

SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Another 'Scope

A FEW weeks ago two enterprising brothers, Joseph and Irving Tushinsky, offered a trade demonstration of a versatile wide-screen process which they have dubbed, with a modesty that seems customary these days, Superscope. CinemaScope, they argued, is fine for those houses with a tremendous proscenium that has to be filled with pictures. But what about the smaller theatres that are architecturally unsuited to CinemaScope's 2.55 to 1 screen ratio (or can crowd it in only by drastically reducing the height of their screen) or are economically unable to meet CinemaScope's high installation costs? Many of these, they pointed out, have already begun presenting their own version of the wide screen by simply blowing up ordinary pictures to extraordinary magnifications and then, quite arbitrarily, cropping the frame to emphasize width. At the same time, a number of studios, while hesitating to go along on CinemaScope's drastic new dimensions (and costly anamorphic lens), have already released pictures framed for wider screens. In this way the outrages perpetrated by theatres in the past on such films as "Shane" and "Conquest of Everest" can to some extent be obviated.

Superscope goes a step beyond any of these. Adapting the anamorphic principle of CinemaScope, which simply means squeezing an out-size image into an ordinary 35mm frame, the Tushinkys have invented a lens that by a twist of the wrist permits the projectionist to throw on the screen pictures of any aspect ratio up to 3 to 1 (greater than either CinemaScope or Cinerama). Of course, there is a preliminary step to be taken before that wrist can be twisted. The picture must first be printed with another anamorphic lens that squeezes the image to the desired proportions. And this can be done only by cropping, even though here the cropping is done in a laboratory under controlled conditions. A sequence out of the CinemaScoped "Knights of the Round Table" was run as an example, first at CinemaScope size, then at various stages down to the normal 1.5 to 1. The main action was held to screen center, but more and more of the side picture was eliminated. Reversing the process, the Tushinskys ran rushes from a forthcoming feature that had been shot in the normal aspect ratio, "Susan Slept Here." They were able

to spread it to almost CinemaScope proportions, but at the expense of height. Where a film cropped in the theatre suffers from extreme magnification and often drastically reduced illumination, Superscope seems able to produce a clear, clean picture in any dimension.

To introduce their process dramatically, the Tushinskys opened their program with an excerpt from Disney's old "Fantasia," beginning it at normal screen size, then suddenly expanding it to the width of CinemaScope. As the sequence ended, the screen slowly closed down to normal size once more. Convincing enough as a demonstration of the versatility of the Tushinsky lens, it also suggested a solution to a problem that seems to have been plaguing the producers of wide-screen epics since this battle of the aspect ratios began. Granted that spectacle gains by being spread over vast areas, what about those more intimate scenes that are today played in boudoirs the size of the waiting-room at Grand Central Station? Why not, with a twist of the Messrs. Tushinsky's little gadget, scale those sequences down to more manageable dimensions? Then, when the time comes for the great scenics or the stupendous spectaculars, the screen could open out to embrace them. Used to accent the dramatic values in a film, Superscope could become something more than a catch-penny contraption exploiting the current wide-screen craze.

PARAMOUNT seems to be exercising economy of a sort in two of its current releases, "Elephant Walk" and "The Naked Jungle." Not only do the main settings look suspiciously similar, but there are some astonishing parallels in the two story lines as well. In both of them a girl goes off to a remote land with a husband she doesn't know—to Ceylon in "Elephant Walk," up the Amazon in "Naked Jungle." In both the couples fail to get along very well until the wife proves her true worth by facing up to a spectacular disaster—an invasion of trumpeting elephants in "Elephant Walk," of billions of soldier ants in "Naked Jungle." There is one important difference, though. "Elephant Walk," which is based on the popular novel by Robert Standish (with further overtones from "Rebecca"), moves ponderously while Elizabeth Taylor

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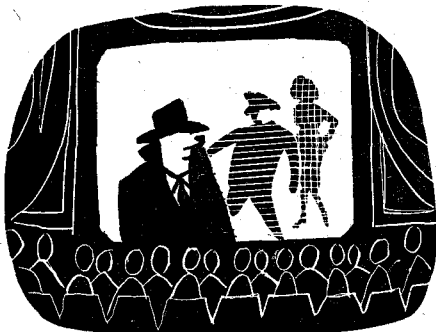
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broods over her husband's inexplicable preference for playing bicycle polo with his cronies in the parlor to paying attention to her in the bedroom. Dana Andrews is also about, moodily gulping tea and playing Chopin, and pressing Miss Taylor's hand at every opportunity. The elephants arrive far too late to save this picture.

"The Naked Jungle," on the other hand, derives from a science-fiction story; and once the amenities of boy meets girl have been attended to, the special effects men get to work to portray, with unnerving effectiveness, the total destruction of every living thing—animal, vegetable, or, with the greatest relish, human—by the mandibles of those tiny monsters. Charlton Heston does more prowling than acting as a proud empire-builder and Eleanor Parker, his bride-by-proxy, maintains her composure under the most astonishing circumstances. But the threat of the jungle hovers over every scene. Nothing like a couple billion ants or a couple hundred elephants to bring two people together.

There was a newspaper note recently that "Prisoner of War" (M-G-M) had incurred the wrath of our Department of Defense as a "distortion" of the atrocities committed in Communist POW camps during the Korean war. Distortion or not (the writer, Allen Rivkin, claims full documentation on the authenticity of the incidents shown), the picture is so loaded with tendentious dialogue, shock effects, and stock characterizations that it fails to convince even on its own terms. Ronald Reagan plays an Army officer dropped behind enemy lines to become a POW and investigate the Reds' camps. Just how he was expected to make his report is not made clear. What the film shockingly suggests, however, is that all the Americans who played along with the Communists in those camps were really secret agents in disguise. "Prisoner of War" is a brutal, sadistic, and thoroughly cheap attempt to exploit public interest in a tragic, highly sensitive situation. "Every man has his breaking point," Reagan keeps saying throughout the picture. Mine came early.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



TV AND RADIO

Russian Television

A SUNDAY night or two ago I decided to play Russian television. It's something like Russian roulette—where you place one bullet in the cartridge cylinder of a revolver, give the cylinder a twirl, point the revolver to your temple, and pull the trigger. You get ten points every time you draw a blank. If you draw the chamber with the bullet in it your opponent gets ten points and a new opponent.

In Russian television you give your dial a twirl and the channel at which it stops is the station you stay with all evening. There are seven channels in the New York area: 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13. The Sunday night I played the game I was fortunate enough to draw Channel 9, WOR. I am now the only living television viewer in metropolitan New York who can report what was on Channel 9 the night the Rodgers and Hammerstein extravaganza was being presented for an hour-and-a-half on channels 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, and 13.

During the next two or three days following the R and H telecast all luncheon and dinner dialogue was about the hour-and-a-half salute to our two greatest living poet and pleasant tunesmiths. I tried to wedge into the conversations with a detailed description of what went on on Channel 9 that night but there were few if any takers. Somehow I got the feeling of not belonging.

I am obliged therefore to come to the conclusion that these special productions are the answer to how to fill out the day-in, day-out difficult problems of scheduling television programs. The hour-and-a-half and the two-hour spectacle, starring the biggest marquee names in show business, and especially fashioned as a genuflectory tribute to a great talent or to a business organization which has in some part contributed to the American way of life (in this case it was General Foods), must ultimately become a more or less regular part of our national television entertainment.

The way things are going now, with viewers becoming satiated with the same stars, the same plays, the same jokes, the same formats, television must look for a new gimmick. It is elementary that an hour-and-a-half or two-hour show which has had a couple of months of special preparation stands a better chance of being good than the shows that grind out

weekly or even monthly entertainment with the same stars, no matter how ingratiating. I always come back to the same proposition, that if Clark Gable had started making a picture a week twenty years ago his box-office value would have reached the point of diminishing returns quite early in his career.

EVENTUALLY stars new to television appearing in special productions will be the highlights of television. The regularly scheduled programs will become the secondary pictures on a double-feature bill. Already plans are being drawn up for that eventuality. The imaginative Mr. Pat Weaver in charge of the NBC network has come up with the announcement that next season he will inaugurate a series to be known as "spectaculars." They will be hour or hour-and-a-half shows designed as something off the beaten path of television fare. Some of them, we are told, will be in color.

And just wait till color TV gets here! When manufacturers can turn out sets to receive color in a popular price range, then the whole problem of how to fill in the program schedule will be solved. Hour-and-a-half and two-hour shows can give way to shows that run a whole day. It's very simple. All they have to do is set aside a day or two a week for the telecasting of one painting.

For a whole day a viewer may have adorning a corner of his living room a Rembrandt or a Gainsborough. He may live with and get to know a landscape by Monet, a modern by Matisse. For a whole day a ballerina by Degas will provide welcome relief from June Taylor. An etching by Goya, a painting by Bruegel will be pleasant substitutes for the other peasants who make up the regular television schedule. Van Gogh, Picasso, Gauguin, Rivera, Rouault—all these are "spectaculars" to conjure with. And, sponsors, they are public domain. No high production cost here. Only please keep the commercials short and not more than one an hour:

"'Blue Boy' is being brought to you by the makers of Tepsic, the after-dinner motor oil."

But I digress. What I started to tell you is what I saw on Channel 9 that Sunday night. There were two old films. The first was one with Roland Young and—oh, you're not listening.

—GOODMAN ACE.