



THE WILL AND THE WAY

Some weeds in the Hollywood victory garden. Joy Davidman asks the blondes to stay out of the bombers. Nor are there barrels of fun in a heap of corpses.

BACK in the depression, Hollywood was often blamed for its willful refusal to face the economic facts of life. Hunger, to the films, was what you felt when you were trying to reduce, and unemployment was one of the words on the Hays Office taboo list, along with "lousy" and the vocabulary of sex. It is pleasant to be able to report a partial change of front.

The film community is keenly conscious of its duty in the war effort. Through individual and group activities it has done much to strengthen that effort; the industry is, at last, accepting the fact that it has a responsibility to the people. No longer do producers argue that escapist entertainment is the sole business of the film; education and morale-building are recognized as duties. Hollywood's will to aid the war effort is unquestionable. Unfortunately, the producers have not often been able to translate that will into film terms—the films remain as questionable as ever.

Through failure to readjust, much of what now appears on the screen, far from being stronger and more realistic than pre-war films, has actually disintegrated to the shocking inanity of a comic strip. This is true of one type of movie in particular. Films for the war may be divided into three groups—frankly educational documentaries, usually made under government supervision, which are serious, straightforward, and effective; fictional films based on some real aspect of the war, which are bad but getting better; and

entertainment-fictions which leave the war and other stern realities completely out of the discussion. It is these "business-as-usual" films which have gone most completely to the dogs.

FILMS dealing with war problems, while often shoddy enough, have at least made an effort at readjustment, and sometimes have succeeded brilliantly. There was *Mrs. Miniver*, there is *Wake Island*; minor pieces like *Manila Calling* and *A Yank on the Burma Road* share some of the dramatic seriousness of these. Last year's *Invaders*, in spite of romantic weaknesses, was well aware of the real issues and the real problems of the anti-Axis struggle. All these films are powerful because of their emphasis on the terrifying commonplaces of our lives instead of on sensational improbabilities. Ordinary people were their protagonists, ordinary people exposed to the enormous onslaughts and equally enormous opportunities for heroism in this war. It is probable that, as the pressure of the war intensifies, and reality seeps through the California climate, these films will set the tone for others still more honest. As yet, however, directors from Hitchcock down are still turning out tangles of silly villainy—*Sabotage*, *Desperate Journey*, even an anachronistic *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror*—as if the war were romantic, as if the Gestapo's chief occupation were twirling its collective whiskers and snarling, "Foiled again, by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer!"

Well-meaning unimaginativeness inspires this failure to visualize the people's war as anything more than a vehicle for Errol Flynn, and the headlines will educate these imaginations. The business-as-usual films present a different problem. They are important to the war effort, for they are or should be the strain-lifters, the cheerer-uppers, the movies to which soldiers on leave take their girls. Little conscious attempt has been made to adjust them to the new situation, but they have involuntarily suffered a sea-change since Pearl Harbor, for it is impossible now to duplicate the casualness and complacency of pre-war days. Would-be grace and lightness sweat with effort, nonchalance becomes imbecility, the smile becomes a painful smirk. Certain changes of subject and attitude have also made their appearance, dictated by the box office and the jitters.

IT WOULD be unfair to blame Hollywood entirely for the two most significant current trends in entertainment. They are the contemplation of sex and the contemplation of death; and never has there been a violent moment of history that didn't produce both. It would be equally unfair to call them unhealthy tendencies. As reflected on the screen, however, they become neurotically exaggerated. The tragedy and heroism of wartime love are disregarded in most Hollywood films; what we are offered instead is a completely irrelevant quantity of female flesh in an unlikely place—a blonde in a bomber, a brunette



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caterwauling to the troops in the jungle, with improbably large areas of skin exposed to the jungle bugs. No more destructive undervaluation of women's place in the war effort can be imagined.

The prevailing attitude toward death is similarly cheapened on the screen. One of the most notable aspects of courage is a refusal to shudder at the thought of death. "Come on, you—; do you want to live forever?" In the fourteenth century, when the Black Death depopulated Europe, entertainment developed the Danse Macabre, which reduced horror to farce and made it bearable. Exactly the same thing is happening in the current enormous popularity of murder stories, murder plays, murder movies—but stories and plays which represent violent death as a trivial and amusing thing. The conspicuous Broadway success of our time is *Arsenic and Old Lace*, which piles up the laughs by heaping corpse upon corpse. Murder doesn't frighten you after you've taken a good look at Hitlerism.

Political thinkers and literary critics are often impatient with this macabre laughter, seeing in it a mere failure to face a serious situation rather than the invaluable psychological defense it often is. For it fills a need, it helps us keep our balance. Our present humorous enjoyment and callousness in the face of death may be repugnant to human decency; yet if we allowed the horrors and atrocities to tear us in bits with proportionate emotional agony we would be good for nothing except giving employment to a deserving straitjacket. The trouble is that many of Hollywood's horror-farces exaggerate this psychological defense until it becomes destructive itself.

SUCH a film as *To Be or Not to Be*, a perfect example of the defensive laugh, offended a great many people through bad taste and pettiness. More, the laugh often becomes hysterical, as in the dancing-madness of the slaphappy gyrations of our musical films. And, still more, the laugh often becomes a substitute for action. It is not true that you can laugh or satirize an enemy out of existence; those who try it usually discover that mockery is the slave's consolation for his servitude.

Thus when Hollywood takes its old horror-film mad scientist formula and turns it inside out, in *The Boogie Man Will Get You*, the product twitches with sick nerves. Basically, Hollywood is doing a healthier thing by making you giggle than it used to by making you shudder; but *The Boogie Man* is laboriously crazy, and your head aches in sympathy with its writers. Somewhere along the line it picked up a few good action gags which contrast oddly with its adenoidal plot. The light comic touch contributed by, of all people, Boris Karloff and Peter Lorre, and the heavy comic wallop of Maxie Rosenbloom, give it moments of delirious charm. Yet it tries too hard to pretend that everything's a barrel of fun; it is the work of frightened people, and something you shouldn't serve to normal adults.

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