

(continued from previous page)

Elissa Landi never was a good actress at all, however good we may once have thought her. While in the others there is the clear suggestion of latent possibilities, in her case there is nothing except pose, posture, and affectation. So it is not surprising that, while the others have gone on to greater successes, she dropped out of sight fairly soon after this film was made. I don't think this is simply a case of being wise after the event: the evidence is there if you like to look for it.

HOWEVER, it seems to me that *The Sign of the Cross* emphasises something which genuine admirers of the cinema should face up to: that the medium is a transient one, unfitted by its very nature to creating work able to withstand the test of time, in the way that literature can in the novel. This is largely because of the film's attention to details: it is too much interested in the immediate effect. The cinema will probably always belong to the day rather than to the decade or the century. But I don't find this fact upsetting. There has been no stabilisation yet of screen technique and there may never be; but this fault of the cinema in relation to other media of expression is its own peculiar virtue, giving it an immediacy which no other art-form possesses.

THERE remains the religious "angle" of *The Sign of the Cross*. De Mille was presumably sincere about this and must, I suppose, be given the benefit of any doubt—but I think it rather hard to do so because of the relish with which he exploits sex and sadism (witness respectively the famous bath-of-asses-milk sequence, and the torture scenes and the Games in the arena). I am not forgetting that this was a licentious and cruel age—crueller probably in degree if not in extent than anything for which the Nazis were responsible—but "relish" is the key-word in what I have just written. Notice, for example, how De Mille lingers lovingly over Poppaea's bath, the precision with which he adjusts the level of the asses' milk. Incidentally, I think the censor now allows

us to see rather more of Poppaea in her bath than he did on the previous occasion (not that it matters). But it is worth remembering, if only perhaps in justice to the film, that *The Sign of the Cross* was made in the pre-Hays Office era, before Hollywood morals came under close supervision; and this accounts for our being treated to a rather more generous display of epidermis than would now be permitted.

At any rate, whether De Mille was, or was not, filled with religious zeal when he made it, the film can scarcely have much evangelical value, since it unfortunately tends to give the impression that vice—as represented by Nero, Poppaea and Marcus—is rather good fun, whereas virtue (personified by Mercia) is merely dull.

NATIONAL FILM UNIT

The sailing of the barque *Pamir* from Wellington is a picturesque and interesting item in the National Film Unit's Weekly Review No. 248, released on May 31. Other items in the reel include "Sheep Week at Waikato Farm School," featuring young farmers at Claudelands; "Learning Mothercraft," showing how girls are taught to become good mothers; and a sequence dealing with the departure from England of Sir Bernard and Lady Freyberg.

Half-hour with Robin Hood

WE must go back 569 years to find the oldest datable mention of Robin Hood, in the second edition of *Piers Plowman*. He is next mentioned by Andrew of Wyntoun in his *Original Chronicle of Scotland*, written about 1420. Of his popularity in the latter half of the 15th and 16th centuries there are many signs, but of conjectures about him there is no end. Children, at any rate, are content to accept him as a fine fellow who dashed about in all directions, performing feats of philanthropic banditry. But none of this need worry listeners who tune in to Station 2ZB at 6.15 p.m. this Sunday, June 2, to hear a half-hour recording of Hood's adventures, by Basil Rathbone, with a chorus and brass choir accompanying the narrative. Listeners to 1ZB will hear the feature on Sunday, June 9, at 7.0 p.m.

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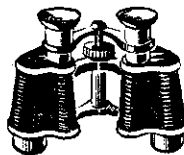
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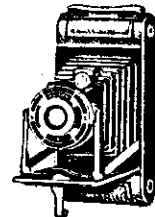
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