

>> The New Movies <<



Sylvia Sidney as Roberta Alden and Phillips Holmes as Clyde Griffiths in Paramount's film of Dreiser's novel "An American Tragedy"



>> "An American Tragedy"

AFTER five years of argument and some weeks of legal protests from Theodore Dreiser, his ponderous two-volume novel has finally reached the screen. The result is an occasionally tense but more often dull murder trial film furnishing routine and never exceptional entertainment. Sylvia Sidney as the unhappy Roberta is the only person involved who seems to have come out of *An American Tragedy* with anything like success. She gives a fine and moving performance. Phillips Holmes as Clyde Griffiths, the boy, is wooden, lifeless and unbelievable, while Von Sternberg's direction is as flat and uninteresting as a three-days-old glass of ginger ale. Frances Dee, as Sondra, the wealthy society girl who loves Clyde, is as absurd as are all "society" people in the movies.

For some unaccountable reason the film is prefaced by the following bewildering caption: "Dedicated to the army of men and women all over the world who have tried to make life better for youth." The story—which is too well known to need rehearsal at this point—has not been changed, but in the necessary condensing a good part of the juice and flavor has been drained away, and all we have is a story of a weak boy who murders a poor girl who is about to have his child, when he finds a chance to make a wealthy marriage.

As for Mr. Dreiser and his legal efforts to keep the picture from being shown, neither he nor Paramount, nor Justice Witschief, who finally pronounced the movie aesthetically "OK," seem to have distinguished themselves. I cannot sympathize with Mr. Dreiser, because he is a great big boy now and he knows perfectly well what the gold coast butchers do to people's books. If he didn't want to risk butchery, he should never have sold his book down the river. In the second place, he received \$150,000 in cash before he started all this noise and, finally, the contract he signed, while allowing him to make

suggestions and comments on Paramount's scenario, states that that company . . . "will use its best endeavors to accept such advice . . . in so far as it may in the judgment of the purchaser (Paramount) consistently do so." This seems to leave Mr. Dreiser out entirely.

Mr. Dreiser claimed, you may remem-

Worth Seeing

Man in Possession: Robert Montgomery and Irene Purcell in a pleasant little comedy.

Murder by the Clock: Murders, graveyards and the other old reliable tricks.

Mystery of Life: Clarence Darrow conducts a lesson in biological evolution.

Politics: The best of the Marie Dressler-Polly Moran comedies—the girls try to clean up the town.

Rebound: Ina Claire as a lady who marries a gentleman who loves somebody else. The dialogue is literate.

Smart Money: Edward G. Robinson portrays a professional gambler.

Smiling Lieutenant: Maurice Chevalier, Strauss music and pretty girls.

Transatlantic: Life aboard a big Atlantic liner—patterned after Vicki Baum's "Grand Hotel."

ber, that the film shows Clyde to be a stupid and criminally inclined boy rather than the victim of environment. The film, he said, "does not indict society."

In answer to this, Justice Witschief of the New York Supreme Court gave out a truly appalling decision, which should well infuriate not only an injured author but any sensible layman. He said: "In the preparation of the picture the producer must give consideration to the fact that the great majority of people composing the audience before which the picture will be presented will be more interested that justice prevail over wrongdoing than that the inevitability of Clyde's end clearly appear."

In other words, this Justice agrees with Hollywood that the cart should draw the horse—that the opinions of an audience are more valuable than those of the author whose play the audience

has come to see. Thus does Hollywood forever cheat its audiences. It never tells them anything new or different. It merely reflects what it supposes the audience is already thinking. And now this procedure has legal recognition! The next thing will be a law making originality illegal.

>> "The Star Witness"

Two of the latest gangster films—started some months ago—make a valiant attempt to prove that they are crusading against racketeers and gang-rule, and in a mild, half-hearted sort of way, they are. *The Star Witness* (Warner) is the better of the two, for, in spite of some moments of gluey sentiment, it manages to move along at an excellent clip and be effective melodrama. It has the action and excitement of the previous gangster films, but it actually does show the boys in a pretty unfavorable light. In the first place the gangsters are portrayed by minor actors, and in the second place they are on the screen but very briefly, although their influence hangs over the whole story. Also it should be noted that on three distinct occasions Mr. Chic Sale (in his old Civil War veteran costume) says that we should "run them danged dirty furriners out of the country, and make it safe for real Americans." How this will strike Mr. Mussolini's warm-hearted, hot-headed, hair-trigger subjects, I do not know. In the theatre I attended the response seemed decidedly favorable. *The Silent Witness* concerns an "average American family" which witnesses a gang murder on the street in front of the house. In terror for their lives, they all refuse to testify against the gangsters arrested by the police—all except the old Civil War veteran (Chic Sale), who thus becomes the star witness. This film doesn't glorify gangsters—but on the other hand it doesn't show the intimate relation between gangsters and politicians which seems to be the real crux of the situation. In their usual modest manner the Warners announce this as "the finest motion picture ever conceived by human mind." Personally, I doubt this.

The Public Defender, with Richard Dix, also purports to be an anti racketeer film, but it is too fantastic and old-fashioned to get anywhere. A picture of same name was made in 1918, and this might be a reissue. A lot of crooked bank officials are accusing an innocent man of theft, when along comes Richard Dix, disguised as a mysterious "crook," who "steals" the documents necessary to convict the right man. Faintly entertaining.

CREIGHTON PEET.



⇒ The Latest Plays ⇐

THE so-called season being unusually late in getting started, supposedly on account of the heat or perhaps the depression, there seems to be nothing to do but give our readers an inkling of what they are in for when something like activity in the theatre recommences. In fact, if I'm not careful, I may discover a trend before this piece is finished.

One thing that might be called a trend is the rather large proportion of foreign plays slated for production. Taking the thing up in approximately alphabetical order the first thing on the list is the visit of the Abbey Theatre players. That, of course, comes under the head of good news for the discriminating, although I believe that Arthur Sinclair, my favorite English-speaking actor, is to remain under the management of Robert Newman and continue to play, on the road, that unmitigated mess of tripe, *Old Man Murphy*. The Abbey Players plan to present repertory for a month in New York and then proceed to Chicago and whatever other cities appear to have sense enough to want them.

The next item of any great possible interest is a musical comedy, still untitled and unwritten, by George M. Cohan. If only he does something like the old Cohan Revue it will be cause for rejoicing.

The A. L. Erlanger Enterprises, as they are now optimistically called, are starting out with a comedy with music called *The Passionate Pilgrim*, in association with Max Gordon, of *The Band Wagon* repute. It is by a couple of fellows who have done a little work in this field before called Otto Harbach and Jerome Kern. Georges Metaxa, who shared the honors of the London *Bitter Sweet* with Peggy Wood, is to be featured along with a very talented British girl called Dorothy Debenham whose first real "break" this will be. The Erlangers are also managing Lenore Ulric now in *Social Register*, by John Emerson and Anita Loos, which I am just silly enough to venture to predict will be pretty stupid. And Miss Ulric will again be dynamic enough to make a lot of us forget about the play.

In addition to the above musical comedy Max Gordon, on his own, is go-

ing to do a version with tunes of *The Play's the Thing*, the old Molnar comedy, with music and lyrics by Hart and Rodgers. At first glance this would seem to be a little unnecessary, but when you've got people to deal with who have

given such abundant proofs of their astuteness and talent as the Messrs. Hart, Rodgers and Gordon, advance predictions that the thing won't be a riot would be foolhardy.

The Theatre Guild can only idly ruminate about anything except their *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the little Eugene O'Neill tid-

bit that only takes three nights to play. True, they have announced ten other plays, but what makes you think they'll ever get around to doing them? Speaking, as we were, of trends, let's all get together and pray that this to-be-continued-in-our-next school of drayma is checked before it develops into one.

The best news that I know about is that Edith Evans is finally going to appear in this country. So far as I am concerned she is the woman who corresponds to Arthur Sinclair. Whatever either of them do is all right with me. Miss Evans is to appear under the Macgowan and Reed auspices in *The Lady with a Lamp*, a play about Florence Nightingale by Reginald Berkeley. Sybil Thorndike played it in London.

And, in spite of anything anybody can do about it, the Shuberts threaten to do nineteen plays, nine of them foreign, including *The Good Companions*, the J. B. Priestley piece, which latter is a great success in London and cost them, according to rumor, a pretty penny—if I may coin a phrase.

Well, I don't seem to have found much of a trend after all, except the foreign menace. Perhaps it's just as well. Wait a second! I'm forgetting the most interesting foreign importation of all. Herman Shumlin, who gave us *Grand Hotel* last year, is going to present *The Captain of Kopenick*, adapted from the German by the same William A. Drake who did *Grand Hotel*. That, I can assure you, will be worth seeing if, as is to be expected, Mr. Shumlin produces it with the same degree of skill. On the whole, I think we'll have fun this coming season.

OTIS CHATFIELD-TAYLOR.

Recommended Current Shows

Gilbert and Sullivan: Only three weeks more of these delightful revivals.

Grand Hotel: It's getting to be a nuisance thinking up new nice things to say about this long run hit.

Precedent: Should be compulsory for all who believe in American justice.

Private Lives: Madge Kennedy and Donald Brian are the current leads.

The Band Wagon: The smartest revue in years with tunes that seem to wear well.

The Barretts of Wimpole Street: If you don't think it's too hot for mid-Victorian incest.

The Green Pastures: Last two weeks of the beautiful negro miracle play.

Third Little Show: Lots of Bee Lillie and not enough Ernie Truex.

Ziegfeld Follies: The old style Ziegfeld, thank the Lord!

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