

# Seeing Things

## WELCOME MAGIC

**A**LTHOUGH Congress from time to time still seems to believe in witches, most of us do not. We are comfortable in the knowledge that Salem's crones belong to the past. We read with incredulity about those unfortunates the Elizabethans charged with sorcery. The Weird Sisters in "Macbeth" interest us as problems in stagecraft or contributors to a needed mood of terror, but we are not frightened by them. Even the very young are less scared than amused by the mummery in which they indulge on Hallowe'en, that feast day of broom-riding hags. Chas. Addams's are the only witches that nowadays cast a universal spell.

This modern attitude of disbelief must have presented John van Druten with a serious problem when he wrote "Bell, Book and Candle."\* His is a comedy laid in contemporary New York. There are, of course, thousands of good people up and down the land who are convinced (with much evidence on their side) that New York is inhabited by horrors of every kind. Yet even the most violent of these Manhattan-haters have never accused the city of being a witches' nest. Certainly its Murray Hill district, which Mr. van Druten has chosen as his scene, is not noted for caldrons, midnight incantations, or elderly women zooming about in the air. The staunchest enemies of Gotham would have to admit that the residents of Murray Hill are as normal as New Yorkers can be expected to be.

This is where Mr. van Druten shows his skill as a strategist. For the purposes of his comedy he pretends to believe not only that witches exist but that, when passed in the street or met in a room, they are indistinguishable from anyone else. Their existence, perhaps I should say their prevalence, is the bold assumption upon which the whole action of "Bell, Book and Candle" is based. So skilful is Mr. van Druten, especially in his first act, in persuading audiences to accept his premise that from now on most of us

sitting next to women young or old, or men as stolid looking as investment counselors, will be forced to regard them with suspicion. Not that we will close our doors against them, because doors closed and bolted offer no obstacles to Mr. van Druten's practitioners of black magic. Nonetheless we will wonder if the most innocent seeming of our neighbors has not some henbane tucked away in her reticule or root of hemlock secreted in his wallet.

Everyone recalls how unlike any soups suggested by Betty Crocker is the recipe for broth supplied by the Witches in "Macbeth." Included among the awesome, if unpalatable, ingredients it calls for are delicacies as foreign to the A&P as

Fillet of a fenny snake,  
In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

I dare to quote so familiar a passage only because in it the atmosphere of the supernatural and the terrors of witchcraft are conjured by what is droning in the rhythm no less than



—John Seymour Erwin.

Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer  
—not "tamed by marriage."

by what is loathsome in the imagery. Shakespeare's necromancy is a matter of language deliberately set apart in its beat and the pictures it summons, so as to serve as speech for the denizens of a creepy realm. Mr. van Druten's witches are unaided by such verbal idiosyncrasies. Prose is their release and theirs on the whole is the kind of talk indulged in by literate people anywhere who do not go in for pointed hats.

To reveal the twists in the plot of "Bell, Book and Candle" would be grossly unfair. Suffice it to say that, according to Mr. van Druten, being a present-day witch is certainly a job demanding full-time dedication. Once you putter around with the Kinsey stuffs, once you give Cupid a ride on your broomstick, your prowess in witchcraft is done in. In the fashion of his own sorceress whose heart is assailed by love Mr. van Druten's script loses some of its force when its first act is over and he is confronted with spinning a romantic yarn capable of living up to the mood he has brilliantly created. Even so, I enjoyed Mr. van Druten's agreeable excursion into the impossible. I admired the way in which, without writing lines that can be described as epigrammatic or notable for their wit, he manages to give pleasure by the civilized quality of his thinking, phrasing, and observation.

**C**ERTAINLY no effort is required to enjoy either Rex Harrison or Lilli Palmer. Mr. Harrison is a past master at the ping-pong of comedy. He sweeps into a script, dapper, lean, and charming, with the suavity of a Britisher, and in the manner of Britain's subtler actors knows precisely which of his lines to cherish and which to throw away. All the while that his casualness is creating the illusion of underplaying, his performance is alert to the nuances and values both of what he wants and needs to get done.

As for Miss Palmer she, like Lynn Fontanne, is a wife-actress set free rather than tamed by marriage. That Miss Palmer is a beautiful woman works to no one's disadvantage. Her gifts, however, do not stop with the beauty of her face or the slim loveliness of her body. Her young Cleopatra in last year's "Caesar and Cleopatra" proved this triumphantly. Her café-society witch in "Bell, Book and Candle" proves it all over again. Here is a commanding personality, taut with all the dark and mysterious tensions which can lend compulsion to the bigger scenes. Yet her comedy is pure sunlight. It might be added that, if any of the older members of Hecate's sorority happen to fly in to

\*BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE, a comedy by John van Druten. Directed by Mr. van Druten. Setting by George Jenkins. Miss Palmer's costumes by Valentina. Other costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone. Presented by Irene Mayer Selznick. With Rex Harrison, Lilli Palmer, Scott McKay, Jean Adair, and Larry Gates. At the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York City. Opened November 14, 1950.

see Miss Palmer's performance, ten to one they will abandon their time-honored costumes. For Miss Palmer is dressed by Valentina, and not even Valentina, sorceress of the wardrobe though she is, has ever used her artist's gift to create more bewitching clothes.

Although Miss Palmer and Mr. van Druten may create in moderns a tem-



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porary willingness to believe in witches, with or without the aid of witches the age-old business of the theatre has always been to cast a spell. This is exactly what "Ring Round the Moon"\* succeeds in doing. It is a comedy rare in its mood, sharp in its satire, and blessed with attributes as easy to enjoy as they are difficult to describe. There is a delectable soapbubble quality about the whole giddy proceedings; a happy awareness that realism is tossed out the window and that in its place is substituted a style which is all glitter; an artifice which is iridescent in its gaiety; and a nonsense which, though most often hilarious, is sometimes poignant and always within hailing distance of sense.

THE right, the inspired classification for Jean Anouilh's prank was thought of by Christopher Fry, who was persuaded to make the translation from the French. The English producers, as Peter Brook tells us in his illuminating preface to the published play,† were in an understandable quandary. They knew that M. Anouilh has a style and manner of his own; that he is nearer in spirit to the *commedia dell'arte* than to the tradition of literary dramatists; and that "he preconceives the accidental and calls it the impromptu." Was his play, therefore, to be subtitled a comedy, a farce, or a ballet? All of these were words which, though accurate enough in their way, failed to cover the entire script and for English-speaking audiences had the wrong connotations. Mr. Fry found the answer. He called it a "charade with music."

From my youth I remember how Mrs. Wiggs of Cabbage Patch fame, seeing someone off on a train for Niagara, thrust an empty bottle into the lucky traveler's hand, begging her to bring it back full so that she would know what the Falls were like. I find myself in a position as ridiculous as Mrs. Wiggs's, when attempting in a review to capture the true quality of "Ring Round the Moon." There is a plot which, in its simplest essentials, tells how a brother conspires to save his twin from marrying a particular

\*RING ROUND THE MOON, a charade with music, by Jean Anouilh. Translated from the French by Christopher Fry. Staged by Gilbert Miller. Music by Francis Poulenc. Costumes by Castillo. Scenery and lighting supervised by Raymond Sorey. Winter garden setting by Georges Wakheutch. Curtains by Raoul Dufy. Choreography by Ted Cappy. Produced by Mr. Miller. With Lucille Watson, Oscar Karlweis, Denholm Elliott, Stella Andrew, Brenda Forbes, Francis Compton, Georgina Cookson, Neva Patterson, Michael Evans, Cynthia Latham, Philip Tonge, Marcel Dill, William Allyn, and Bennett Martin. At the Martin Beck Theatre, New York City. Opened November 23, 1950.

†RING ROUND THE MOON. A play by Jean Anouilh. Translated by Christopher Fry. With a preface by Peter Brook. New York: Oxford University Press. 104 pp. \$2.50.

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girl. But the ramifications of this story are so involved that compared to them "The Comedy of Errors" seems as uncomplicated as a straight line. These twists and turnings, however, serve their purpose. They allow fun to be made of the idle rich, the snobbishness of servants, the pretentiousness of the lower classes, the pathos of the self-made, the poverty of wealth, and the unreliability of appearances.

Having been unable to procure a copy of M. Anouilh's text I can only guess at the richness of Mr. Fry's contribution. The fact that he converted the original title, "L'Invitation au Château," into "Ring Round the Moon" may perhaps be taken as a hint. So may Mr. Brook's statement that "to translate Anouilh is no matter of matching chat with chat: it demands re-creation, a re-shaping of ideas into phrases that have an English elegance and grace." No one who has seen or read "The Lady's Not for Burning," "A Phoenix Too Frequent," or "Venus Observed" can be unprepared for Mr. Fry's prowess with the language. If in "Ring Round the Moon" he writes prose instead of poetry, his prose nonetheless has the fecund imagery, the dash, the beauty, and the originality associated with his poetry.

NOTHING could more happily suggest in visual terms the literary quality of "Ring Round the Moon" than Raoul Dufy's entr'acte curtains. Castillo's enchanting costumes, Francis Poulenc's rippling music, and Georges Wakhevitch's conservatory setting. This is properly rococo and warns us even while delighting us that the characters about to be seen live in glass houses.

Although the acting leaves something to be desired in the matter of a completely established and fused stylization, Gilbert Miller has assembled a capable cast. Denham Elliott is admirable as the twins, distinguishing the one from the other without change of costume or make-up, and playing both with much spirit and charm. Lucile Watson is wonderfully dry and acid as a chair-ridden dowager. And there are delightfully droll performances by Brenda Forbes, Oscar Karlweis, Francis Compton, and Philip Tonge. Certainly the season is not apt to reveal a more uproarious interlude than the scene in which Georgina Cookson and Michael Evans stalk through a goofy Mexican tango while gravely discussing their relationship.

I do not mean to accuse Mr. Fry of being a warlock (male witch to you), but one thing seems incontestable. He is a magician—with words, moods, and the most gossamer kind of comedy. —JOHN MASON BROWN.

## FILMS, RADIO & TV

(Continued from page 12)

and of adjusting to the real conditions of their lives they can find little or no meaning in what Hollywood has largely offered.

Before the mature audience can be properly looked after something will have to be done, Mr. Seldes suggests, about a major obstacle in the way—Hollywood's self-imposed straight-jacket: "A Code to Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures."

The section in "The Great Audience" on what is more familiarly known as the production code gives a wonderfully clear explanation of why movies bear so little relation to the general conditions of our lives. The code was developed, supposedly, to help protect both the producers of movies and the audience they are made for. A bewildering variety of pressures has awaited the producer, even while his movie was in the planning stage. The pressure "has been esthetic, social, moral, economic, political, and religious. It has included boycotts, denunciations from bench and pulpit, editorials, legislation, arbitrary use of the police power, financial chicanery."

Over the years the code has managed to achieve little but baneful results. "Most of our pictures have little, if any, real substance. Our fear of what the censor will do keeps us from portraying life as it really is. We wind up with a lot of empty little fairy tales that do not have much relation to anything. . . ." So speaks Samuel Goldwyn. Mr. Seldes, in his analysis of the code and its quite terrifying effects on American habits and conducts (younger people, who form the bulk of the audience, are particularly affected) is at his most brilliant.

It might seem strange, in view of the situation, that Mr. Seldes remains a believer in organized pressure. "I am convinced," he writes, "that nothing else can be effective dealing with such highly organized, entrenched, and well-defended enterprises. . . . It seems to me the intelligent public has never recognized its own interest. . . . A democracy cannot endure if the forces making for free minds are apathetic and the forces of invincible ignorance are aggressive and brilliantly managed and irresponsible." It seems to me that an intelligent public can first begin to recognize its own interest by reading Mr. Seldes's valid and vital essay.

\* \* \*

Hortense Powdermaker is an anthropologist and a university profes-

sor who spent a year in Hollywood on a sort of field trip. She studied the giant in its native habitat, interviewed members of the many levels of Hollywood's working society, and came to conclusions similar to those of Mr. Seldes. However, it is a closer view that her book "Hollywood: The Dream Factory" gives. You meet the actual executives, producers, directors, writers, actors, and agents, all of them more or less typical of the personalities connected with those who concoct stories for the rolls of celluloid. She is more acid, often more witty and more devastating than Mr. Seldes, and it is rather a shame that she often weakens her very logical arguments by the patronizing attitude she now and then evidences. She has already come under criticism from the trade on the grounds that her interviews were too often with the disgruntled and the dispossessed, and certainly she does quote some of the chestnuts tossed by those on the scene for any length of time. She has produced a valuable book, nevertheless, not immune to criticism, but one impossible to dismiss lightly.

I want to get one of my own annoyances out of the way quickly. This came about from her insistence upon demonstrating the value of anthropologic methods for such a study as hers, and by her fairly constant comparison of Hollywood "rituals" with those of Melanesian natives she'd studied previously. The joke (although it's not always meant to be one) becomes wearing: "To me the handsome stars with their swimming-pool homes were no more glamorous than were the South Sea aborigines exotic."

Miss Powdermaker, too, speaks out against the code and roundly claims that "the motion-picture industry is an exception to the American pattern of resisting censorship through legal action." But she wonders if it is the code alone that is responsible for so many of the bad movies. "The taste, good or bad, of the men who make the movies will be inevitably stamped on them and will break through all rules and taboos. . . ."

Taste, good or bad, is something that is a part of a mentality or a group of mentalities, and so it is to the people who make movies that Miss Powdermaker devotes the major share of her attention, and she has used an apt method for showing them to us. She has woven together a great many thumbnail "profiles" that are astonishingly clever in delineating the backgrounds and mentalities of those who make movies in one capacity or another. I suppose a parlor game could easily result from trying to guess the identities of those she

labels as "Mr. Big-Shot," "Mr. Mediocre," "Mr. Kowtow," "Miss Manifest Destiny," and others.

But it's a good way of getting to know something about the hacks, the occasional heretics, the kowtowers, the men of ability, and the gods who are colossal and those not so colossal. Here are people whose tastes govern the choice and treatment of stories, and here are those who must bend talents to conform not only to a code, but to standards of those in positions of power. Directors are hampered by producers; the writers in most cases knuckle under to both. The Hollywood writer's economic security is dependent upon the screen credits doled out to him, and he is generally caught in a limbo lying between the two-room flat and the estate complete with swimming pool. For a relative few of the many thousands enrolled in the Screen Writer's Guild "writing for the movies becomes the means to wealth or comfort, which eventually becomes the goal. The writers take over the executives' and producers' values more successfully than the latter take over the artists' goals."

Stars, puffed up by the Hollywood publicity set-up, can help along the debauch of creative talent, too. They often, says Miss Powdermaker, demand script alterations and usually get their way. By the time all involved have made their changes and distortions the original script for a movie is generally a sorry, disorganized mess. Bad movies cannot help but result. Hollywood owes at least some of its plight to its way of operation.

But sometimes there occurs a striking contrast to what Miss Powdermaker calls the norm. You find an occasional example of intelligent planning and real collaboration between the key people who place their stamp upon a movie. The picture that results from this kind of cooperative creation indicates "that there is nothing inherent in the production of movies which necessitates the confusion, wastefulness, and lack of planning which underlies the assembling of most scripts and which is taken for granted in Hollywood."

\* \* \*

As a case in point Miss Powdermaker refers to someone she calls "Mr. Intelligent, who recently became the executive head in charge of production for a major studio. Unlike most executives he tends to surround himself with men of training, of proven intelligence and ability." It doesn't take much guesswork to identify "Mr. Intelligent" as Dore Schary, a man who took the hard way toward his present high position in the Hollywood hierarchy, from writer to pro-



Dore Schary — "Mr. Intelligent' . . . the hard way."

ducer to vice president in charge of all production at the MGM studios.

The way in which Mr. Schary goes about supervising the making of a movie is set forth in "Case History of a Movie." It is a book which helps show that making a movie can involve perception, imagination, intelligent planning, and manifold skills. There isn't much doubt that it will be read with profit in Mr. Schary's home territory.

The case history is that of the making of "The Next Voice You Hear. . . ." Not a great picture by any means but a respectable one and certainly off the pattern enough to rate being termed experimental. Mr. Schary tells simply and vividly how this movie came into being, first as an idea, then through the various stages of transference into the screen medium. Along the way we are given honest and thorough glimpses of the craft work that must go into a polished Hollywood production, of decisions taken by executives, of a producer's careful guidance of the story through its screen treatment, selection of director, actors, and craftsmen. You notice the respect Mr. Schary has for the people who work with him, the precarious line he must tread between achieving a flop or an unveiling at the New York branch of Hollywood's heaven, Radio City Music Hall.

This "case history" is the best guide for the general public to the techniques of Hollywood production that I have yet come across. But Mr. Schary also manages to puncture a few of the public's myths about Hollywood and its personages. "Hollywood," he says, "has become so much a part of American folklore that it has acquired a persistent stereotype in the public mind." This stereotype of sin, extravagance, wastefulness, "was

partly superimposed from without, and partly generated from within."

He then tries to determine what is true about the stereotype and what is kept vestigial by newspaper, magazine, and gossip reporting. He also shows to what extent the intelligent executive can put a fight against restrictions of the production code, and to what extent he must inevitably conform. For the good executive must be also a good businessman, and there is such a thing as a national and international market for goods produced that he must take into account.

But before accepting Mr. Schary's total view one must remember his atypicality. His method of operation has not yet been generally accepted, although men like Mankiewicz, Zanuck, Kramer, and Brackett have been making themselves felt of late, with refreshing results in the theatres. And even Mr. Schary accepts the dictum that movies are made primarily for the under-thirty audience.

\* \* \*

Research bears out the assumption that the largest audience for present-day movies does lie in that under-thirty group. You will find the figures in Leon Handel's "Hollywood Looks at Its Audience." You will also find that the average "A" picture is seen by only thirteen million people, hardly a popular mass—more in the nature of a segment. The reason for the relatively small audience for so popular an entertainment form, can be discerned from another set of figures which serve to bolster Mr. Seldes and Miss Powdermaker in their views.

These figures indicate, according to Mr. Handel, "that persons with only grade school education go to the motion pictures less frequently . . . that persons with college educations attend more often than people with either grade school or high school background. In general, the findings seem to indicate a misconception on the part of some producers who feel that they have to 'play down' to the lowest intellectual level to make a motion picture a financial success."

There, it seems to me, it is, in as neat a nutshell as one would want it. There is a great deal of additional ground to be explored (and these books do indeed explore some of it—although this summary has had to leave many of their conclusions unexpressed), but the outlines have become clear, and these outlines show glaringly that the film audience has been consistently underrated, and that the mass production of film stories has been failing to find its supposed mass. The time for Hollywood and its movies to grow up all the way, it would seem, is right now.

# SRL Goes to the Movies

## SAHIBS & SONS OF SAHIBS



Dean Stockwell and Errol Flynn  
—"dated portrait of empire."

IN THE year 1950, almost 1951, it is a curious anomaly to come upon a resplendent version of the white man's burden in the Orient, relic of an outmoded politic, dated as an antimacassar, and yet as immediate as the day's dispatches from New Delhi. For only a few weeks ago a correspondent for *The New York Times* in India reported the presence of Russian spy parties in Tibet, surveying the passes through "the icy barrier of the Himalayas into India," projecting air bases as "eventual threat against India . . ."

The Russians of Kipling's "Kim" (published in 1900) were disguised as sporting men and they hunted wild goats, but their kiltas contained surveying chains, levels, compasses, and a theodolite. The Russians of 1950 were "pilgrims to Lhasa," accoutered with more modern instruments with photographic attachments.

And so it is with mixed feelings that one approaches this film version of "Kim."\* Kipling's India, never acceptable to the Indians, is the country of the Splendid Utterance; of the "clean pride of departmental praise"; of the Sahibs and the sons of Sahibs, the boys at St. Xavier's, who would "no more have bathed in the English Channel in an English August than their brothers would have lain still while a leopard snuffed at their palanquin,"

\*KIM. Screen play by Leon Gordon, Helen Deutsch, and Richard Schayer. Directed by Victor Saville. Produced by Leon Gordon. Released through Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. With Errol Flynn, Dean Stockwell, Paul Lukas, Robert Douglas, Thomas Gomez, Cecil Kellaway, Arnold Moss, Reginald Owen, Laurette Luez, and others.

and who never forgot that they would some day command natives.

It is also the India of the Great Game pursued night and day for its own sake; of Colonel Creighton, whose Urdu was fluent and picturesque; of Mahbub Ali, the giant Pathan who dyed his beard red to conceal his age, one of the best horse traders in the Punjab, whose caravans penetrated into the Back of the Beyond, and who was registered in the locked books of the Indian Survey Department as C25 IB; of Lurgan Sahib of the small, white, dextrous hands, who treated Kim as an "equal on the Asiatic side," taught him the intricate Jewel Game and how to recite the Koran with the roll and cadence of a mullah; and of the red Lama, dressed in "fold upon fold of dingy stuff like horse-blanketing," his face yellow and wrinkled, illuminating knowledge with insight as he sought and found the River of the Arrow.

Perhaps if there had been no films within memory made in India—Robert Flaherty's "Toomai of the Elephant," the more recent "Black Narcissus"—the discrepancies might not be so visible. For "Kim"—though apparently made for the most part in India, with the combined collaboration of the Maharajahs of Jaipur and Bundi, who loaned dancing girls, elephants, and the use of their realms—never quite convinces one of its authenticity.

With a compact and well-written script deduced line for line, incident for incident, and character for character from its original, preserving the major line of the narratives, the film too often gives the impression that it might as easily have originated in Hollywood, with its red and gold uniforms as immaculate as anything newly rented from Brooks, and the rude intrusions of unnaturally green studio trees and prop-planted hummocks of grass unduly luminous in closeups.

There are moments, however, when Kipling's India asserts itself: in the brilliant, brief, and macabre portrait by Arnold Moss of Lurgan Sahib stringing pearls in a room presided over by a mailed Japanese warrior, Tibetan devil-dance masks, lances, khandas, and kuttars; and again in the vanishing glimpse of the boys of St. Xavier's off for their midsummer holidays, rushing down the ancient steps of the sculptured building into a fleet of rickshaws that disappear in the dust of midday like apparitions from "Plain Tales from the Hills."

Kim as Dean Stockwell plays him