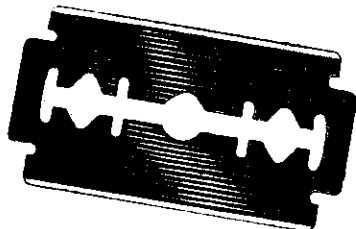


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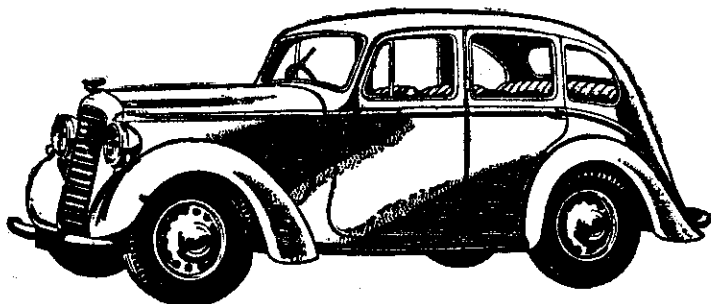


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8.3A

Listening While I Work (9)

By "Materfamilias"

A COUPLE of weeks ago, I made some comments on accents in the ZB serial *Josephine*, pointing out what seemed to me the absurdity of making Josephine speak with a marked French accent when presumably she spoke French in a French world. I have since had a letter from the producer of *Josephine*, explaining that whereas all the cast have instructions to speak English, there are special reasons for Josephine's and Napoleon's accents. Judging by the popularity of the production I am probably in a minority of one in regretting Josephine's accent. If I did not praise this serial in proportion to its popularity it is because on the whole I do not like history dished up as light entertainment unless I can be reasonably sure of the accuracy of the presentation. Elisabeth Bergner some years ago gave us a charming, entertaining but entirely fictitious picture of Catherine the Great of Russia. To anyone who knew anything about Catherine the Great, the performance became less and less entertaining as it became more and more fictitious. The portrait of Josephine is probably much nearer to the Josephine Beauharnais of history. But a welter of semi-historical films chiefly concerned with the love lives of the great, from Henry VIII. to Lady Hamilton, have helped to make us wary of accepting portraits from the past too readily. This is, or should be, all to the good. The mere fact that *Josephine*, or *The American Challenge*, or *Women of Courage* should make me want to run to the nearest reference library (not an easy thing for a materfamilias to do), shows that at least the effect is stimulating rather than soporific.

* * *

THE question of accents over the air must give producers generally some thing to think about. In a stage play there are all sorts of factors in appearance and gesture that give the foreign effect. In radio there is only the voice. A curious example of the use of accents was shown in a recent NBS production in the *Fighting for Freedom* series. It was the dramatised story of the battle of Thermopylae. Xerxes and his Persians spoke the King's English, but the Greek who betrayed the path over the mountains to him spoke with a real Soho waiter accent. To my relief, however, Leonidas and his men spoke unadulterated English again. I wondered what the producer would have done if Xerxes and Leonidas had got together on speaking terms, but of course he knew that the Persians would leave no Greek to tell the tale either in English, Greek or Soho. And a traitor sounds much more treacherous with a foreign accent. I was interested enough to go to my books to verify the point that Leonidas had 1000 men, and not just the 300 that I thought the answer was, as I should have remembered, 300 Spartans and 700 allies). Reading over the story, I confess I found the plain narrative even in the stilted language of a translation more moving than the dramatised version which I had heard a few minutes earlier. Are we overdoing the dramatic technique because it is new and can fairly easily be put over the air? Story

(continued on next page)

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, DECEMBER 1938