

# SRL Goes to the Movies

## EVERYBODY'S MAKING EPICS

heroine. In the course of the two evenings she demonstrates that she is able to be coy, frightened, impudent, cruel, lustful, imperious, comedic, and tragic in the most complete portrait of Cleopatra the theatre has known or is apt to know.

Mr. Olivier's Caesar and Antony are both distinguished. His Julius takes Shaw's script too literally and is older than he ought to be. When Caesar went to Egypt he was, after all, only in his early fifties. To Cleopatra, then sixteen, he unquestionably looked like the "old gentleman" referred to in the dialogue. Mr. Olivier, however, has made himself up so that he looks like an old gentleman even to those who are themselves in their early fifties. Although Shaw preferred to forget Caesarion, Caesar's son by Cleopatra, Caesarion would have been unknown to history had Caesar been as venerable and as tired as Mr. Olivier makes him. I, for one, can see no reason why as Julius Mr. Olivier should not carry himself more like a professional soldier, and save his slouch as a characterizing value for Antony. I also wish that, instead of subduing his voice as he does at times in both parts, Mr. Olivier would grant his Caesar and his Antony the benefit of its full resonance and strength.

But make no mistake about it. Mr. Olivier's performances are such as only a remarkable actor could give. He knows the mind and spirit of Shaw's conqueror. His Julius is as wise as his Antony is abandoned, as intellectual as the latter is physical, and both of them are men to whom authority comes naturally. Few can equal Mr. Olivier and none excel him when it comes to reading prose or poetry so that their ultimate beauty and meaning are revealed. He is a master not only of small details but of great scenes, and blessed with a gift for comedy no less marked than his gift for tragedy.

Some inadequate mention must be made of the sweep and intelligence of Michael Benthall's direction, of the serviceability of Roger Furse's settings, and the general excellence of the company the Oliviers have brought with them, with special reference to Wilfrid Hyde White as Britannus and Lepidus, Robert Helpmann as Apollodorus and Octavius, Niall MacGinnis's Rufio and Pompey, and Harold Kasket as Pothinus and Mardian.

What matters, what is exciting, what lends distinction to this season, and would to any other, is to have two such players as the Oliviers giving fine performances in stirring productions of two such notable plays.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

NOW that everyone else is making De Mille-type epics—lions and love amidst the pageantry of ancient Rome—that old master has had to find new worlds to conquer. And in "The Greatest Show on Earth" (Paramount) he seems to have hit upon the perfect solution. He still has his lions and his love, but the spectacle now is supplied by the Messrs. Ringling, Barnum, and Bailey. Doubtlessly inspired by the tremendous panorama of their big top, De Mille has flung himself into not one, but half a dozen stories of circus life—two rival aerialists who think they're in love, an elephant trainer who can't believe that his fair assistant prefers the circus boss to him, a clown on the lam from the law, a couple of menaces who want to wreck the show because they've been refused the pick-pocket concession on the midway. Dorothy Lamour, playing one of those iron-jawed janes who twirl by their teeth in mid-air, probably had a story too, but it disappears completely before the picture is half over. After all, Cecil B. is a director, not a juggler.

And as a director in this film he displays all of the qualities that have kept him at the top of the heap since movies wore knee-britches, qualities best summarized as "the popular touch." True, he is distressingly pompous in his narration of the documentary scenes of the circus on the move; but once the show is set up and the acts get under way, everything becomes just fine. John Murray Anderson actually did the staging for the three-ring show that fills the canvas, and Miles White designed its striking costumes, but it is De Mille



—From "The Greatest Show on Earth."

"... hokum from the hand of a master."

who picks out what the audience will like—decides when to look at the clowns, the trapeze artists, the pretty ladies on the floats. And when to add in the reactions of the spectators in the crowd. He has one grand shot (well, maybe he didn't have to repeat it *three* times) of a little boy watching everything with a solemn face while his old man goes wild with excitement.

Cecil B. himself is exactly like that father. He is obviously enraptured by all the tinsel glamour, awed by the feats of daring, impressed by the sense of danger that lurks everywhere in circus life. And all of this he has captured with his unrivaled sense of what will make good movie. Here he doesn't have to pretend an historical accuracy or assume a religious sententiousness. Here, against the background of a circus, all the faults that caused such critical mutterings about "Samson and Delilah" are converted into positive virtues. Here it's right for De Mille to be vulgar, obvious, gaudy. For what else is a circus? In this film any other approach would produce the same pretentiousness that vitiated his earlier epics.

But all the old virtues still remain, the visual excitements that always won him his crowds. "The Greatest Show" includes what is certainly the most monumental train wreck ever put on film, with lions prowling the wreckage and elephants to the rescue. The aerial episodes, in which Betty Hutton and Cornel Wilde (or reasonably exact facsimiles) challenge each other to increasingly hazardous feats of flying, build breath-taking moments. And there is a neat, typically De Mille bit when the jealous elephant trainer urges his beast to put its foot into Gloria Grahame's pretty face. It's hokum, sure—but it's hokum from the hands of a master.

In its more traditional, non-movie meaning, epic might also be applied to Dore Schary's new "Westward the Women" (M-G-M), a film that will inevitably remind the old-timers of "The Covered Wagon," a silent classic that captured much of the spirit and the struggle of America's pioneers on the trail of '49. Two years later, the land cleared, the men who had come on alone want women "to give roots to their valley," as the script puts it. "Westward the Women" details the difficulties attending the first shipment of roots, 200 women trekking from Kansas City to California on the promise of

husbands and homes. They encounter all the traditional catastrophes—rains, floods, childbirth in a wagon during a windstorm, the hair-raising business of moving cumbersome prairie schooners down a precipitous cliff, and of course, Indians. All of this is fine, authentic stuff, and just the sort of thing that Director William Wellman knows how to make capital of. But (just as in "The Covered Wagon," incidentally) they also encounter a traditional plot, and it keeps obtruding itself whenever nature's calamities have temporarily abated. The women are led by woman-hating Robert Taylor, "the only scout who knows the country well enough to get them through." He hates especially Denise Darcel, a lady of the evening back in Chicago who has signed on for this chance at a new life. Their part of the story is all too predictable. Predictable, too, is the character of most of the characters. But predictability never matters much when the cameras are sweeping over wide, rugged landscapes or casting us into the teeth of the raging elements. At such moments we find ourselves completely caught up in the spirit of the pioneers, that venturesome surge that carried our country westward, and epic truly describes its proportions.

"Distant Drums" (Warner Brothers) also turns back into history for its story, here to 1840 and the Seminole War. No pretty moral lessons about Indians being driven out of their lands in this one. America is expanding, and that is that. Heading the expansion in "Distant Drums" is Capt. Quincy Wyatt, who, as played by Gary Cooper, would love to sit quietly on his little island on the edge of the Everglades and let the rest of the world go by. Adventures such as he encounters in the course of this vigorous narrative are simply the means to that end. There are times, however, when it seems highly dubious that even Gary Cooper can survive the obstacles author Niven Busch has contrived for him and his doughty little band. Chased into the swamps by the Seminoles, they become fair game for snakes, alligators—and Seminoles. It's a savage game of hound and hares, climaxed with a rousing underwater knife fight between Cooper and the Indian chief. All in glorious Technicolor. Raoul Walsh, an old hand at this sort of thing, manages to keep everything taut and suspenseful—albeit a bit bloody. There is, almost of necessity, a romance that serves to introduce blonde Mari Aldon and a tightly-fitted dress, but the way Walsh maneuvers it, it's little more than a breather between adventures. The score—by Alex North, of all people—skillfully heightens the general tension.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

## TV and Radio

### SUNDAY COMES BUT ONCE A WEEK

**B**OTTLENECK is the word for broadcasting's Sabbath when the networks throw their Sunday punch. Weekdays, mother and the children are the radio-TV targets: weeknights, father has the right of way. But Sunday there's something for everyone—all day long, and discrimination should come into play.

Four fairly new Sabbath programs merit attention, two pro and two con. Around the noon hour, depending on your time zone, NBC-TV offers you "Frontiers of Faith," television's first regular religious hour, produced by the network in cooperation with the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths. These three major groups alternate in presenting cycles of several denominational services. Television services, they should be qualified; for a Jewish cycle observed was staged in the studio; and several Protestant and Catholic programs, while conducted in church or chapel and incorporating elements of the off-TV services, were obviously tailored to the demands of a half-hour video representation.

Morton Wishengrad, writing and narrating the Jewish Theological Seminary cycle, chose to communicate informally the mood and the symbols of the Jewish Sabbath. An authoritative observer noted that the studio service projected was a rather free mixture of orthodox, conservative, and reformed practices; but the programs had dignity, solemnity, and clarity. In fact, being actual documentaries, the programs might easily be the best documentaries yet produced on television.

The Protestant and Catholic services, formal in style and content, in-

cluded Scriptural and responsive readings, choir music, and sermons. While the camera work was generally in excellent taste, the TV director could not resist the temptation to spot a pretty chorister; and once, it seemed, a minister responded hurriedly to an off-screen speed-up cue. Most impressive were the sermons, revealing in interesting contrast the different value stresses of the two major Christian faiths. Here is television serving well by casting the camera's eye—Sunday—on Americans at worship.

And here is radio—CBS radio—serving the church poorly with "It's Always Sunday," a new situation comedy series about a minister's "everyday life." "Here are thirty minutes of proof," said the announcer not many Sundays ago, "that the good life is not a dull life." And then followed a pallid little romantic titillation deadly in its tired assumption that there's no life but in sin.

"It's Always Sunday" is written by Frank Fox and Jesse Goldstein, "who have provided laugh material for Alan Young, Joan Davis, Ed Wynn, and other top flight comedians." Accent on "have." What wonderful "material" there is in the lives of clergymen, who daily must face significant choices, sharp with the strains of our society! And CBS radio—for the only series about a man of the church on the air—gives us "It's Always Sunday." It's a sin.

TV-CBS balances this fall from grace, however, with a decided Sabbath virtue, "What in the World!"—a WCAU-TV Philadelphia origination, produced by the station with University Museum Director Froelich Rainey, of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr.

