

LOOKING BACK AT IT ALL

The Films Encountered Many of the Same Old Problems Again in 1940

By THOMAS M. PRYOR

FROM where we sit—3,000 miles away from Hollywood, but right next door to the home offices of the film companies—it does not appear likely that there will be any lamenting the passing of 1940. For the year rapidly approaching oblivion yielded a bumper crop of knotty little problems and a couple of major crises (these last are discussed elsewhere in this section), which already have cast a dark shadow over the new year. But to get down to the business at hand, looking over the past, here are some of the things which might conceivably be regarded as among the year's highlights.

Obviously the unkindest cut of all was Samuel Goldwyn's frank confession in a national magazine that Hollywood was "sick" and that there apparently wasn't a doctor in the house. This was regarded as heresy by most of his fellow-producers who only two years before had poured a million dollars into an all-industry campaign to convince an apathetic public that "motion pictures are your greatest entertainment." Mr. Goldwyn diagnosed



Annabella in "Hotel du Nord," French drama at the Little Carnegie Playhouse.

Hollywood's illness with keen insight, and among the cancerous growths he found that old debbil—the double feature.

That started every one arguing again about the merits and demerits of the two-for-the-price-of-one system, and Dr. George Gallup offered to settle the controversy once and for all. After three months of diligent research the Gallup poll findings showed a nation divided—57 per cent of the public was for singles, 43 against. But when asked how they felt about doubles if both pictures were good entertainment 63 per cent declared for them and only 36 per cent held out for singles. Nobody was satisfied with that answer, so the problem remains unsolved.

But the most embarrassing (to Hollywood) aspect of the Gallup survey was the disclosure that only 54,000,000 people went to the movies weekly, whereas for years Mr. Will Hays had been saying that the number was 85,000,000. There was considerable controversy over that point, since the poll was made in the middle of the Summer, when business is admittedly off, but nobody could explain how that 85,000,000 figure came into being. We read in the trade papers that a Hays office spokesman said the industry got it from the Department of Commerce, but that agency had a handy explanation, too; it got the figure from the Hays office. So there!

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The charges of communism which were hurled at twelve of the cinema's leading lights last August during a Los Angeles County Grand Jury investigation of a three-year-old murder case aroused the citizenry of the film colony almost beyond belief. Similar accusations had been made at intervals for the past several years without causing undue excitement, but this time the industry and the individuals named decided to have it out.

James Cagney rushed down from his Martha's Vineyard farm to protest to New York reporters that the only thing red about him was his hair, flew to the Coast and was publicly cleared by Congressman

Martin Dies, whom the Screen Actors Guild demanded to arbitrate the charges. Others who received the blessings of Congressman Dies were Humphrey Bogart, Robert Montgomery, Melvyn Douglas and Fredric March. This action, it is believed, took the punch out of the Congressman's long-threatened investigation of "subversive" activities among the film folk.

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Naturally there was much concern over the turn of events in Europe. Following the invasion of the Lowlands and the collapse of France there was a mild panic in the industry. On the lighter side, however, was the edict at the Warner plant forbidding any of the refugees contingent to speak German. And there was that press-agent release slugged—"Seems authentic," "Official propaganda," etc.

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Just as the new order in England brought out a rash of militant film titles such as "Convoy," "Gestapo," "The Lion Has Wings" and "Contraband," the preparedness program and civilian conscription in this country started Hollywood on a quest for stories of both topical and patriotic significance. The Warners rushed out an up-to-date version of "Confessions of a Nazi Spy" and more recently reissued the 8-year-old "Here Comes the Navy."

Meanwhile, other studios are looking with renewed interest into the activities of the armed forces. Metro has turned out "Flight Command," Paramount is winding up "I Wanted Wings" and there are others in the offing like "Combat Car," "The Tanks Are Coming," "You're in the Army Now," "Young America Flies," "Service With the Colors" and "March on Marines."

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The military theme has undoubtedly been the most significant and apparent trend of the year. Otherwise films, with the exception of a "Fantasia" and a "Grapes of Wrath," have been cut to customary patterns, though a couple of feeble attempts were made to capitalize on the success of the John Steinbeck story in Metro's "Gold Rush Maisie" and Republic's "Doctor's Don't Tell." Among the standards which showed up again were the horse operas, the "Dr. Kildares," the "Hardys," "Charlie Chan," "Mr. Wong," the "Cisco Kid," and, of course, the Cinderella formula.

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The censors, official and otherwise, were as vigilant as ever and perhaps even a little more so. Metro received a "C" or condemned rating from the National Legion of Decency for "Strange Cargo," but later got a clean bill after eliminating the legion's objections. RKO had trouble in Detroit with "Primrose Path" and even the government-sponsored documentary on maternal welfare, "The Fight for Life," was deemed objectionable by the Chicago police censors.

There were several other minor controversies, but the banning which received the most fanfare was that of the March of Time's first feature production, "The Ramparts We Watch," in Pennsylvania. The censors approved the film in its original form, but objected to its exhibition when the producers replaced the original ending with German-made newsreel shots from "The Baptism of Fire," which was confiscated by the British. Later it was hinted by the censors that they had objected to the Nazi material because it was inserted after they had approved the original version of the preparedness document.

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And, as is usual in every year, there were several differences between players and producers which received widespread attention. To mention a few, there was the lawsuit which Paramount brought against Don Ameche for \$170,000 because he refused to be "loaned out" by his home studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, to appear in "Night of January 16." The action was subsequently settled amicably in the best Hollywood tradition. At this writing the Warners and "Oomph" girl Ann Sheridan are still squabbling over matters of salary, the while Miss Sheridan is off the payroll and cannot go to work at any other studio.

That, more or less, was 1940 and in many respects it didn't seem to differ appreciably from 1939 and the year before that. Perhaps there will even be a certain sameness about the year 1941.