

The Movie and the Legitimate Theatre

By W. R. Dunlop.

The Motion Picture is rapidly overspreading the world. Even now, almost every village with any claim to civilisation has its "Movie" with the usual accompanying loud placards of melodrama or farce; and still the tide keeps rolling in with something of the volume and speed of the Solway. It is questionable if the world is fully awake to the giant strides of this development in modern life—just as with the entry of the auto we hardly notice the exit of the horse. Perhaps a reason lies in the easy association of the Studio with the narrowed sense of the word as applied to the Fine Arts. Until the last few years the painter, musician and photographer have monopolised the term which has now been appropriated by the Film Industry; and when it is realised that one of these "Studios" in the suburbs of Los Angeles covers 1,500 acres, that at times it alone employs thousands of actors and is only one of many of varying size around the Southern city—chosen as a root centre for topographical and atmospheric reasons—one begins to grasp the idea of mighty Film corporations, of "million dollar pictures" and a potent influence which cannot be measured.

It is too obvious to need proof that the Screen has vast educational power and possibilities, not only of instruction but of dramatic interest and innocent amusement; the more cause, therefore to cherish the hope that the communal loyalty of producers and the perception and impartiality of censors will in time taboo all pictures of dubious appeal and shoddy scenario, which are still common enough. The danger is that, so long as they keep within the censor's veto, ill-finished scenarios of doubtful influence are the more likely to bring large profits, because of cheapness of production combined with appeal to the love of suggestive forms. For, while it is a sign of the essential soundness of human nature that, at any play, the greatest applause greets the approaching defeat of vice and the triumph of virtue—as for instance in the imminent capture of the villain by the pursuing hero who emerges galloping from out the dark wood—yet it must be admitted that the double entendre and the ambiguous or risque situation find ready lodgment in the minds of thousands of young patrons who not only enjoy it but look for it. For this, thanks in great part to a laxity in home discipline, sometimes through temperamental lack of control and as often through a shirking of responsibility. The average good citizen in a community is neither licentious on the one hand nor over-prudish on the other; and it should be possible for any man to take wife, sister or sweetheart to any picture house—"West End or Water-front"—with every confidence, and without the lurking need of previous enquiry. That should be the censor's care. Though the prevailing tone is good it will not be pretended that the fear of offending a sensitive nature is absolutely groundless; and it is a pity that the occasional fly in the good ointment should oblige even a few to look askance at the pot. Apart, however, from a rigid control of motif one could wish that the censor's power extended to the artistic side of plays, so that—assuming him to have dramatic gifts and high standards—many an offering of poor construction and weak finish would be improved off the face of the screen altogether.

From an educative point of view—in the accepted use of the word—the motion picture is a vehicle which public agencies are only beginning to realise. Its power is untold because of the extent of its audience. As an incentive to the tourist trade in a Province like this and as a means of focusing attention on industrial progress and possibilities it should be invaluable if the films are judiciously spread; while, as in a recent movement in New York, it may exercise a benevolent influence on unrest by showing the salient features of inter-related problems which the two classes of Capital and Labour

have to face. It is too much, however, to expect that the ordinary play producer is an altruist or to overlook the fact that, in catering to heart interest, his main thought is of commercial gain, with a varying love of edification thrown in; and if the educative films referred to are to have anything like the requisite showing it may be necessary that the governments or public bodies who wish to further them should be prepared to pay subsidies.

A word on the nature of the play-houses themselves. In the finer ones—and the growing tendency in great centres is to outvie in sumptuous elegance—ventilation and physical comfort may have a relative first place; but in some of the poorer districts of cities, and often in country villages, the pressure of patronage seems sufficient to warrant "show" buildings little better than barns in which, as in a cul de sac, fetid air invites disease, while many in the crowded audiences will remain to a second performance, unconscious of anything but absorbing interest. Surely stricter byelaws should provide and enforce a remedy and incidentally a better protection against a pulmonary menace to the growing youth who form a national asset.

Through the comparative cheapness of prices and the spacious settings and sensational features of many of the plays, the motion picture makes an increasing challenge to the future of the Legitimate theatre, by reason of deep inroads into the spending power of the community. This, I think, is matter for more than professional alarm. In ethics the Theatre has been the subject of time-worn controversy. Both in association and work it has doubtless many blemishes, even without the aid of the spotlight; and it lies much in the power of dramatic critics to purge it of impurities, at least of plot and performance—for a fearless Press has the effective qual-

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