

SRL Goes to the Movies

YIPPEE-YI-O-KY-ID

Ethel Barrymore, Pauline Lord, Jeanne Eagels, Florence Reed, Katharine Cornell, Tallulah Bankhead, the Lunts, and many others, whose personalities are sufficiently electric to create in us a sense of the living theatre when all we are seeing is portrait photographs of them. But who, unless they had recollections to guide them, would know how fabulous in its scale was Reinhardt's "The Miracle" from a tiny close-up of Orville Caldwell and Rosamond Pinchot kneeling at the feet of Lady Diana Manners posed as a Madonna? Who could guess the sorcery of Mei Lan-Fang, whose hands were among his glories, from a picture of postage stamp size in which his hands are not shown? Who would identify "The Road to Rome" as a comedy from a shot in which a scowling Philip Merivale seems on the verge of cutting Jane Cowl's throat with a dangerously long dagger? Who could imagine the charming simplicity of the staging of "Our Town" by looking at a group of actors huddled around Frank Craven in the marriage scene? Who could ever be expected to realize the breathtaking wonder of Laurence Olivier's Oedipus from the static figure in the photograph chosen by Mr. Blum?

I could cite any number of other instances of such inadequacy, but these may suffice to indicate that Mr. Blum's "Pictorial History" is the kind of book to which a good deal of knowledge must be brought if it is to be fully understood or enjoyed. The theatre it presents is a matter of scant and often misleading hints thrown out rather than of reliable reminders. It is a theatre of stilled orchestras, petrified dancers, gagless comedians, wordless dramas, and colorless settings and costumes. Since it is a pictorial record, there is no escaping this. But there are pictorial records and pictorial records. To compare the illustrations in Mr. Blum's compilation with those in the bound volumes of the old *Theatre Arts Monthly* is to become aware at once of how different in quality, selection, range, format, and reproduction such pictorial records can be.

I do not mean to be too harsh on Mr. Blum's book. Its major defect is that it could and should be much better. It has the virtue of being close to Broadway in its tone, quality, and feeling. Yet what it fails to supply is the dignity, heat, joy, or importance of the theatre which on one unpredictable night after another manages in mysterious ways to come to life—in spite of Broadway. This is the theatre which, after all, creates memories and haunts our minds. It is this same theatre which Mr. Blum must have hoped to record, even if it has eluded him.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

IT'S my duty this week to report on a quintet of Western films, and I might as well admit that I went to them in a somewhat prejudiced frame of mind. A friend hearing I was off on this kick armed me with the latest intelligence on the subject, which, as it turned out, appeared recently in a periodical I have somehow always regarded nervously. The magazine is called *Neurotica*, and it contained some heady material: an article on heroin addicts, a story about a South Sea island called Paranoia, an analysis of the sexual implications of mambo, and an essay by Alfred Towne titled "The Myth of the Western Hero."

"The Western film, and its hero," Mr. Towne writes, "is fast becoming America's number one candidate for the cultural analytical couch." Nor does he mince words after that. The gun—the six-shooter—is, he announces, a barefaced potency symbol, and for him "the plots of these movies are fantastic in their blatant homosexuality."

Sure enough in John Ford's "Rio Grande" (Republic) there was Mr. Towne's "father-surrogate," John Wayne, playing a grouchy and grizzled colonel of cavalry. One of the grouchy colonel's new recruits is a son he hasn't seen in fifteen years. A few hours later along comes the wife the colonel hasn't seen in fifteen years either—obviously Mr. Towne's "ever-clarifying pattern of rejection of women." The only trouble is that by the time a

couple of hundred Apaches have been killed and the bugle (another potency symbol?) has blown for the last of the cavalry charges the colonel has gone back to living with his wife. I was badly puzzled: how equate the rejection and the acceptance? Was I discerning ambivalence in Westerns? About the only solid conclusion I could reach was that John Ford was wrapping up in exciting new ribbons the same old package that had made a lot of money before. This is an item that has always been fairly strong in Hollywood's subconscious.

But when I viewed "Branded" (Paramount) I could see right off that Alan Ladd was rejecting everybody, women and men alike, and he said as much within the picture's first sixty seconds. Choya (Ladd) was holed up in this general store with a bunch of mean folks outside taking pot-shots at him. The grizzled storekeeper said, "Choya, what good's a gunfighter's life? Ain't you got anybody real close to you? Any folks?" Choya's face was frozen solid-like as he turned to the storekeeper, and it came as a kind of surprise to hear him talk. "These are my folks," he said, meaning the guns, "they take care of me." What do you make of that?

Before long Choya is involved in a deal that has him impersonating the long-lost son of an important ranch owner with a daughter whose *sisterly* affection Choya finds hard to bear. Finally he goes after the real long-lost son and drags him back to the ranch. Then Choya can marry the girl. Well, I saw something here that Mr. Towne doesn't mention. Look again at that phrase, "whose *sisterly* affection . . ."

"The Great Missouri Raid" (Paramount) has in it the James and the Younger brothers. Plenty of symbols, too. The picture opens with a rope around the neck of the James boys' stepfather. The Union soldiers are trying to find Frank James, a Southern guerrilla leader. Meanwhile they've caught Jesse and are *whipping* him. Frank (Wendell Corey) and his guerrilla band come along and stop all this Freudian stuff in the nick of time, and after a lot of tearing around the countryside Jesse gets killed again, and Frank escapes to Europe. I couldn't figure this one out at all.

By this time, though, Mr. Towne's influence had waned at bit, and I was nearer my accustomed viewing mood for "The Redhead and the Cowboy" (Paramount). Thought Glenn Ford



—E. W. Bartlett.

rode a horse real finé, and Rhonda Fleming struck me as mighty pretty. Glenn is just a sort of wandering cowpoke, and Rhonda is a dancehall entertainer who is really a courier in disguise for the Southern guerrillas (they're hot these days). A lot of messages and countermessages have to be delivered before our boy and girl can get together in what had all the earmarks of a non-rejectory clinch, and I might even be willing to suggest this one for an evening of innocent fantasy. It has some remarkable photography by Laniel Fapp, and Leslie Fenton's direction gets flavor into the action.

I also got to see "Dallas" (Warner Bros.)—practically a ritualistic Western—which has Gary Cooper as Reb Hollister, former Confederate colonel and now, so help me, an outlaw because of his guerrilla activities. The carpetbaggers are terrorizing around Dallas for all getout, and Gary by pretending to be a U. S. marshal (the real one doesn't shoot straight and true) cleans up the area, principally by disposing of the dreaded Marlowe brothers, with what seemed to me to be a lurking sense of humor. But what a barefaced potency symbol he represents! It's a situation that clearly demands more than a cultural analytical couch—perhaps as much as a full-scale Congressional committee with the stated objective of cleaning up Hollywood's subconscious.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

SRL Recommends

The Sound of Fury: Townspeople, inflamed by circulation-hungry headlines, lynch impoverished man sucked into crime, together with psychopathic killer. Gripping picture of mob violence, if somewhat unconvincingly motivated. [SRL Feb. 3.]

The Steel Helmet: Despite familiar "characters" and story line, a compelling quickie about the war in Korea. [SRL Feb. 3.]

Ways of Love: Recipient of the film critics' award for the year's best foreign picture, this packaged trio of short movies by Pagnol, Renoir, and Rossellini is distinguished by superb direction, camera work, and performances. [SRL Jan. 27.]

The Halls of Montezuma: Filmed in good but not too glorious Technicolor. Shots of actual Marine-Navy maneuvers laced with taut performances into overpowering climax. [SRL Jan. 20.]

Born Yesterday: Billie Dawn gropes hilariously through ABC's of democracy, with considerable private enterprise. [SRL Jan. 6.]

Breakthrough: Exploits of the infantry-battalion level at St. Lô. Realistically presented—within formula strictures. [SRL Dec. 9.]

Mad Wednesday: Harold Lloyd comes back in a film so funny you may hurt yourself with belly laughs. [SRL Nov. 4.]

TV and Radio

A MASTERPIECE A DAY

I FEEL TODAY like an impoverished scientist who has been experimenting with a synthetic bubble gum for his emaciated children when he suddenly realizes he has discovered a method to manufacture the hydrogen bomb for only \$265,541,820.42.

Like any true scientist I hasten to pass along my discovery to all humanity or at least to that part of it bounded by Lever Brothers on the north, the tobacco auctioneers on the south, Colgate Toothpaste on the west, and Pat Weaver on the east. And, like any true discoverer, I am prepared to accept my share of the disbelief and derision heaped upon Columbus, who was considered a square because he believed the world was round.

But first to my discovery and then to the experiment which accidentally led to its conception. It is a new and noble use for a television set. I suggest the telecasting of paintings. That's all. Just paintings. The works of Renoir, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Vandyke, Hals, Holbein, Picasso, Cezanne, Gainsborough, Degas, Goya framed on your television screen—a masterpiece which is yours to live with for a whole day. But only one masterpiece a day, because if there were more than one the temptation to insert between them "Ajax, the Foaming Cleanser" would be too great for any television station or advertising agency.

At first blush the idea seems preposterous. But I feel sure you will agree that the names of Renoir, Van Gogh, Hals, Holbein, Picasso, Cezanne, Gainsborough, Degas, and Goya compare rather favorably with the names of such masters as Jerry Lester, Jack Carter, Bobby Clark, Abbott and Costello, Sherman Billingsley, and others too humorless to mention. Imagine owning for an entire day a masterpiece by a great artist. It's something to think about—especially against the day when color television becomes a reality.

And now to the experiment which brought about the discovery. I saw Lilli Palmer on my television set the other evening. As I sat there entranced for what seemed like a few seconds and watched her loveliness dissolve into a CBS station break, after what they claimed was a full fifteen minutes, I was suddenly struck with the inequality of the television setup. To some are given a full hour—even more; to Lilli Palmer just a few minutes and a tantalizing promise to come back next Thursday evening. I toyed



—John Seymour Erwin.

"... the miracle of Lilli Palmer."

with the idea of taking a heavy sleeping potion until next Thursday evening. I considered calling the station and asking to have the fifteen minutes rerun for the rest of the evening. My excuse would be I didn't hear what she was talking about. I really didn't. I heard only the most delightful suggestion of a vague accent, saw only eyes which gazed intelligently and courageously into mine and lips which moved in provocative circles to form words which held me spellbound but left absolutely no impression on a brain reeling with the miracle of Lilli Palmer herself.

As I settled back limply to await the 168 hours till Lilli Palmer would return again I began to ponder the idea of a television station concerned only with telecasting Lilli Palmer. Realizing the toll this would take on her if she had to stand there and speak hour upon hour I compromised for just a close-up of Miss Palmer and nothing more. It was then I got the idea of telecasting nothing but masterpieces every day. And so I pass it along.

Just one more thing in this connection. Television may not have come a very long way in the past year or two, but the professional critics who review the television shows for the New York newspapers certainly have. A year or two ago these critics would have written—"Miss Palmer is not television. She is radio." The rule was, they wrote in their columns, that if