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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Fantasy and Fun

IN *The Troublemaker*, produced by the satirical group of fun-makers responsible for off-Broadway's *The Premise*, an ingenuous young man arrives in New York with the intention of opening a coffeehouse. In *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*, produced for M-G-M by George Pal, whose specialty is special effects, an ancient Chinaman arrives in a nondescript Western town with the intention of putting on a circus. The similarity between the two pictures ends there, for, although both are offered as comedies, they go about the business of producing laughter in diametrically opposite ways.

Dr. Lao, which is based on Charles G. Finney's beloved novel, is a calculated affair, with everything carefully measured and weighed—so many drops of fantasy, so many ounces of philosophy, so many pounds of action, romance, and plot. Both the fantasy and the philosophy stem from the book, and screenwriter Charles Beaumont is to be credited for transcribing felicitously the chimerical essence that made the original so endearing. For *Dr. Lao*, in his wonderful circus, entertains his audiences by providing a projection of themselves. The local harriidan, with curls in her hair, becomes a Medusa. The town's librarian—sexually repressed as, by convention, all town librarians must be—visits the circus and dances there with Pan. The richest citizen, who plots to buy up all the land cheap in order to sell it at a handsome profit to the railroads, sees himself as a highly vocal snake.

What stops the fantasy dead in its tracks, however, and makes the film often as conventional and trite as *The Music Man* without music, is a subplot involving the librarian (Barbara Eden) and a young, upright newspaper publisher (John Ericson). The circus, imaginatively designed and lit, is constantly being forced off the screen by the exigencies of story development—and the story, in which the land grabber (Arthur O'Connell) attempts to silence the newspaperman, would be considered primitive even by Saturday-afternoon serial standards. All too obviously, producer Pal felt that stock villainies and standardized heroics would mitigate the daring of his fantasy. Actually, the plethora of plot not only mitigates the fantasy; it submerges it.

Also submerged, but under layers of plastic makeup, is Tony Randall, who supplies all seven faces of *Dr. Lao*—

and an assortment of voices to match—but oddly little by way of characterization. Perhaps the makeup is the reason. Randall, ordinarily an intelligent and attractive performer, was so hidden away from the camera that he seemed to feel the disguises did everything. He was constantly being concealed behind masks, robes, and pelts; he became the armature of the statue, not the finished work. And George Pal, who doubled as director, was as insecure with his actors as he was uncertain about his material. How else could Arthur O'Connell be induced to give a bad performance? But Pal does know special effects; and whenever *Dr. Lao* is showing off his magic circus, Pal demonstrates his own wizardry with charm and a quiet humor. These parts of the film, for which everything else was merely an excuse, almost excuse the rest of the film.

IN *The Troublemaker*, on the other hand, nothing was calculated—except, perhaps, how to make every penny of a limited budget stretch to the utmost. Although Jack Henry and Theodore J. Flicker are credited with writing the film, and Flicker with the direction as well, it all bubbles along with a disarming air of off-the-cuff improvisation, post-midnight inspiration, and occasionally on-the-set desperation. Apparently in setting up his original *Premise*, Flicker encountered more than his share of outstretched palms, both official and unofficial, that had to be greased before he could open his entertainment (and, if memory serves, probably needed constant regreasing, for his show was always being threatened by one agency or another).

But Flicker does not look back in anger. His attitude is rather one of dismay at his own naïveté in even imagining that in New York one could go into a legitimate business legitimately. Tom Aldredge plays this innocent with a winning verve, Buck Henry is delightfully owlish as his lawyer friend who knows all the ropes and makes all the connections, and a sinister comic named James Frawley, in the manner of the day, plays three of the grafters who stand between Aldredge and his coffeehouse. Best of all, *The Troublemaker* is a healthy, and often successful, attempt to get back to the free-wheeling wildness of the old silent film comedies, particularly those of Harold Lloyd.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



The Urbane League

THE third and final offering by the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center is S. N. Behrman's *But for Whom Charlie*. The Charlie in question—a man “but for whom” a number of authors say they wouldn't have written works they inscribe to him—is an opportunist created by Mr. Behrman to epitomize the sort of middleman today's writer must too often come to terms with. In the play he administers a foundation for needy writers with ruthless self-interest. With him frankness is a pose and an assignation the first but not necessarily clinching step to a grant. Most insidious of all is his evaluation of applications not on their merits but on the basis of personality.

We see Charlie turn down a very worthwhile work because its genius author is a psychotic drunk who goes around panning Charlie's administration of the foundation. This young writer is Willard Prosper, the beatnik son of a deceased Nobel Prize playwright. One cannot help remembering that Eugene O'Neill was the only American playwright ever to win the Nobel Prize and that a great many other details match some of the things we know about O'Neill's children and his last wife.

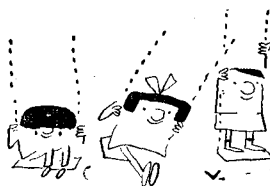
However, as in *After the Fall*, the theatergoer should be cautioned against assuming that because some of the details seem to match, all of them are true. In the play, for instance, the children complain that all the money has been left to their stepmother, whereas in fact the children received two-thirds of O'Neill's only wealth, his posthumous play royalties.

Since all these pseudo-biographical fillips are only tangential to Mr. Behrman's play, they serve to distract our focus from the social comedy he has only partly written. That comedy contains frequent flashes of wit and insight into this society's “morass of evil,” whose sole virtue is that it “provides a wide margin for adventure.” In its plays all heroes are impotent, while in its life there is a population explosion. While Mr. Behrman is ultimately obliged to take a moral position—which is that terrible times like these call for more rather than less scrupulous behavior from institutions—the play's most telling lines are cynical. For example, someone asks, “If every girl behaved like that, what would become of the family?” And the belligerent answer, “It will march on, I promise you,” scores a bullseye that will outlive the play's unconvincing moral resolution in which the evil ones end up

with the evil ones, the deserving ones get their grants, and the well-intentioned featherbedding bassoonist joins forces with the well-intentioned young girl. Only two characters in the play know themselves. One is a passé novelist, the author of one good book about World War I, who seems to speak for Mr. Behrman. He is played colorfully but with discipline by David Wayne, who moves and walks like one of Walter Kerr's most painstakingly accurate descriptions. The other is the meek little square whose inherited money supports the foundation and who surprises us all by his simple strength of character. Jason Robards, Jr., fights down his naturally hip responses to catch the essence of the character, and also manages to seem forlorn when his virtue is not romantically rewarded at the end.

By using bright yellow mats, Jo Mielziner has created pools of focus on his open stage and, by almost totally avoiding the front twelve feet of acting space, Elia Kazan has been able to direct the play as if it were on a picture-frame stage. One keeps wishing that *But for Whom Charlie* were either more profound or more entertaining. Nonetheless, Mr. Behrman's wit and tough-mindedness and Mr. Wayne's performance do make a contribution to the season.

—HENRY HEWES.



IN THE SURVEY of musical comedies published February 22, the reply of the prominent writer Meredith Willson was inadvertently omitted. It is as follows:

Favorite Own Lyric or Music: (L) “Trouble” (*The Music Man*), (M) “Chick-A-Pen” (*The Unsinkable Molly Brown*)

Favorite Lyrics and Music by Other Writers: (L) “Beside a Babbling Brook” (Gus Kahn), “Adelaide's Lament” (Frank Loesser), “Dames” (Oscar Hammerstein); (M) (L) “Washboard Blues” (Hoagy Carmichael); (M) “You Go to My Head” (J. Fred Coots).

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