

## THE BATTLE OF WARDOUR STREET

We are of the stuff that films are made of. Yet we don't get away with it. You need not see British pictures to realise their artistic mediocrity; a glance at the average still produced in our studios is one glance too many.

It's a funny business. At the moment Wardour Street sees visions and its directors dream dreams. One day we shall succeed. One day we shall make a great film. But not just yet.

Wardour Street, flaunting the nosemarks of high finance, gets the blame. The poor critic, distracted between duty to his public and that violent patriotic complex which surges in the breast of every right-minded Briton, lets us down lightly and turns on the tap and the lukewarm adjectives.

We are, we learn with satisfaction, coming on. Our directors are getting better and better. Already, according to one critic, the best American pictures are being made at Elstree. And what's good enough for Hollywood is good enough for Tooting Bec.

Hollywood is our goal. It must be entertainment or nothing. Ours is the Heaven-sent mission of supplying entertainment of the masses, for the masses, by the masses.

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“ International ” is the chief word in the temper-ried vocabulary of the Wardour Street producer. International. World markets.

That is the secret of British production. World markets. We have ceased to strain after the Quota gnat. It must now be one hundred per cent. or nothing. Let everything pass ; let patriotism—bitter pill !—go by the board. Let us get our world markets.

Acting under the curious illusion that we can do in one year that which has taken America eight, we accordingly go all out for the round the world screening. We sell outright to the Dominions. Right, let us get into America. Long cables and sleepless nights, lunches snatched hastily at the Monico, private secretaries living on aspirin, and it is accomplished. We have sold to America !

But it is not good enough. We must now tie up the whole of Europe. Frenzied arguments with a translation bureau, heated words on the long-distance telephone, and an extra fraction has been secured on the Czecko-Slovakian market.

On, on, ye noblest renters ! Must the genius of man stop at Constantinople ? No, more cables and desperate hours juggling with gibberish. A British film has been sold to China.

It is round the world. El Dorado has been captured. Satisfaction—brief, and indulged in at the Savoy—is followed by chagrin. No rights have been sold to the Dutch East Indies !

The picture ? Oh, the picture. Well, what of it ? Give it to a man who made a good quickie in 1911. Get a third-rate novelist to write the story. Something with a kick and

a chorus, something with heartburn and a happy ending. Get the Blank girl to play in it. She's cheap, and a friend of the director's. The picture. . . Yes, it will have to be made some day.

Universal entertainment. What is it? Ask Wardour Street. Something built around a cabaret scene, something with a beauty chorus and just enough lingerie to earn an "A" Certificate. Or an epic of the British Navy with three close-ups of the Union Jack and Mother left at home crying her eyes out. That is the key; heartburn. Sentimental or sensual.

The fault with us, of course, is that many of the men who rule us just don't know what they want. The Street has its doubts and plods on, hoping for the best. We sell to America and then make the picture for five thousand pounds, we make a song of the film rights of *Jew Süß* and then forget all about it.

Wardour Street agrees we must be "international". Accordingly it solves our problems by importing played-out stars and third-rate directors. There are exceptions, of course. We determine to copy Hollywood and steal their cameramen, their technicians, their gagmen, their scenarists. We then decide to use them on a perfectly English story, and venture, viewing the future balance sheet through the rosy glasses of dinner at the Ritz, to risk a whole ten thousand on the picture. With Flossie Footlights in the title role—and she was a box-office draw in Sierra Leone twenty years ago—our profit on the world market already arranged by our Foreign Department is assured.

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Even that it not enough. In English films one has one's cake and eats it. Our pictures must be *national*. "British films must have national characteristics and international entertainment value." The phrase flits through a harassed brain. It was uttered by one of the Wardour Street oracles—there are about fifty of them—at a dinner recently.

Right, let us not forget the national note. We did talk sometime back about a Quota, didn't we? What is a national film? Property man, the Union Jack. Cameraman, take a train and shoot some local colour. Scenarist, hunt out the war songs and look for the catchy lines. International appeal? Well, they can alter it all in the cutting rooms on the other side.

Meanwhile, what of the night? A little stormy, perhaps. Shareholders do not always look as though they have been well fed. Certain banking accounts suggest anaemia. It may be that we spent rather too much on our last theatrical sequence. Could it have been that the film was bad?

It didn't book well on the Continent, certainly. America regurgitated it rather hastily. In England the trade Press let it down by calling it a "Good Booking for Smaller Halls". And even the smaller halls did not like it, judging by exhibitors' letters.

But, argues the Wardour Street oracle, it must have been a good film. Two cabaret sequences and some wonderful war stuff shot on the Riviera. And it stands to reason that if a company goes to the Riviera for exteriors they do so on account of its film potentialities and not because they want a holiday.

. . . .

And yet, despite appearances, we have it in us. We are, I say, of the stuff that films are made of. If only we could make up our minds. What are we aiming at? Where are we? Is it to be art or the box-office? Is there, in the long run, any difference between the two? Is it to be Hollywood or Leningrad? Or just Elstree? King Vidor or Eisenstein? Or just G. B. Samuelson? If only we knew. We might be able to get somewhere then.

Yes, we have it in us. Hitchcock just missed great things in *The Ring*. Asquith was intensely interesting in *Underground*. Norman Walker gave us a thoughtful taste of the "purely national" in *Widdicombe Fair*. Dupont, I thought, came a cropper with *Piccadilly*, partly because he might have been filming Timbuctoo for all the relation his picture bore its title. But that, of course, is the "international" note carried to perfection. Perhaps he left it so that they can call it "Broadway" in America. Werner Brandes, at least, achieved something with the camera in the picture, and Dupont himself showed a flair for the pictorial.

One day, when we have forgotten the word "international" and its minor and conflicting echo "national"—made harmonious by that singular line of reasoning adopted in the Street of Films, we shall make a great picture.

Apart from our arguments we are too insular. We know nothing of the cinema about us, only that fraction Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount show us. Pudovkin is a naughty boy who achieved news prominence through being mentioned in Parliament.

*Mother* is shown under the rose at the Film Society. *The End of St. Petersburg* receives the same treatment. Only

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profligates, according to our righteous Press, would want to see *Cosmos*. Russian films in general, according to another writer, are generally hysterical. Potemkin is the name of a ship; *Storm Over Asia* has degenerated to a breeze in the *Daily Express* office.

Art, of course, is a word in the dictionary; an organ possessed by every Wardour Street oracle, a pumping machine vaguely connected with the paraphernalia of kidneys and the like. We are stiff-necked people and deserve to be censored. Accordingly, we know not the meaning of cinema. Hollywood's elegant pornography and England's imitation, we are allowed, our eyes can feast on Clara Bow, but *Mechanics of the Brain* is denied us.

Thank God for a sense of humour. Of course, continues the Soho oracle, we have no need to study the work of foreigners, really. We must develop along our own lines. In order to do so we import people from Hollywood and Germany and set them to film impossible stories by magazine writers who—judging by the finished product—never go inside a cinema.

Here and there, in the sea of doubt, tribulation and pain, we can see something to cheer us. Walter Summers almost made something of *The Lost Patrol*. Had he seen the best Continental product before he made it he might have got away with a picture. It was at least a change. Not a cabaret, no motherlove, only one mention of the duty of England's sons when the freedom of the Emerald Isle is questioned. Victor Saville made a sound dramatic subject in *Tesha*, despite its Victorian symbolism where anticipatory motherlove was concerned.

Perhaps the nucleus has been formed already. Only two racing melodramas were made last year. If only Alfred Hitchcock could stage a comeback and forget he ever made *Champagne*, a film which, as champagne, suggested it had been left in the rain all night. Asquith is developing. Manning Haynes has his potentialities. Dr. Arthur Robison is over here making *The Informer* for British International. Harry Lachman may one day be given something better than a comedy with which to prove his undoubted talent.

Art direction has been whispered in Wardour Street. The words boomed in one day and have lingered on the Dictaphone records. It is not quite known, in certain quarters, what an art director is. At least one oracle maintains that he is a mixture of head carpenter and assistant cameraman. The forty-nine others hold different views. But Hugh Gee has emerged from the noise. Remember how he lifted *Tesha* off a flat screen? Edward Carrick is proving the value of the Craig's blood. It is being slowly apprehended that an art director is a fiend who spends money, but who, given the proper nourishment, can help the picture to net the Almighty Shilling.

Scenarios are more often a hindrance than a help, naturally. Their value to the producer is that they enable him to check up the sequences the director has forgotten to shoot. But Wardour Street is now allowing more than five days for them to be written in. Yes, we are looking up.

Converted greenhouses, age-old brick buildings and the like still serve as studios in many cases. The value of the antiquated studio is that it gives the company an excellent excuse for having made a bad picture. What matter if the rest of the

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world argues the pros and cons of panchromatic? We can still carry on with one or the other all the same. Our patron Saint is the Vicar of Bray.

Stories are one of the difficulties. Even Wardour Street sees that. What is a film story? Is there such a thing? Should it be "national"? Or "international"? Must it have a name? Must it have sex appeal?

How to film; that is the question. We are undoubtedly in a position to make progress. But where? Is it to be Hollywood or Leningrad? Or Elstree? "National" or "International"?

If only Wardour Street could finish its mental battle and make up its mind.

And "talkies"? No, it is too much. At the mention of the word your Wardour Street production oracle folds his hands over his stomach like Bacchus and silently passes away.

HUGH CASTLE.

## THE ENGLISH CINEMA

England sits atop her globe looking down upon her dominions.

England hoped to sit as neatly upon her quota and look down upon far-flung film dominions. But the eye of England is on the U.S.A. cinema, the cinema of the presumptuous