

COMMENTS ON THE SCREEN

BY JANET FLANNER.

ACTING either for the screen or on the stage consists in both cases of one of two things. It consists of creating a new character, whose habits, expressions and emotions are in terms of the individual indicated in the play, or in finding a character in a play which is similar enough to the person acting to admit of their being themselves with a change of plot thrown in. Maude Adams has often been accused of being the latter type of actress—one who continues indefinitely at the charming role of being herself. Bernhardt perhaps was and still is one of the best examples of a purely protean actress—one who effectively and perfectly changes from one characterization to another.

What is the condition in the cinema world? Of course, when performers from "the legitimate" step before the camera they retain their habits of acting whatever they may have been. However, what is the attitude of screen workers who have never been anything but screen workers when they are forced to create, during the course of a successful and lucrative season, six or eight fully distinct characterizations? Do they have the luck always to be offered by their producer characters so nearly like themselves as to render any effort at characterization unnecessary or do they receive characters to play requiring real thought, study and delving? One sometimes wonders.

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A note from a big studio announces the following facts—they are typical and representative and are built on a sketched program for five women stars whose work, so far as intelligence and characterization is concerned, is far and away above the output of the average "celluloid star." The list is a compilation of what is to be done by these stars in the following twelve months. Geraldine Farrar, six productions. Yet Miss Farrar, in a studio press sheet, remarks that she acts before the screen to let off superfluous energy, of which, judging by this statement, she has a phenomenal amount; Pauline Frederick, eight; Mabel Normand, Mae Marsh and Madge Kennedy—three more or less of a kind—eight apiece. Rex Beach is also listed as having six productions to be made from his works, but this should be no strain on the man.

Can these women possibly create a thorough and artistically molded character eight times in twelve months? Even if in the case of, say, Pauline Frederick's screen appearance as Felicia in "Mrs. Dane's Defense" where she had, if she wished, a predecessor in the role to turn to for guidance—though Miss Frederick is far too conscientious a worker to restrict herself thus—is it possible in each instance to do justice to her own ability, to the character or to the spectator? After all, the spectator counts for something.

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"Trade" reviews in the cinema world make much of a star's ability to step from the tail of one production onto the head of another without pause, much as one goes from one moving car onto another. One hears that Norma Talmadge, and her sister Constance, too, completed work on one film Saturday night and started something entirely different and new on Monday morning. This gives the sisters a busy Sabbath for transition. Who is responsible for this unfair rush in production—the producer who is or should be an acute business man, confident of the mercantile value of his stars; the star who may have an appetite for eating new parts much as a gourmand has for tasting new dishes, or the public that inanely, ridiculously cuts down the ability of its favorite stars by demanding that they appear often in something new? If the plays produced were of a more serious and rich color, revealing more of the great processes of human relations, might they not run longer, content the public longer, inspire them to see the same play more than once, instead of merely setting them to crying for something new?

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Is this demand for something new another of these typically American virtues—a restless feather in the eagle's tail?

It is difficult to say. However, this much can be said. Cinema "trade" magazines are full of walls concerning overproduction. The wall translates itself into a moan that certain stars are "slipping" or "lagooning"—downward—and that the salaries of popular stars, cost of luxurious production, a thing taught to and now demanded by the public, and competition have made film rents too high to be born with profit by the exhibitor. He complains. The industry groans. Is this the public's fault?

"Intolerance" and "Birth of a Nation" have become old and valued friends to screen goers. Like "Ben Hur" and even Shakespeare, these plays continue to find audiences. Griffith is a genius. Douglas Fairbanks recently remarked on his visit here: "Griffith is the only director I would have around. He is a super-person." His films live. They present the truth and stir the imagination. Too few are of their ilk. And they required time for production—and thought, and labor and possible, too, real love for the screen.