

# SR Goes to the Movies

## SPIES AND THE FBI

**“W**ALK East on Beacon” (Columbia) is the latest in a series of pictures produced by Louis de Rochemont for which a new and exact name should be found. Naturally leery of the implications of the word “documentary,” Mr. De Rochemont calls this one “a drama of real life”; it was suggested by a factual report on counter-espionage made by J. Edgar Hoover, and the FBI cooperated on the production. Included are sequences showing both the physical and intellectual equipment by which spies are captured; at the same time, the picture, written by Leo Rosten, has a matrix of fiction, a strong current of personal emotions that fuses all the relevant fact into a fairly tumultuous melodrama.

The importance of this kind of picture can be judged by comparing it with Leo McCarey’s production of “My Son John,” (Paramount) which also deals with spies and the FBI. “Walk East on Beacon” is specific: a Communist agent arrives in America to spur the slow-moving apparatus in Boston to acquiring the facts about an American top-secret project; in this apparatus are men and women, foreign-born and native, paid spies and zealots and men coerced; what they want, steal, and finally lose is a tape recording of intricate mathematical formulas concerning our weapons of the future. Their fronts are a florist shop and a photographer’s studio. Everything is tangible.

Not being a fact-film “My Son John” is divorced from anything as tangible as mathematics. The picture resolutely refuses to train the camera on any specific object connected with Communism. Its central character, brilliantly played by the late Robert Walker, says at the end, “I am a native-born American Communist and may God have mercy on my soul”—but this comes to us after he is dead. While he is alive we see nothing whatever of his work; we do not see him in action as a spy, we do not know what he is trying to get. He receives a phone call—we do not know from whom. He talks to associates, presumably in the Government—we do not know his position or theirs.

So, in the end, “My Son John” becomes the classic instance of guilt by

association, the classic instance and the glorification of this dubious principle. For the solitary fact, the one palpable object, is a door key. The young man has, loses, and in the end is trapped by a key to the apartment of a woman who has been arrested (we aren’t even told anything about her crime) by the FBI.

But if you make association your theme and use supercharged symbols for emotional effects, you run grave risks. There is a scene in which the father (Dean Jagers) hits his son with a Bible. Technically this scene is strong, but it is ruined because at the very beginning of the picture another symbol has been placed before us: an empty chair. The mother raises her glass in a toast to the absent son and at this moment the father looks up with a glance of almost venomous hatred. The son is absent from his heart long before he suspects the taint of Communism. Why? Is Mr. McCarey trying to tell us the son became a Communist because his father hated him? Or what?

Except for appealing to all loyal citizens to report anything suspicious to the FBI, “Walk East on Beacon” has no “ideas.” It does have, as I said, emotions, and the harsh brutality and the cunning of the espionage system itself contribute moral contrasts with the methods of the F.B.I. But the picture as a whole exposes, is does not exhort.

“My Son John” is a long exhortation against an enemy who remains undefined. Since the traitor is not shown in his treachery we must take everything else he does as stigmata of guilt; here Communism is made abhorrent to us not through what it visibly does (since it does nothing) but through its effect on the traitor. Unlike his two brothers (who are in the armed services) he is an intellectual; he kids his father for still belonging to the American Legion; he makes a jest at the expense of a jolly priest (and jolly Frank McHugh is); he doesn’t agree that American citizens of foreign descent should go back where they came from if they don’t like it here; instead of staying at home with his parents, he goes for a long talk with one of his old college professors.

These are his visible crimes. His capital offense is that he wants to cut the silver cord between him and his mother. With Helen Hayes playing the part (always with more, and often with better, acting than you would expect) the crime is virtually matricide; and it

doesn’t surprise you that, when she discovers the fatal key, she turns her son in.

The way to defeat Communism is to meet its strength with ours; the way to lose is to dissipate our forces. In its course “My Son John” makes war on science, on free inquiry, on the critical temperament, and—as the source and center of all these things—on any education that sets men’s minds free. By implication, since it never says anything directly, it makes a present of these things to the Communists. Heaven knows they need these qualities badly enough—but it is not our duty to surrender our chief weapons to our enemies.

“Walk East on Beacon” gives nothing to the Communists beyond their due as ruthless and powerful foes. In its camera techniques and its searching for the true strength of both sides in the drama, it is admirably impartial. In its way, “My Son John” is impartial, too. Regardless of race, creed, or color, anyone who genuinely distrusts the free intellectual enterprise of intelligent men will find something in it to fortify his prejudices. —GILBERT SELDES.

## SR Recommends

*Walk East on Beacon*: Reviewed in this issue.

*Singin’ in the Rain*: Gene Kelly in a nostalgic spoofing of the early talkies.

*Encore*: Another trio of Maugham short stories turned into an engaging film. (SR Mar. 29.)

*The Man in the White Suit*: Alec Guinness invents a fabric that will never wear out—with hilarious consequences. (SR Mar. 29.)

*My Six Convicts*: Prison lore based on Donald Powell Wilson’s book of same name. (SR Mar. 29.)

*Deadline—U.S.A.*: For once, a true-to-life film about the newspaper profession. (SR Mar. 29.)

*The Belle of New York*: Fred Astaire as nimble as ever, with some captivating Currier & Ives backdrops. (SR Mar. 22.)

*The Marrying Kind*: Matrimony runs a bumpy but witty course as delineated by actress Judy Holliday, director George Cukor, and writers Kanin & Gordon. (SR Mar. 22.)

*The Magic Garden*: A light-hearted comedy from South Africa, with a plot compounded of miracles and a substratum of satire. (SR Mar. 15.)

*5 Fingers*: L. C. Moyzisch’s “Operation Cicero” turned into a spy film that avoids all the usual clichés of the genre and includes an abundance of the Mankiewicz sophistication. (SR Mar. 8.)

*Cry, the Beloved Country*: A sensitive screen translation by Alan Paton of his moving novel of South African life. (SR Feb. 2.)

*The Young and the Damned*: Luis Bunuel’s enlightened and enlightening study of Mexico’s juvenile delinquents, reviewed here under its original title, “Los Olvidados.” (SR Sept. 15.)



# Music to My Ears

## ROSENSTOCK'S "WOZZECK" AT THE CITY CENTER — FLAGSTAD'S FAREWELL

ALMOST everything about the current production of Alban Berg's "Wozzeck" at the City Center calls for expression in terms of qualification, except the amount of nerve it took to put it on the first place and carry it through to an end, if not a conclusion, in the second. This was unbounded, colossal, staggering. If the orchestral direction by Joseph Rosenstock, or the vocal-dramatic impersonations of Marko Rothmueller and Patricia Neway, or the production scheme of Theodore Komisarjevsky were something else, the net effect was nevertheless a new point of vantage relative to the challenging score, which is known here only from last year's concert performance directed by Mitropoulos and the dimly recollected stage production of Stowkowski in 1931.

Twenty-one years is a long time between "Wozzeck's" but this one struck me as decidedly less persuasive, for all its literal spelling out of the action, than the vaguely recollected one for which Robert Edmond Jones was the designer, William von Wymetal, Jr., the stage director. The unit sets favored by Komisarjevsky penalize mood and atmosphere by giving a small amount of credibility to isolated episodes and throwing a blanket of confusion over the whole.

In the current instance the stage level is divided by a staircase leading to an upper level. Clever lighting converts the upper level into a variety of locales—the pond where Marie is eventually murdered and in which Wozzeck drowns, a tavern for a drunken revel, a street on which soldiers parade. The right side of the lower level is, consistently, Marie's room; but she has, apparently, a duplex which opens on the upper level when convenient for the dramatic action. On the other side of the staircase is an area which is now captain's quarters, now barracks, now open square, now barroom. The checkered relation of space suggests that such proximity is intended by Berg, or Büchner, whose play he utilized. No such intention exists.

So much for action. The English text struck me as another liability. Berg's kind of agile text-setting is as much wedded to German vowel sounds and word formation as, say, "Pelléas" is to French. If you can imagine Maeterlinck in English, than you can do the same for Büchner. I



—The Bettmann Archive.

Alban Berg—"mounting eloquence."

can't. "A worthy man" is not "Ein guter Mensch," no matter how you slice it.

Rothmueller and Neway could be admired as diligent people laboring with insufficient vocal equipment against cruel demands. The former has, to his credit, a stolid, sub-human, dramatic presence to offer in a credible likeness of the eternally put-upon Wozzeck, but not nearly sufficient vocal flexibility or variety of sound. Miss Neway did, alas, another version of Magda Sorel in "The Consul," with only a few strained top tones as landmarks by which to judge Berg's writing. All the others—Luigi Velluci (Captain), Ralph Herbert (Doctor), Howard Vandenburg (Drum Major), even the usual capable David Lloyd (Andres)—wandered beyond their depth vocally before Wozzeck did physically. That they were all engulfed, musically, by the amount of sound Rosenstock permitted the orchestra to produce was too pat a parallel for the death by drowning of the central character.

Nevertheless, one learned more than a little about Berg and "Wozzeck" thanks to exposure to one more piece of evidence, no matter how incomplete. What I learned from this latest "Wozzeck" is its mounting eloquence and power as Berg wrote himself out of the fabric of intellectual method with which he started; the gathering directness and mood of the music as he became absorbed in the emotional upheaval of his vastly commonplace but not unappealing underman, Wozzeck, who rises to the supreme arro-

gance of which man is capable—taking another's life. Midway in Act II the whole creative process escapes from its intellectual framework and becomes fluidly expressive, up to and through the moody interlude in Act III which gives Berg an enduring status as a poet in tone. As for the laconic understatement of the final scene with the children's "Hip Hop," it is quite unique in the order of thing generically called "opera."

Berg had fifty years of life when he died on Christmas Eve, 1935. "Wozzeck" was completed in 1921, when he was thirty-six. As experience accumulates and evidence multiplies, the judgment must be that this work, for all its cumulative effect, was but an incident in his development. I can imagine a rigorously integrated, powerfully directed performance—say at the Metropolitan—which would penetrate much deeper than this one. But I think the final verdict would be that "Wozzeck" is a promise, not a fulfilment.

In the realm of fulfilment, the musical scene was presented with a classic example in the final farewell of Kirsten Flagstad at the season's last "Alceste." Not only was the musical content as distant as the literature contains from the Wagner roles in which she attained her greatest fame; the text was neither her native Norwegian nor her adopted German, but the relatively exotic (for her) English, which she pronounced with greater clarity and purity than any other member of the cast. Those who shouted their bravos at the curtains or applauded for a full twenty minutes at the opera's end might be envied the power to give physical expression to their feelings. Others, who were trying to capture the image as durably as possible, to retain it is a measurement for some future phenomena, could only listen in silence. Kirsten Flagstad gave a vast amount of pleasure to all who heard her; to the critics who were too young to remember the last "Golden Age"—including this one—she gave a standard of excellence they will long cherish.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

## Summer, Be Late

By Peggy Walden

"SUMMER, be late," the poet said,  
And each tulip nods its head.  
O, to put a staying hand  
Over this just-verdant land,  
Tree just leafed, and grass just sprung,  
Summer to wait 'til Spring has sung  
Her perfect song again.