

sights and sounds



SHLEMIEL AS FARMER

**The facts of pioneer life as cleaned up by
MGM. "The Yearling" and three other films.**

By JOSEPH FOSTER

SO ALL-PREVAILING have been the toughie, creepy, killer films that when a movie comes along mumbling about economic struggle, even if only in the foreword, the critics embrace it as a great social document. Such has been the fine, fortuitous fate of *The Yearling*. For myself, I hold that it is undeserving of such affection. Were anyone to ask me to name the film that embodied most successfully the characteristics of the Hollywood product, I would unhesitatingly pick this same *Yearling*. Not because it is a technicolor triumph, costing enough money to keep NEW MASSES in ready cash for the next dozen years (wages included), but because it makes serious pretenses at approaching life amid all the restraints, delusions, escapisms, distortions and euphemisms that mark our movie excursions into realism. Since I have not read the novel on which the film is based, I do not know where the original author proposes, and where MGM disposes.

The film pursues two themes at once—the relations among mother, father and son, and the tough struggle for existence that the pioneer dirt farmer faced. The two, of course, are interwoven, and the film indicates somewhat how the struggle to survive affects the attitudes of the members of the family to one another. Pursued within a historically accurate context, the subject could provide a film of staggering impact and importance. Needless to say, *The Yearling* is not that film, by several country miles. It presents all the appurtenances of life, all the facets of struggle, except the dirt and the sweat of actual living. The figure is there, but the lungs

don't move. With all the technical skill that the studios are able to call upon, the film piles detail upon heart-rending detail, so as to overcome the most obstinate tear-duct; yet the eye remains dry and the heart lingers elsewhere.

Why is this? you ask. Simply because the ferocious battle with environment is not based on obstacles that are natural and unavoidable, but on a series of misfortunes that are arbitrary inventions of the writer. For instance: the father, under other circumstances a conceivably intelligent man, is here so inept that in real life he would have perished within a year or two of his attempt to subdue a portion of the Florida wilderness. As it is, he spends half his film life in bed. He can hardly be considered a representative of the hardy and resourceful pioneer.

Lack of meat is one of the most nagging handicaps that besets the embattled family: the little boy cannot afford to keep a pet, another mouth to feed. Yet in every history I have ever read, game was one of the mainstays of the pioneer. In the film, the woods around their clearing literally jump with wild life—but hunger or no hunger, killing is out of the question. Otherwise the whimsical bambi quality of the picture, with its leaping, gamboling deer, would be ruined.

The boy, played by Claude Jarmon, Jr., provides whatever moving atmosphere the film has. He is as yet an unspoiled youngster, relaxed and candid in his actions. He never does any work around the farm, except in moments of crisis; yet when he rolls up his sleeves he is the equal of his dad and is furthermore able to get out of

bed the following morning. That his face glows with a continual cleanliness, that never a smudge mars the studio perfection of his face and hands is consistent with the general approach of the film to honest sweat.

ANOTHER film whose foreword beats its chops with moral earnestness is *Swell Guy*. This film was made by Mark Hellinger, who is currently being motivated by a search for unconventional types. Prior to the unwinding of this opus, he informs us that man is neither good nor bad, but a combination of both. This is a discovery that was put to words and music by Tin Pan Alley pundits years ago, but the modern movie had never put the idea so succinctly for itself before. The film is a letdown. Instead of depicting a man in his virtuous and sinful behavior, *Swell Guy* turns up an unmitigated heel. He leaves women in a family way all over the landscape. He steals money, his brother's wife, credit from his co-workers, and violates every principle of decency. His little nephew worships him and feeds his ego. He is thus fond of the boy, and this fondness, I suppose, is intended to supply the balancing quality of good. With superior acting and directing this film might have still come out better than average, but Sonny Tufts as the punk makes the whole business slightly silly. He bats his eyes at people and smiles continuously as he informs you that he doesn't mean to be bad. He was just made that way.



Still a third film that employs the preface to explain itself is *Lady in the Lake*, but this time a new technique rather than a social idea is the burden. Robert Montgomery appears as the Greek chorus of one to explain that in this film the audience is both the camera eye and the hero. Thus the actors address the audience directly instead of one another. Montgomery is merely seen as a hand, a grunt, or a speech. As an innovation it is to be commended if for no other reason than that it gives evidence that the boys are trying. However in its practical effects it achieves just the opposite results to those it set out for. It is by now a platitude to say that the movies are more seductive and ingratiating than any other medium of communication. Where people would reject a story in a book or theater, they usually accept it in movie terms. What makes the film such a powerful propaganda medium is the ease with which people identify themselves with movie characters. (Why this is so would require a long study in itself.)

With *Lady in the Lake*, because of its technical gimmick, audiences become self-conscious. They laugh and make wisecracks and remain utterly outside the customary magic that movies exercise. Thus in spite of its deliberate effort to identify characters with audience, the movie produced the diametric effect. Consequently the film, a typical Chandler yarn with its fair share of hardboiled action, murder and suspense, becomes the dullest whodunnit I have sat through in many a day. Maybe next time they'll leave the lily alone.

About the only recent film that doesn't lean upon forewords, footnotes or preliminary curtain speeches to make its meaning clear is *Dead Reckoning*, but this one is so faithful to formula that it is scarcely necessary. *Dead Reckoning* is a customary Bogart thriller, with Lisbeth Scott in place of Baby Bacall as the only noticeable variation from the past. Scott uses almost the same throaty morbidetzza voice as her predecessor. She blows out tobacco smoke with the same studied indifference to danger and drawls the deadly words of love and murder with the same insouciance. If you gather that she is the type to the very eyebrows, you are right. However I believe that Bacall has better over-all gear.

Morris Carnovsky, as fine an actor

as has ever come to Hollywood, is misused in this film more blatantly than usual. He has been cast in all types of roles from the fine Anatole France of *Zola* to his current shady night club operator, crook and killer. The part fits him like a bullet fits a human organ. It may rest comfortably but it doesn't do the organ any good.

THEATER

THE historical repertory which Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop performs in illustration of its "March of Drama" course has just completed its winter and begun its spring season. This repertory has two distinctions which set it apart from others. Drawn from the major dramatic literatures and periods of the world it fulfills its educational purpose without, however, straining dramatic interest for the sake of the education. And it proposes to show, and generally succeeds in showing, drama as a reflection of the life of its time.

The "March of Drama" performances, done by student players, cannot of course compare with such finished acting as the American Repertory Theater provides; and the company assembled from the winter class did not seem to me up to that of the previous seasons. But the staging was as inventive as before and showed how will and resourcefulness can overcome the handicaps of a tiny stage and meager properties.

The spring season, just begun, again includes great plays not seen here for years and not likely to be seen on the commercial stage for further years. Among them are Gogol's great satire, *The Inspector General*, Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*, Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*, Lope de Vega's *The Sheep Well* and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. A number of these are carryovers from previous seasons. It is therefore regrettable that Pogodin's *The Aristocrats*, the Soviet play which was one of the Workshop's outstanding productions last year, is missing from this season's repertory. At this time it would have been a substantial service to culture, and several other important causes as well, for the Workshop to have contin-

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