

HAS HOLLYWOOD LOST TOUCH?

"A Very Dangerous And Significant Trend"

A CURIOUS, and as it seems to me, significant trend has been creeping into Hollywood films of late months, writes C. A. Lejeune in the *London Observer*. I refer to the practice of Hollywood producers of obtruding the familiar, the domestic, note into their pictures; of washing their intimate linen in public, of making sure that the audience identifies a film actor with a film actor, and not with the incidental lover, journalist, garage hand, or rubber planter that the dream merchants have been at such pains to create.

THE first faint intimations of this tendency occurred about a year ago, when it became the practice for actors called, say, James, to play characters called, say, Jimmy. This was followed by a more sinister phase, in which an actor would suddenly turn to the spectators and address them personally. Groucho Marx did it again in *The Great Profile*, when he assured the customers in the *loges* that "Any similarity between the character I portray and myself is purely coincidental." To some extent Frank Craven did it in *Our Town*, when he solicited questions from the audience, and brazenly leant across the stalls to address the man in the projection booth. *Our Town*, of course, was a stylish oddity, and as such demands some licence, but I couldn't help feeling, even then, that the producers were rashly opening a door through which something subversive might easily steal in.

THE third and most esoteric stage opened with a film called *His Girl Friday*. At least, that was the occasion on which I first remarked it. If you saw the film you may remember a scene in which Cary Grant, as the newspaper editor, wished to eject Ralph Bellamy, as his ex-wife's fiancé, from a taxi. "You'll recognise him," he says off-hand to his minions. "He looks like that guy in the movies, Ralph Bellamy." In the same film, Mr. Grant, obviously the prophet of the new familiarity, observed that he hadn't felt so bad since Archie Leach committed suicide. That was a private joke for the specialists and the readers of fan magazines, who knew, of course, that Mr. Cary Grant, that killingly funny fellow, had spent his childhood days as simple Archibald Leach.

THERE have been several instances of this intramural "shop" since *His Girl Friday*. There was that stunning moment in *Caught in the Draft*, in which Bob Hope, eyeing Dorothy Lamour's trim figure, observed that she looked just like Dorothy Lamour with clothes on. There was the scene in *Moon Over Burma* in which Mr. Preston Foster remarked sneeringly to Mr. Robert Preston (it sounds like a game of Consequences, somehow): "One of those stalwart men, huh? I've seen them in the movies."

NOW I have nothing against the film players having a bit of innocent fun

in their dull lives, but I can't help feeling that these gambols hint at a very unstable state of mind behind the scenes. If the dream merchants have to guy their own make-believe, who is going to rely on the merchandise they have to sell? If things go on in this way, I can picture a day when Miss Bette Davis will turn to her cameraman in the middle of a death scene and remark, "Don't shoot until you see the whites of my eyes." Or I can fancy a horrific morsel in which Mr. Boris Karloff will confide in the audience, before killing twelve with an inter-stellar death-ray, "Don't worry, folks, my real name is Pratt, and my partner and I have just been licked at exhibition tennis."

DELIGHTFUL avenues of unreason fill the eye, but, speaking seriously for the moment, I think the trend is very dangerous and very significant. Hollywood, I can't help feeling is in one of those moods when technique has out-run thought. Hollywood, whether deliberately or accidentally isolationist, is out of touch with a clamant world. The producers don't know just what the people want, and if they hear a rumour, they don't want to listen to it.

IT has happened before, thirteen years ago, and the revolution of talkies was the result. I can see all the old symptoms of unrest repeating themselves—the trivial comedies, the re-makes of old dramas, the sly slipping into indeterminate naughtiness, the comfortable compromise with hard themes, the surface indignation over causes that nobody really cares to fight for. I wonder sometimes how long it will last before the bombshell falls—smellies, "tellies," all-colour films, something to blow the Hollywood complacency sky high.

NINETEEN-FORTY-ONE in films is 1928 all over again. With one great difference. In 1928 English production was lagging behind Hollywood, compromising too, waiting on events. In 1941 English production is independent and alert. We make fewer films these war days, but most of what we make is better than before. For the first time since the British industry came of age, it is forced to turn every penny, every free technician, every plank of wood and strip of hessian to good account. Every film is a battle against time,

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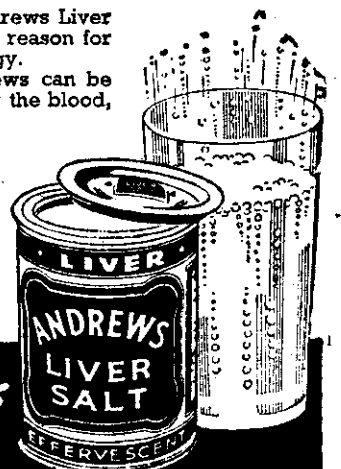
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