

THIS MODERN HORROR

LAST week, by way of experiment, and because nothing more attractive was offering, I decided to see three examples of the modern "horror" film which is so much in vogue. My conclusion is that horror on the screen is not what it was; or perhaps I myself am not what I was when I rejoiced over *Night Must Fall*, *Love from a Stranger*, and *Ladies in Retirement*, or even over the original *Dracula* and the original *Frankenstein*. Those films had something, but these days our Draculas, Frankensteins and pathological murderers have, almost without exception, degenerated into Ape-men, Wolf-men, Living-Dead-men, and other monstrosities more calculated to make a normal person laugh than shiver. Yet judging by the frequent celebration of Special Horror Weeks by enterprising theatre-managers, such films do not lack appreciative audiences, particularly among children and adolescents. This was certainly the case when, the other evening, I subjected myself to the baleful influence of *The Mummy's Ghost* and *The Spider Woman*, on a Universal double-feature programme. It was a salutary experience. A critic who is too selective in the pictures he sees is in danger of walking with his head in the clouds: it does him good to be reminded occasionally that there are still plenty of pictures capable of causing whistles, catcalls, and floor-thumpings, and still plenty of picture-goers to react that way. It may also give him a rather higher opinion of some of the other films he sees at theatres where the audiences are less demonstrative.

FIRST, however, I went to see *Behind the Rising Sun* (R.K.O. Radio). This would probably not be classified as a "horror" film by its producers, but since it deals almost exclusively in atrocities, it seems to deserve that description. Allegedly based on facts contained in the book of the same name by the U.S. correspondent James R. Young, *Behind the Rising Sun* is a piece of rabid propaganda dressed as fiction. It shows what happens when the son of a ruling Japanese family returns after being educated in America: sent to serve with the army in China, he rapidly drops his Western ways and acquires a taste for torture. Simultaneously, however, his father, who, up till then, has been all for Japanese world-domination, sees the errors of his country's ways. Convinced that Japan is headed for ruin through having attacked America, he engineers the escape of two imprisoned and tortured Americans in Tokio during Doolittle's bombing raid and then, his son having been shot down in flames, commits harakiri, leaving a suicide note in which he expresses the hope that Japan will be purged by fire and sword of its evil influences. This change of heart is even less convincing than a good many other things in the picture, including the slit-eye make-up of the Hollywood actors (there would, admittedly, be difficulty

in securing a genuine cast!) and their pseudo-Japanese accents. But realistic enough, and highly exciting, too, is the "duel of honour" between an American boxer and a gorilla-like Japanese jujitsu expert.

It is difficult to see what good purpose a film like this is serving even as propaganda. Claiming to "lay bare the true nature of the Japanese" it does, in fact, not do much more than suggest that the Japanese, being Orientals, neither live nor think like Occidentals. But by piling on the agony and the atrocity, it panders to the worst sort of emotionalism. While the film's sadistic excesses may delight some people, it will scarcely persuade those who matter to have a much different idea of the Japs from what they have already, nor make them any more determined to beat them. Worst of all must be its effect on children.

Still, I can imagine that in cases like this any censor might be in rather a dilemma. There are now practically no limits of sadism and sensationalism to which a movie producer may not go in the name of propaganda when exploiting the nastiness of our enemies; yet although the censor's inclination might be to call a halt, the film company can always use the argument that its atrocity-mongering is being done "to help the war effort." And that is a difficult argument for a Government official to answer.

AT least there is no such problem as this (though there may be others) in *The Mummy's Ghost* and *The Spider Woman*. The former presumably is a sequel, since it shows a mummy—or what is left of it—returning from the grave at the behest of the "Almighty Gods of Egypt" in order to continue the working out of a very violent curse on the inhabitants of an American town. To keep himself going, the mummy drinks tea brewed from nine tanna leaves, and after that the mortality rate is invariably higher. The chief virtue in this nonsense is that having started by being supernatural, it does not end by being scientific. I always dislike a spook story which gives up its ghost in the last scene, revealing that it was only wind in the chimney that caused the hauntings, or that the vampire murders were nothing more than the work of a doctor with rather unorthodox theories about blood-transfusion. *The Mummy's Ghost* is guilty of no such anti-climax: it goes down to a watery grave still flying the colours of Ancient Egypt.

By comparison, *The Spider Woman* is almost rational, being the further adventures of Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes, and of Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson in opposition to various choice specimens from the criminal and insect worlds. Well, never rational perhaps, but sometimes amusing.

One study of our little man, portraying a rather detached interest, will do for all three films.



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- (2) Don't read facing or backing the window. Arrange if possible, for the light to come over your left shoulder.
- (3) Never rub the eye if you have a piece of dirt in it, or if you have a sty or boil. Always bathe the eye and if the trouble persists, consult a doctor.
- (4) Don't read in bright sunlight or twilight.
- (5) If you have the slightest doubt as to the efficiency of your sight, consult a Qualified Practitioner at once.

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