

way in the film. (It looks as if the producers had some trouble deciding just exactly where it *should* go.) Through song and dance, Judy narrates the troubled career of a born entertainer—born in a trunk backstage at the Princess Theatre in Pocatello, Idaho. For this number, complete in itself, Irene Sharaff designed a series of sprightly and witty costumes, as well as a shifting *décor* that is at once simple and striking, abounding in imagination. Again the temptation to create something big and brassy was overcome; the sequence, written by Leonard Gershe, emerges as a nugget of almost perfect picture making.

Unfortunately, despite all these virtues—in addition to which should be mentioned superb color photography supervised by that master of fashion photographers, George Hoyningen-Huene, and some of the most artful pictorial composition yet devised for the ungainly CinemaScope screen—"A Star Is Born" somehow fails to sustain its three-hour running time. The fault is not in Moss Hart's consistently literate and perceptive script, nor in the tuneful Ira Gershwin-Harold Arlen score, and certainly not in Cukor's sensitive and skilled direction. The fault would seem to rest rather in the attempt to adapt a serious, even tragic work into a vehicle for a musical star in the first place. For in it Miss Garland, skilled actress though she be, remains always a *performer*. The essential element that might have held the film together, the tragic, all-consuming love of Vicki Lester for her has-been husband, is repeatedly dissolved in the necessity for a song or a dance. Even

in their scenes together, whether casual, intimate, or dramatic, Judy must always be the great entertainer, putting on a show. Her showmanship is superb, but the warmth and heart that made Janet Gaynor's Vicki Lester come alive are inevitably submerged by the musical numbers. And without that human core this "Star Is Born" lacks the power of conviction, the power to hold an audience in rapt absorption for a full three hours. It is a bountiful, beautiful film, but ultimately it becomes just too much for too little.

* * *

Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" (Paramount), despite the nostalgic overtones of the title, is not a re-make of his earlier success, "Holiday Inn." Even so, the "original story" that Irving Berlin prepared for this one seems repeatedly like a re-make of virtually every backstage musical produced during the Thirties. It's one of those tedious affairs in which a group of golden-hearted show-people get together, despite misunderstandings and logic, to stage a benefit for good old failing George. The frequent musical interruptions are always more than welcome, but the sad fact is that Berlin has failed to produce anything particularly noteworthy in this department either. As a result, such good people as Crosby, Danny Kaye, Vera Ellen, and sunny Rosemary Clooney are frequently left stranded up on the stage with material infinitely inferior to their talents. And Mr. Berlin's monster entertainment proves a colossal bore.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

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7. The Moon Is Blue
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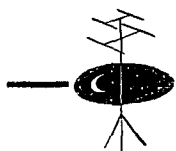
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A Break for Papa Ibsen

A FEW years ago it was Henry James's turn to be discovered as an author. You could hardly go to a theatre, a movie, without seeing a James story, and at a flick of your dial there the old master was in television. This year it's Ibsen's chance.

In the theatre he is represented by one of the best monologues or comic recitations since "Cohen on the Telephone"—the long denunciation of "A Doll's House" in "Oh Men! Oh Women!" which is shrewd and genuinely funny and germane to my present report because it makes huge sense. The irritated husband advises the analyst to take down the picture of Sigmund Freud and put up old man Ibsen who, through the character of Nora, dissatisfied with home, love, babies, beauty, wealth, and a few other common desirables, wants to find out what there is outside the door. And does so. It was Bernard Shaw, I think, who said that the echo of the door slammed at the curtain of "A Doll's House" reverberated round the world. Our American businessman denounces this and makes a valid point in his own favor and against all Noras. That point doesn't concern us; the fact that in the modern comedy the theme of

the Ibsen play is reasonably stated is important.

Because we run into the theme again, this time on a half-hour program called "Nora" (derived from "A Doll's House," or something like it), one of a new series which, with proper respect for the originals, changes the titles as it changes everything else. (The title of "A Handful of Dust" was changed to "The Green Curtain," as I recall it, although the production, based on Waugh's earlier and shorter version of the story, was faithful and tremendously well done.) We used to ask why the movies bought a play or a novel when they intended to gut it first and change the title afterward, and never found out. What TV producers have in mind, except to build up a successful series, will also remain forever secret.

What we have in "A Doll's House" is one of Ibsen's simpler themes and one of his little masterpieces of construction. The plot and the theme work together. *Because a young woman has no inkling of the realities of life*, she commits a small crime when faced with a crisis. She signs her father's name to a document in order to raise money to save the life of her husband. When she is blackmailed she is certain her husband will defend her; but defending her means losing his job at the bank, losing with it (his) standing in the community, and he cries out, "You should have let me die rather than commit a crime." She then understands that she hasn't understood anything; she sees that she has been nothing but a doll in her husband's life, and, so to speak, in her own life. She wants to become a human being, she wants to live contemporaneously, in the present harsh, living world. And *she* is willing to sacrifice her standing in the community to do so.

What we got in the TV version was the story of the blackmailer, the disillusion of the woman over her husband's action—but not one scintilla of the meaning the event had for her. And to prove that this was intentional: at the end, after saying the words that carry the theme, unheard and unsuspected until the last moment, Nora leaves the room and—goes upstairs! To sulk? To pack? To wait in bed for her husband? You'll never know.

Comes then the Ray Milland Show

(which ought to be called something else in spite of his charms). In this (as I follow it after missing about two minutes) somebody is involved in an amateur production of "A Doll's House"—in any case, the text is in evidence. There is a woman who does and a woman who doesn't know how to make a husband come across with mink coats. (Billie Dawn, in "Born Yesterday," had the infallible method.) These women exchange ideas, some of them out of Ibsen. There occurs one of the few truly revolting scenes in television: the wife who doesn't know makes herself up as a real doll, with long eyelashes and round apple-red marks on her cheeks, and talks like a mechanical doll, because (you gather) she is showing her husband that he has treated her like a doll. Yet when she says something about the bank statement he replies, "That's your department." Then you get the plot, which isn't a plot but only a TV-mixup—a pretended forgery to which the husband, finding out, responds with a pretended sell-out of all the furniture. He gives her a mink coat in the emptied room. She cries out she doesn't want a mink coat, she wants her home, and he shows her all the furniture stacked in the adjoining room. Then she is told she can keep the mink coat, too.

THE reduction of a play to a skeleton is often necessary if you are to do the business up in twenty-two and a half minutes flat (the series had to be introduced the night "Nora" arrived, so there was less time for poor old Ibsen). The reduction of an 1860 idea to something important or relevant to us is also possible. "Nora" wasn't as good as any contemporary half-hour on the subject would have been because a new play would have the blackmailer killed, the husband thinking the wife did it, and *vice versa* (but he was really killed by heat lightning). On the other hand, Ibsen wrote thrillers (even "Ghosts" has been so described) and we had some excitement. The Milland piece was vulgar by its own standards and hugely, monstrously funny. That it *seemed* to be saying something about American life—about marriage, about human beings—and actually said nothing valid or true, but spun dull words and uninteresting actions around the stalest of comic-strip ideas is a kind of degradation.

The program was not seriously offered, I am well aware. It was meant to be funny and wasn't. And it was typical of a mentality, operating out of Hollywood, which television ought firmly to oppose if it wishes to survive.

—GILBERT SELDES.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 593

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 593 will be found in the next issue.

PANIC IROLB FGLLXC

DSRL, QALB IGXLG

FGLLXC ANFSO.

—ALBGM NXNKC.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 592

Perhaps no man ever thought a line superfluous when he wrote it. We are seldom tiresome to ourselves.—Johnson.