

' CLEAN FILMS '

An Exhibitor's View

THE film industry to-day is a huge commercial organization involving something like £500,000,000 of capital, of which about four-fifths is invested in the United States, and this industry stretches its great bulk into every corner of the globe. It caters for all classes of people; it provides comfort, cheapness and continuity of performance, as well as recreation, distraction and relaxation after the daily monotony of business and working hours. It transplants the visitors into a new world of surroundings (very often, however, to the detriment of home life), and exerts an influence far beyond the auditorium. It saves time and money in buying and reading books, and, in some cases, supplies the mind with an increase of knowledge of other nations, races, countries, their customs and manners, and this without appealing to any intellectual exertion on the part of the visitor.

If we pause for a moment to consider the work conditions in Hollywood, the most important hive of the industry. we gather from press reports and other eye-witness accounts that the atmosphere brought about by scandal and divorce is not at all conducive to persons fit for their responsibility of producing world entertainment. Such an attitude towards life is bound to show itself in the **work**. The standards of morality, whether of the performers, producer, director or scenarist, express themselves most clearly in the films they make. If these people disregard the real issue between self-control and immoral self-gratification it seems to follow that they view life in one aspect only, and therefore are incapable of giving the world true art through this powerful medium.

His Eminence Cardinal Bourne, in his pastoral letter for Lent this year, gives emphasis to this particular **conduct** when he says: 'No silly prating about the necessity

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of elucidating problems, or that to the pure all things are pure, or that the claims of art must be satisfied, which we frequently hear, can change the moral law or alter the fundamental facts of human nature.' With Hollywood holding a practical monopoly of film entertainment with this particular moral code permeating its work, what should be said of the influence on character and will and the moulding of public feeling and opinion?

The Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking as the principal guest at the Annual Dinner of the London and County Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association in March this year, said there were two things that he knew, first he knew that they were discovering and developing a great art. They were bringing new resources of science to the entertainment and instruction of the people—an art which was giving wonderful and wholly new expression to life, nature and beauty. The second thing he knew was that the exhibitor wielded a more powerful influence than almost any other in the life and character of the British people. The crowds that were attracted to the theatres were sufficient proof. The power was wholly in their hands. There was no power to restrain—not even all the resources of the Home Secretary. Could they wonder, he asked, that this immense power should be used with a corresponding and increasing sense of responsibility? He was not going to indulge in 'high falutin.' He knew quite well the main motive was to make a profit quite legitimately by finding out what the public wanted, and trying to supply it. But the public always wanted something a few degrees higher than the servants of the public supposed. That was true of the platform, the pulpit and the press. It was true also of music and the drama. He pleaded that their efforts should be directed more and more to discover just whether they could reach the public at a higher level and keep it there. The British public were really tired of wallowing in the Hollywood of five or ten years ago. He believed they were discovering there was far more interest in a film that reflected their own British ways than following the ways of the hectic and exotic life they had hitherto been encouraged to im-

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port. Nothing was more popular than a good story told with simplicity and straightforwardness. full of vitality and decisive action. Human nature always preferred to leave an entertainment with a good rather than with a bad taste. When he saw the children crowding into the theatres, and the long queues of lads and girls with the future of the country in their hands, he pleaded that exhibitors should feel it to be an honour to supply an entertainment which would leave no had taste behind it. They were servants of the public; let them respect above all the honour of that master.

Reports tell us that overtures have been made to the film magnates again and again by public authorities, Catholic and Non-Catholic bodies, both here and in America. and although some small measure of success has been reached, no marked improvement has shown itself. So with the continued releases of objectionable films stem measures have been ordered by the Catholic Bishops of America; and by our own Archbishop Mostyn. and the Westminster Catholic Federation, a crusade against improper films has been started.

Now what we in the film industry do not want to see is a boycott by any section of the community on the attendances at the cinema. At the moment we are already sufficiently embarrassed by over-building, a most important problem which faces exhibitors and producers both here and in America. But the Church now feels she cannot rely upon the Censor, and may possibly have to take into her own hands the difficulty of telling what pictures are good and what pictures are bad. It is not her purpose to dissuade her children from attending the cinema, but to rid them of the gross, the harmful and the unspeakable. There is money in salaciousness. and the producer knows it in spite of the fact that some of the best box office feature films of the past year have been films of which the Church could approve. There is danger in expecting too sanguine a view of these big features, for part of their box office appeal depends on the tremendous advertising campaigns behind them.

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Certain devices which producers understand **well** are used to capitalize our ordinary programme pictures; popular names and notorious characters that appeal to the passions. **How** often have we seen exploited some sensational incident, whether by newspaper, hoardings, or lobby display to enable Mr. Exhibitor to fill his theatre. The present-day system of angle advertising docs not seem in method one bit removed from the early Penny Peep Show days. What I would urge, then, is the need at the present time to **en-**list editors and publishers on the side of Catholic action. The press must be made an ally and throw its tremendous force on the side of moral right. There is a crying need for more reliable film criticism in some of our papers and magazines. **I know** there is a certain amount of intelligent and disinterested criticism, hut quite a lot of film critics' space in the popular press is taken up with 'screen gossip' about the personalities of the film stars, and praise is lavished on particular films where the pull of advertisement is all too strong. My own experience has proved this. Being a small theatre. I cannot afford to advertise to any large extent. **As** a result of this, despite the attraction of premier pictures, which is definitely 'news' to the public, I have been ignored by the critics of some popular dailies. **As** a very reliable film critic of a Sunday paper pointed out in a lecture on films given at the Y.W.C.A. not long ago, 'There is precious little good criticism on the market for several reasons. In the first place. modern film criticism is largely in the hands of the Advertisement Manager. It puts an editor in a difficult position. to sav the least of it. when one of the biggest cinemas in London cancels its advance advertising because it anticipates a bad review—but that is what really did happen recently.'

There is every need, then, at the present time, to enlist editors and publishers to Catholic action! for **I** feel they can be persuaded of the necessity to drop the immoral films and instruct their reviewers to appraise each film in its moral light as well as from its technique and entertainment value. Once audiences are convinced that they represent honest, intelligent opinion, they will become a

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powerful influence. But as long as you are content to leave things as they are, systematically putting up with the supply of films that are chosen for you and the boosting of unreliable films, so long will the situation remain unchanged. As long as you go on paying your money into the box office you are telling the exhibitor that you are satisfied with the films he chooses. It is very difficult for an exhibitor to know, out of the welter of material before him, exactly which films will satisfy his patrons. He can only make a fair guess at it, and wait for his patrons to give him the lead.

The trouble is that individual patrons are frightened to give a lead; they grumble among themselves, but make no attempt to furnish the all-important constructive criticism to the one person that matters, and who is ready to welcome it—the exhibitor.

The contribution of countries other than America to the films is relatively small. Fortunately our Censor can see through the doubtful wrappings of some of these productions; they are cleverly concealed intentions to undermine the Christian Religion, faith, morality, society and family life, divine and human authority. But the formulas governing the judgment of the Censors cannot always delete the cunning of certain propaganda films of apparently harmless, innocent character.

The two main objectives of the Hayes Organization of America—equivalent to our own British Board of Film Censors—have been to meet unfair criticism from outside and to secure by agreement higher standards of conduct inside the industry. Before this organization came into being, American producers selected their subjects by caprice, and if by chance they were prompted to aim at anything at all it was the lowest common denominator of cinema audiences. Now happily, however, all subjects are submitted to the Organization before being put into production, and advice sought as to its suitability as a film subject. The powers of this Organization will be learned by the fact that three hundred submitted subjects last year were rejected as unsuitable, and it is gratifying to learn

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that even greater care is now being taken over the selection of subjects. This is the reason why so many producers are turning to the popular classics. The following is a list of subjects scheduled for production during the coming year: David Copperfield; Edwin Drood; Great Expectations; Kim; Shape of Things to Come; Captains Courageous; Scarlet Pimpernel; Treasure Island; Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch; Girl of the Limberlost; Swiss Family Robinson; Count of Monte Cristo; Tale of Two Cities; Pickwick Papers.

With such a list I think we can confidently look forward to a return of the intelligent film-goer to the cinemas, because the tendency discernible in these subjects is good.

Miss Lejeune, Film Critic of the *Observer*, gives the following advice. 'The whole cinema is one long system of supply and demand, and the key to that system is YOU. It is your money in the end that is paying for the industry, and the industry will supply exactly the sort of entertainment that you ask for, if you ask plainly enough. The exhibitor is just like any other sort of salesman—he stocks his shop with the goods that seem most likely to appeal to the majority of his customers, and then waits for further orders. So don't blame him if he does not show exactly the films that you want to see. Don't just drift along putting up with films that you know to be bad, make a point of finding out the quality of various brands of film, just as you find out brands of stockings, or groceries, or typewriters. Learn to know which films are the most reliable. Then place your order with the exhibitor. Tell him exactly what films you want to see. Keep away from the films you do not want to see. Remember that the box office controls the studio all the time, and you—not the critics—not the exhibitors, but YOU—control the box office.'

ARTHUR LESLIE.