

The Illuminated Bones of a Fish

—That is Broadway, Manhattan

English Film Critic Looks at New York Shows

IF I turn slightly to the left and look out of the window and down about seventy stories or more, I can see laid out below me the orderly skeleton of this fish that the sea washed up—I mean Manhattan Island, said Alistair Cooke, the B.B.C. film critic, in a talk broadcast in New York recently.

This is, of course, an exciting sight for anybody, but if I were a critic here, I would have a standing arrangement with the landlord of the Empire State Building for Radio City—if any such gentlemen are not already heading across Siberia. It would be that any time I had to write or talk about films, I might be allowed to come up as high as this, so that I should not need to carry a lot of notes around about the films that were running on Broadway; for if you let your eye follow the illuminated bones of this fish, you will come in time on a patch of light rather brighter than the rest, that looks like a section of a lung under X-ray treatment; and this is Broadway; and all the film critic needs to do is to wander over to this window and look down on the left and see the titles of all the current films blazing away there.

At the moment, I can see a streak of red and yellow, saying "Dodsworth"; a white line panting out the news that "The General Died at Dawn"; there is another splatter of light announcing "Ramona" in technicolour; there is "Nine Days a Queen," Robert Stevenson's movie, which we called "Tudor Rose"—a movie as popular as all English costume films seem to be over here; and then there is "Swing Time," the new Mickey Astaire and Minnie Rogers film; and separating the "Great Ziegfeld" from the "Girls' Dormitory" is a catherine-wheel that spells three words—"Romeo and Juliet."

All this is very impressive at this distance, but as Tallulah Bankhead said of a very elaborate production of a very thin play: "There's less in this than meets the eye"; for Broadway is only the shop window of the Island's entertainment.

Inside the shop there are some special lines that have to be brought out from under the counter. Broadway does not reflect the habits of all the people who go to the movies. It is as well that I should remind myself that the names I have just quoted are the names of the newest films, but if I had been asked what there was to see in New York in the way of movies, the first two recommendations that would have come to mind are Max Linder and a Chinese talkie.

On Forty-second Street there is a Flea Circus where for a nickel you can regain your youth; I mean you can see John Bunny and Flora Finch

and Max Linder performing their ancient antics through downpours of that pre-war rain.

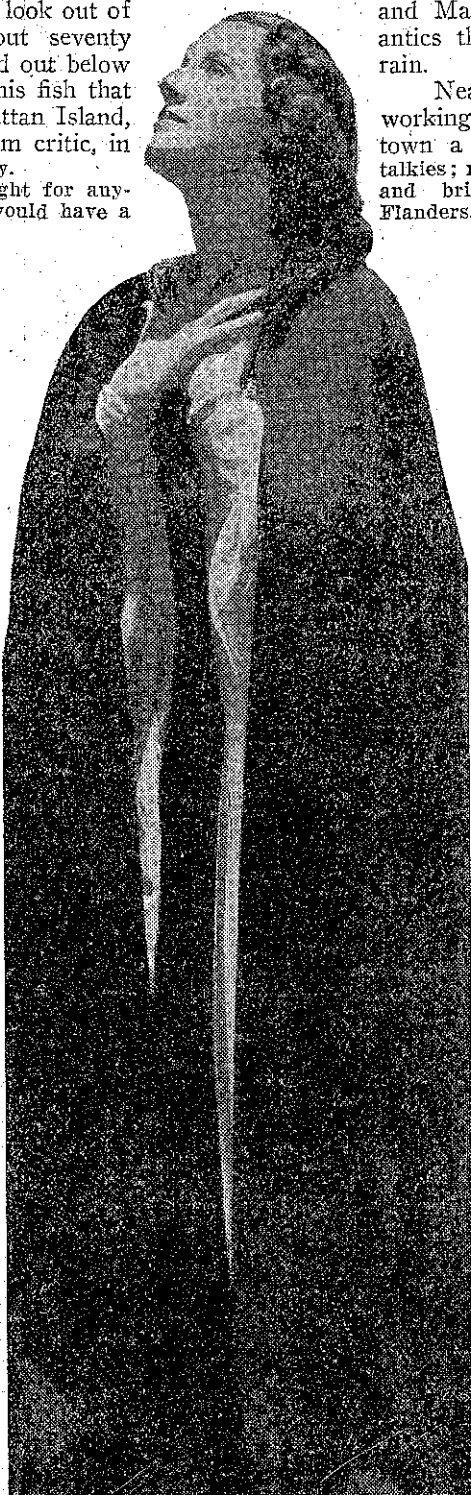
Nearer to the patch of lung we are working on, there are two Italian films, up-town a Spanish music hall with Spanish talkies; next door to a Yiddish theatre is a new and brilliant French comedy, "Carnival in Flanders." Way down-town you might meet Mr. Pond Wing, who gets films rushed straight from Hong Kong—films that have no English titles, so the censor has to see them, with Mr. Wing shouting himself hoarse translating all the time in case there is a line an American might object to if only he understood.

It is very likely, I think, that a film critic in New York would constantly forget his job of keeping an audience informed on the latest films—at least for his first two years. But however much fun I got out of a Chinese film called "Crazy Detectives" it is an experience that is not likely to be repeated in London, whereas that more conspicuous patch of light does advertise the films that you are seeing, and the films that you will see before many months are out, which brings me back up-town and round the corner to the catherine-wheel and "Romeo and Juliet."

I HOPE as I talk about Hollywood's latest Shakespearean effort, that, whatever sounds are managing to swim into your loudspeaker, you don't detect a sneer. It became almost the automatic duty of every English film critic when "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was produced to damn the film in advance. I never did see why it should be so funny that Hollywood tackled Shakespeare. I have seen some funny productions of Shakespeare myself. The funniest, as I remember, was one of "As You Like It" by Beerbohm Tree, in which one of the real sheep fell into a trombone. Well, compared with that, the present "Romeo and Juliet" is a miracle of taste and under-statement, in fact is so tasteful and so understated that it almost manages to say nothing at all.

Mr. Oliver Messel's work with Adrian's on the costumes and settings is as careful and authentic as any Renaissance painter could wish posterity to think him, and Mr. Mill has done a beautiful job. There is the dance in the Capulets' home. And there has gone into the actual performance, especially from Norma Shearer, much easy and beautiful speaking.

It is a terrible thing when a film critic longs for the stage performance of an adapted play, and somehow I was wanting somebody to pull the cameras back and let us see



"Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen!" Norma Shearer as Juliet in a moment of supplication from the M.G.M. film version of "Romeo and Juliet."