

CINEMA:

*Plays Made into Pictures—Spy
Melodrama—Shavian Hokum*

THE MOTION PICTURE industry, Hollywood version, is a stubborn beast. Having once decided on the level of picture production best suited to the average mind, it has been reluctant to consider any revision.

It has always been felt in the industry that it was easier to mold the public taste than change the producer's viewpoint. That the audience wants only to be entertained and will reject information has appeared too frequently in the press of late to be anything less than suggestion. Nevertheless the inroads of films from France, England, the Soviet Union, and many minor centers, are having an effect. These foreign films offer competition, since technical development is now comparable, and the change, albeit slow, indicated in the recent and projected releases, is probably due more to this than to any growing volume of complaint from the box-office patrons.

Of course it is too soon to expect relief from the hypocrisy of the Hays Office, but a judicious sprinkling of honesty and social significance through the garden of glamour is more than welcome. We can take entertainment, information, or any combination of the two that is clear, sincere and well told.

The picture that could have touched all of those points and failed to touch any was M.G.M.'s adventure in obscurantism, *Idiot's Delight*.

Robert Sherwood (also credited with the screen play) originally started with a diverse group of characters stranded in an Italian resort hotel at the beginning of the next World War. In the picture he adds a mildly

amusing prologue showing Harry Van, the hooper protagonist, progressing (as agelessly as a Tyrone Power character) through the years from the last World War to the new one, with a slight interlude in a hotel in Omaha.

Mr. Van is at the hotel with *Les Blondes* (six, and all nice) but has eyes only for the one who arrives on the arm of a munitions magnate. She is faintly reminiscent of the past, in spite of accents and gestures.

The war starts. A fleet of bombing planes is off into the night. A city is being razed. Thousands of innocents are being blown to bits. A fanatic pacifist raises his voice and is very gently taken out and shot. The world is at war but (hush!) a more vital question takes the stage; did she or did she not sleep with him in Omaha long ago?

Les Blondes dance with the army officers. What are wars? Avalanches, maybe. The research scientist who has been saving lives decides not to "save human beings who don't want to be saved," and goes back home to devise new ways of taking lives.

There is a rather undeveloped villain in the munitions maker who departs leaving the blond "Countess" behind so Harry Van can offer her the supreme sacrifice.

Yes, she is the same girl and she wants to go back to work, with Harry. They discuss it, make love, and are a little afraid as the bombers return to make hash of the hotel. A few square feet miss destruction, and they happen to be standing right there. The piano is wrecked but is still in tune. As the planes pass on, peace arrives heralded by a hot number and a cooch dance.

Peace, and a long life of chicanery for the lovers. Where, in a world at war? That seems to have been overlooked. One point was made: a screwball love affair as incidental relief in a story of war is frequently welcome; a reversal of the device is sickening.

A FINE EXAMPLE of what can be done in the straight "information" field is Paramount's *One Third of a Nation*. Here is a story told with as little circumlocution as the producers felt they could get by with.

In adapting the play from the Federal Theatre's excellent production, a little watering-down with love interest was considered advisable. It hasn't helped materially, but then it does no harm. If the addition serves to make more palatable this depiction of the "submerged" one third for the other two (a large proportion of whom are not so far removed themselves as to feel at all secure) that is sufficient excuse.

The plot, however, is less than important. The picture is a valid and well documented description of slum conditions. Briefly, little Joey Rogers is crippled in a tenement fire. He comes back from the hospital warped and resentful. The house is his enemy. He sets fire to it and dies in the conflagration.

This is one boy. The audience, watching this horror which serves as "life" for so many, must realize why the jails are so crowded and the electric chair feeds on the children grown in these sections.

Settlement houses, athletic leagues and various agencies try to ameliorate conditions but the answer is obvious; the elimination of such circumstances as are shown here with commendable truth.

THE BEST EXAMPLE of virtuosity in the "pure" entertainment field is an offering from England: *The Lady Vanishes*.

There are those who disdain "thrillers" of any sort and thereby cheat themselves of superlative hair-raising by Alfred Hitchcock. As a director of the chilled-spine school, Mr. Hitchcock has no equals and this offering is up to his previous best.

The picture is concerned with espionage and counter-espionage and a middle-aged lady spy trying to get her message through the enemy's country and back to England. A young girl is drawn into it through being hit by a missile intended for Miss Froy (the spy), who in turn becomes helpful and friendly. They get on nicely.

After a brief period of semi-consciousness the young lady awakes to find the old one missing. The train is filthy with enemy agents and the girl is frantic trying to find anyone who will even admit the existence of Miss Froy.

The hero is drawn into it and after a while convinced. The rest of the footage is taken up with the search, rescue, escape, etc., into romance and a happy ending.

With indifferent handling such spy melodrama would be just as bad as it is now good. Mr. Hitchcock knows how to keep suspense at fever heat and when to turn on the safety valve of comedy, which is unusually intelligent in this instance. Novelty is added by the director's individual touches rather than by plot, and the result is thoroughly gripping and enjoyable.

FRANCE, as has become its habit, comes through with the best production in point of balance. *Heart of Paris* (Griboille), deals with the virtues and weaknesses of a "nice" man. Camille Morestan, who has a little shop in which he sells athletic goods, is called for jury duty. It is the most important moment in his life since the Armistice. He is impressed.

A girl whose fragile beauty could have served in lieu of evidence with the average male jury is on trial for the murder of her lover.

Morestan stumbles on a question (juror's privilege) of importance to the defense. This subconsciously allies

him with the defendant and a little approval from her attorney is enough to send him fighting for acquittal in the jury room.

The accomplishment of that increases his interest in the girl and he wants to help her. She won't accept money so he employs her in his store and takes her into his home.

The altruistic shopkeeper's interest remains strictly paternal: he is a good family man with a son, a daughter and a wife. However, a reluctance to divulge the girl's identity starts a lie with the usual misunderstandings and complications. Here the story bogs down a little but momentum carries it through.

Raimu as the floundering humanitarian Morestan is superb. Michele Morgan as the girl is excellent. The rest of the cast is more than adequate.

AN EVENT of unusual interest was the showing of the first authorized film made from a George Bernard Shaw play. Since the film, *Pygmalion*, arrived with the author's unqualified blessing, his devotees (for he does still have them) aren't likely to be too critical. It is doubtful, however, whether or not the average movie-goer will see more in *Pygmalion* than in the "rags-to-riches" comedies flowing regularly from Hollywood.

Mr. Shaw is a (self-declared) man with a message, but in spite of his early Socialist pretensions, the old "Fabian" choses to obscure all possible values of his words with cleverness. In this fairly modern version of the famous myth Mr. Shaw has a very good time. The difference between a lady and a tramp lies in the approach of a gentleman or, in extreme cases, a bath and a clean chemise

Still, despite the dated "middle-class morality," the

Galatea of Shaw does a much more interesting coming to life than that of an ivory statue into cold beauty.

In the hands of Wendy Hiller the transformation of Eliza Doolittle is rich, lively, and sustained. It is a difficult rôle done exceptionally well. Leslie Howard's Professor Higgins is excellent through the first three-quarters of the picture, but in the end seems carried away by the author's intellectual hokum into a bit of hamming.

The picture is definitely amusing and should pave the way for others from the same source. It is to be hoped, however, that in the future Mr. Shaw allows leeway for the broader scope of the screen and doesn't demand continued allegiance to the proscenium arch.

VINCE HALL

The Harrowing of Heaven

Hillsides once golding with the sun
gradually shadow; low
quadrigae — chariots that run
on turning knives for wheels — now go
stolidly, anti-Phoebus driven,
to harry back the tarnished light
across the under-arch of heaven
and past the nine-fold gates of night
(smoulder, transcendent living rays!). . . .
The chariots cleave both star and clod,
each in a self-created cloud
revealed concealed for mortal eyes.

KENNETH PORTER