

Film Record—by Gordon M. Brown

"PORTIA" Gets The Verdict!

And The Quality of Your Mercy is Not Strained . . .



FRIEDA INESCOURT'S poise and restraint stands out in B.E.F.'s "Portia on Trial," the "surprise" melodrama previewed below. Neil Hamilton and Heather Angel figure in the scene on the right.



HOLLYWOOD dare not admit it, because of the millions invested in the star system, but it is a fact that there is more chance of producing a worthwhile picture from a solid story with obscure players than from a thin plot with big stars. Hamlet, you may remember, once said something to the same effect in four words . . . (for your special guidance, it's in Act II, Scene 2).

This is one reason why I seldom pretend to have a prior engagement when invited to a preview of what, on the surface, seems to be just another picture—even when the omens of success are about as propitious as seeing a cross-eyed man spilling salt under a ladder on Friday the 13th. Hope springs eternal in the critic's breast; and it often springs higher when it hasn't been weighted down with loads of advance publicity and the prospect of seeing another one of those "positively greatest all-star casts ever assembled."

Such was the attitude I adopted toward "Portia on Trial," and I suggest that you may be wise to do the same. This film was produced by an obscure studio (Republic); the director was an

unknown fellow called George Nicholls, jun.; and the cast can offer no greater "box office" names than those of Frieda Inescourt, Walter Abel, Neil Hamilton and Heather Angel. The only obvious lure is the fact that Faith Baldwin wrote the story. (It wasn't a lure to me, either, because I've never read her).

But it's a rattling good show, all the same.

Bricks With Straw

I DON'T mean by that to suggest that it's a rattling good show, despite Faith Baldwin's authorship. Indeed, I rather suspect that she's largely responsible for its goodness—she, and the direction, and the sincere and restrained acting of most—but not all—of the cast.

Miss Baldwin's story supplies the straw for the emotionally solid bricks which the others have built up into a strong melodramatic edifice. It's a rather plain and unpretentious structure, with few of the florid touches so frequently found in melodramatic architecture—and it houses good entertainment. There are, undoubtedly, a few cracks and blemishes in the walls, but all the Big Bad Wolves of the critical world could huff and puff till they were blue in the face without making much impression on it.

Practically Dry

ENOUGH of metaphors! "Portia on Trial" is a blend of mother-love and court-room drama. Frankly, mother-love films not infrequently have the effect of making me cry—but with the effort of suppressing my cynical laughter. But there's not much to laugh at in "Portia." Perhaps it's a pity there isn't a bit more.

However, don't let me give you the idea that this is ultra-heavy stuff of the "East Lynne" school. No tear-stained mother is kicked out into the snow clutching a child of shame to her boobum. No "Madame X" tactics of going to a pauper's grave with the lips firmly sealed for the sake of the dear boy. . . .

Yet, "Portia on Trial" does contain two wronged women, a child of shame (possibly two—I wasn't sure on this point), a weak but repentant male wrong-doer, and a snarling, heartless old grandfather. With such potential stimulants to the tear ducts, the restrained treatment of the story becomes truly remarkable. Emotional hysteria is kept firmly in check, and the tears shed by all the characters put together would hardly fill an egg-cup.

In brief, though the characters themselves may be theatrical, and the situations are of such sobstuff as novelettes are made of, everybody seems to behave in a more or less normal and rational way. (Ctd. next p.)