, understanding performances by Martin Kosleck, Kaaren Verne, Philip Dorn, and Jeffrey Lynn, is the insight it affords into the nature of the German opposition to Hitlerism—an opposition that finds its counterpart throughout the world, wherever people fight reaction. You learn from this film that the anti-Hitler fighters are no small, isolated group of courageous intellectuals. You learn, as you must instinctively have known, that they comprise a powerful, integrated, and infinitely courageous majority of the common people: workers, farmers, professional persons, throughout the land. They give the lie direct to Klaus Mann who, in a recent issue of the magazine *Decision*, saw fit in attacking *Underground* to libel the German people themselves. "The primary task of an anti-Nazi film," said Mr. Mann, "is to reveal and to dramatize the real atrocity of the Nazis, the misery and boredom of daily life in the Third Reich, the martyrdom and *stupidity* of the German masses. . . ." [My italics—A. B.]

The people of the German underground—and we do not need this fine picture to convince us—are far from stupid, far from being martyrs in the sense that Mr. Mann implies. And it is not likely that they would find that "the real atrocity" of the Nazis is the "misery and boredom of daily life." They have had their sons, brothers and sisters, their fathers and husbands torn from them for torture and death. They have had their organizations smashed, their standards of living lowered to the vanishing point, their children regimented and miseducated, taught to despise each other. Perhaps this is what Mr. Mann means by "misery and boredom," and if so, he has chosen a singularly inept phrase. But the activity of the people portrayed in *Underground* can scarcely be called "stupid."

It will hearten you to see this film, and it will encourage you even more to experience the reaction of the audience. Their hatred of fascism in every form is evident in the way they respond to certain sequences of the film; their understanding of the issues is shown in their warm approval of those characters who represent the *real* people's opposition to Hitler. The picture has almost everything—suspense, sound humor, valid sentiment. It is a credit to Hollywood.

THE FILM *Inside Russia* has been released by a company called Hoffberg Productions, Inc., which advertises it as a documentary. Actually it is an old travelogue, although this fact is never indicated in the projected titles, or

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the commentary by Norman Brokenshire. The film was probably made around 1924, judging from the clothing of both the Soviet people and the tourists, the 1917-vintage Renaults on the streets, and the rudimentary appearance of factories and industries as compared with those in recent clips.

Much of the footage is taken with blurred shots from train windows, beautiful but badly photographed scenery, and people rushing around in the jerky manner of those in early nickelodeon films. However, you will see some interesting things: the beginnings of collectivization, the unveiling of Oriental women (imagine how long ago this was shot!), the early creches and workers' schools being established on farms and in factories; the delegates from the various constituent republics of the Union; the emphasis on opportunity for all. Compare these shots with the new reels from the USSR and you will realize how far the Soviets have progressed toward their collective goals.

ALVAH BESSIE.

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