

France Invades The Cinema

Directors Are The Men Behind The Guns

IN recent years, the French have established the reputation of making the best motion pictures in the world. Here in New Zealand we haven't been lucky enough as yet to see more than a handful of French talkies; but what we have seen have been good enough to make many of us realise what we have been missing all these years. And now there is a chance that, more or less, as a result of the war, an increased number of French productions will be coming into this country; though how long, with all her energies now devoted to fighting Hitler, France will be able to retain her reputation for making the world's best films, is another matter.

At the moment, however, that reputation is a very real thing. It would be quite wrong to imagine that it depends solely on the praises of intellectuals who, professing to despise Hollywood and all its works, are ready to bow down and worship anything which happens to be "foreign." Long before the war, French films were becoming popular in England. In London there are several "special" theatres that screen nothing but foreign films, most of them French, but in addition, more and more French productions have been finding their way on to the screens of "ordinary" theatres which were previously sacred to Hollywood and Elstree.

Quietly, steadily, the French have been invading England. Where Napoleon failed, French film producers have succeeded. Two years ago I heard a speaker from Daventry draw attention to the

fact that there was then hardly a town of any size in England where one didn't come across a theatre showing a French film. And they were doing good business. The language difficulty has been largely overcome by sub-titles in English or by improved "dubbing" of dialogue (as in Sacha Guitry's "The Cheat").

Succeeding on Merit

All this is a very welcome sign of the friendship between Great Britain and France, which the war has cemented even more firmly. But it goes even deeper than that. The French invasion of the cinema has succeeded not on sentiment but on merit.

Nor are French films proving popular outside of France because of the old idea that anything French is necessarily "spicy." They are popular because they are good entertainment.

While Hollywood has been frantically searching for ways to make its pictures pay; while the British industry has been suffering serious internal disorganisation; and while the German and Russian industries have become more and more submerged in propaganda, the French industry has been striding vigorously forward, winning prizes at international exhibitions, securing the praise of critics throughout the world and—most important—it has been making money! Without that last achievement, the others would hardly count. Because French pictures pay capital for expansion has flowed in a steadily increasing stream into the industry.

The Secret of Success

The French themselves are very proud of the reputation which their films have gained. Just about every novelist, playwright and journalist of note in France has tried to cash in on the vogue for French movies.

Wherein lies the secret of the French success? Chiefly in the fact that the French are a logical and businesslike nation. They are shrewd enough to realise that in its own line Hollywood is, and must remain, supreme. They see the futility of trying to build up a rival star system and compete with the American million-dollar spectacles. Instead they have concentrated on the home market and on originality. And just because French films are original and distinctive, they have succeeded in capturing outside markets as well.

The most they spend on making a movie in France is round about £30,000, and sometimes the figure goes as low as £5,000.

With figures like that there isn't much room for any serious loss. On the other hand, there is room for quite a handsome profit—sometimes as much as £100,000.

Directors Before Stars

In fact, the French seem to have learnt something that Hollywood apparently will not learn—that spending a lot of money cannot, in itself, make a good picture. With a clarity of thought that is truly Gallic, they have gone straight to the heart of successful movie-making. Realising the impossibility of building up stars to compete with Gable, Taylor or Jeannette McDonald, the French have consistently "starred" their directors instead. As a result the whole outside cinema world knows the names of directors like Rene Clair, Julien Duvivier, and Sacha Guitry. The French do have starring players, of course, like Jean Gabin, Raimu, Harry Baur, Danielle Darrieux, and Charles Boyer—but the directors, the men behind the guns, are the men who count most in the new French invasion—perhaps the most successful since the days of William the Conqueror.

Under this system, a director who has any imagination gets a completely free hand. He isn't worried by enormous overhead costs in the studio, and he can pick the players he wants. He isn't restricted, as the average Hollywood director is, to those stars who are being retained at enormous cost on the studio roster. For instance, when Duvivier made "Un Carnet de Bal" he was able to choose some of the finest artists in all France; and for the eight separate episodes of the story he was able to secure eight different and highly-skilled scenario writers. Such a method doesn't always work: in this case it did.



DANIELLE DARRIEUX, the French actress best known to audiences in New Zealand. Her reputation was made with "Mayerling." This photograph is taken from "Katia" (released here as "Catherine")

Continually Experimenting

The point is that, with little to lose French directors are able to make continual experiments. As a result they have evolved a technique which is as typically French as that opening shot of the Eiffel Tower which Hollywood seems to stick into every picture that has its setting in Paris. At the same time, their technique isn't static: in "The Cheat," for example, Guitry achieved a remarkable series of innovations.

Because the French pay so much attention to their directors, rather than to their stars, their films have an individuality never encountered in American or British productions, except perhaps in the case of those British films made by Alfred Hitchcock. "The more we see of the average English and American film, the more pleasurably we await the latest importation from Paris," says a leading English critic. "It may not be good, though the chances are it will be; but at least one can rely on its being informed with a definite philosophy, and documented with innumerable little touches revealing a shrewd and honest observation. Good or bad, it deals with life; it is aimed at the adult intelligence instead of at the mental age of 13, which is the avowed target of the average British and American producer. Above all, it has style. Only an imbecile could confuse the work of Rene Clair, Sacha Guitry and Julien Duvivier."

If you argue that such enthusiasm carries the odour of literary snobbishness, that doesn't explain how most French films manage to make handsome profits. Purely highbrow pictures don't do that.

—G.M.



CHARLES BOYER and his English wife, Pat Paterson. Boyer, who divided his time between Paris and Hollywood, co-starred with Danielle Darrieux in "Mayerling"