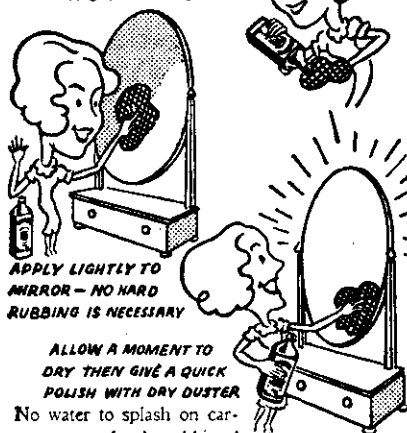


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WINDOLINE ONTO
A SOFT CLOTH



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MIRROR—NO HARD
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OF the 654,000 New Zealanders who go to the pictures each week, only a tiny handful will have seen the film reviewed here. That is not altogether their fault. When they bother to screen this film at all, exhibitors are showing it as the first half of a double-feature programme at B-grade theatres (in Wellington as curtain-raiser to a return season of a Betty Grable leg-show!), and are dismissing it in two or three lines of advertising. And yet "The Ox-Bow Incident" is one of the milestones of the cinema in its slow progress towards maturity; a film which people in a few years from now will be mentioning in the same breath with "The Informer," "Winterset," "Citizen Kane" and "They Won't Forget."

The space which we here devote to "The Ox-Bow Incident" in comment and illustration—a greater space than that which we have devoted to almost any other production—is given to it on its own merits. But it is also given partly as a tribute to those other "unknown little pictures" which are missed by all except the few who have keen eyesight as well as advance information, and partly as a protest against the system of film distribution and exhibition which makes this happen.

* * *

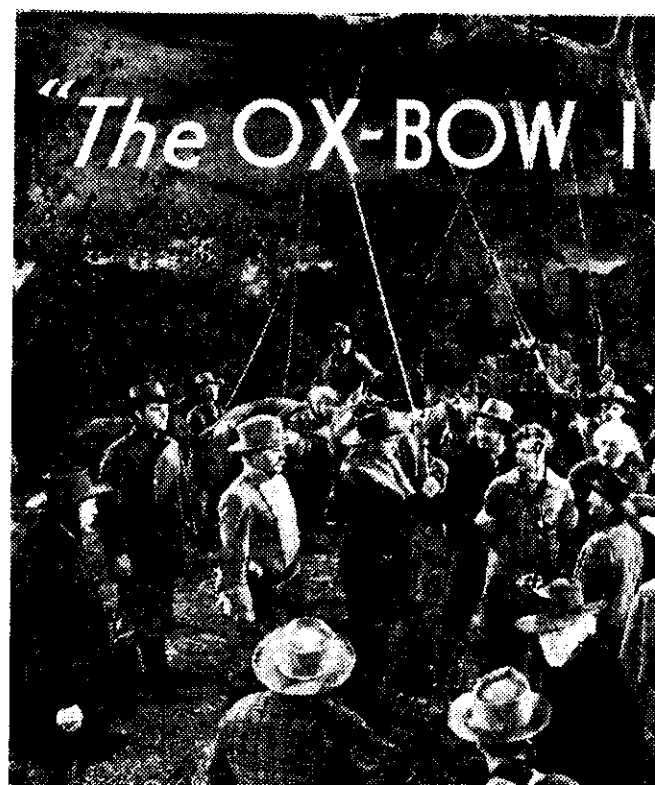
(20th Century-Fox)



SOME of the people in the theatre had probably gone, like me, for the express purpose of seeing *The Ox-Bow Incident*, but most of them were obviously there to enjoy Betty Grable—and an audience which wants Betty Grable is scarcely the ideal type of audience to appreciate a deadly serious adult drama about lynching. From the posters outside they probably expected that *The Ox-Bow Incident* would be nothing more than just another cowboy picture which would fill in time till Betty Grable was due. And yet they "took it," and gave it all their attention. What some of them thought about it when it was all over, I don't know, but during the screening there was a feeling of tension in the theatre more pronounced than almost anything of the kind I have ever noticed. For the first few minutes they clearly didn't know quite what to make of it; and then, almost between one scene and the next, they seemed to grow up. After this experience I am more than ever convinced that the film industry generally underestimates the intelligence of its audiences.

The Ox-Bow Incident is the screen version of a novel of that name by Walter Van Tilburg Clark. I had read the novel a year or so before, and wondered how on earth Hollywood would handle it. For once, however, Hollywood has treated an outstanding story as all such stories should be treated: with deep respect. There have been some omissions, some telescoping, some slight changes. Yet on the whole the film is not merely faithful to the form of the book: it also catches its spirit and its philosophy, while even its omissions provide evidence of the director's determination to treat his audience, on this occasion anyway, as intelligent adults.

The story is simple, and is adequately enough told by the pictures on this page. What those illustrations do not show, however, are the details of acting and direction which make *The Ox-Bow Incident* a social document of some importance as well as a masterpiece of the cinema; which make the onlooker share in the bewilderment and stark terror of the three men who are condemned to death by the mob; which make him feel something of the pity and cold fury and frustration of those few members of the posse who plead vainly for sanity and the processes of justice; and which cast over the whole picture an almost unbearable atmosphere of mounting suspense and inescapable tragedy. This



time, you feel, there can be no last-minute rescue, no Hollywood happy ending. And there isn't.

In a film so nearly perfect it is hard to know what aspects to choose for special comment. The skilful use of music, perhaps? Or the direction, which in some sequences reduces dialogue to a minimum and in others dispenses with it altogether and relies entirely on natural sound, such as the clomp-clomp of the horses' hooves as the posse winds into the valley. Or the way in which the director (William Weiland) opens his story with the shot of the two friends riding into the sleepy Nevada town and then, having built up the feeling of boredom crying for release in violent action, precipitates us into the hysteria of the mob, and finally closes the "incident" with the opening scene in reverse. Or imaginative technical details such as the composition of that scene where Henry Fonda reads the dead man's letter to the shamed audience in the bar, and the brim of his friend's hat obscures Fonda's eyes, so that all attention is focused on the reader's lips.

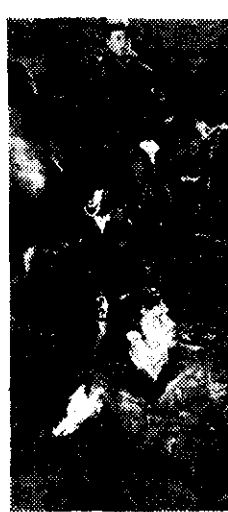
But possibly the most notable single feature of the film is the care shown in casting even for the smallest parts, and the skilful interpretation of the motives and reactions of the various characters when mob hysteria takes control. There is the self-appointed leader of the posse, a sadistic, disciplinarian Confederate major (Frank Conroy) who finds in the incident the little brief authority which his nature craves; there is the man who is obsessed by the desire for vengeance (Marc Lawrence); the blood-lusting harridan (Jane Darwell); and all the others—stupid, unimaginative, hesitant, loutish, beastly, cruel—each representative of a type, each drawn with uncommon realism and insight into human nature. And the few who try to reason with them—the idealistic, gentle storekeeper (Harry Davenport); the negro preacher (Leigh Whipper); the cowpuncher who realises the ghastly mistake

(continued on next page)

1. Three innocent men murder. They are a weak-minded old man (Quinn). This is t



2. Gil Carter (Henry Fonda) watches the posse gather.



3. Carter wakes up M... asleep in Ox-Bow