

SR Goes to the Movies

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO FRENCH FILMS?

THE simultaneous release of four new French films in New York seems to emphasize just how few have actually been seen here in the past year or so. At one time the words "French film" and "foreign film" were practically interchangeable. Since the war, however, English and Italian pictures have increasingly been edging in, often securing extended playing time in the most desirable theatres. And now, with the Government-enforced separation of American production, distribution, and exhibition, Hollywood movies are regularly turning up in houses formerly associated solely with foreign pictures. All of this means, of course, greater competition for French films. No exhibitor now books a French picture simply because it is French; not with the star-studded Hollywood product available to him, not with British pictures around that have all the advantages of foreignness without the necessity for strip titles. A French picture has to have extra merit these days to find a theatre—or at least some readily exploitable box-office personality or theme.

But this is only part of the reason why so few Gallic importations have been visible of late. A further explanation is to be found in France itself. Production costs in France, as in Hollywood, have risen astronomically through the past few years. And whenever that happens there is an overwhelming tendency on the part of producers to play it safe, to use established stars and directors in time-proven stories, to avoid experiment. The small Government film subsidy in France, as is so often the case, seems designed to encourage mediocrity and stereotyped production. As a result, French films have fallen off both in quality and quantity. There have been a few exceptions since the war, even a few exceptional films. Jacques Tati's recent "Jour de Fête" had the verve and freshness of shoe-string experimentation about it. Max Ophul's silken "La Ronde," as smooth a studio production as ever was made, won audiences by its sheer perfection. "La Vie Commence Demain," yet to be released in this country, is an exciting, provocative examination of today's arts and sciences in relation to the world of tomorrow. But in general the vigor, the creativity, even some of the taste that distinguished the French cinema of the late Thirties seems to

have burned itself out. At the moment, we can be grateful that our exhibitors are choosing for us only the best.

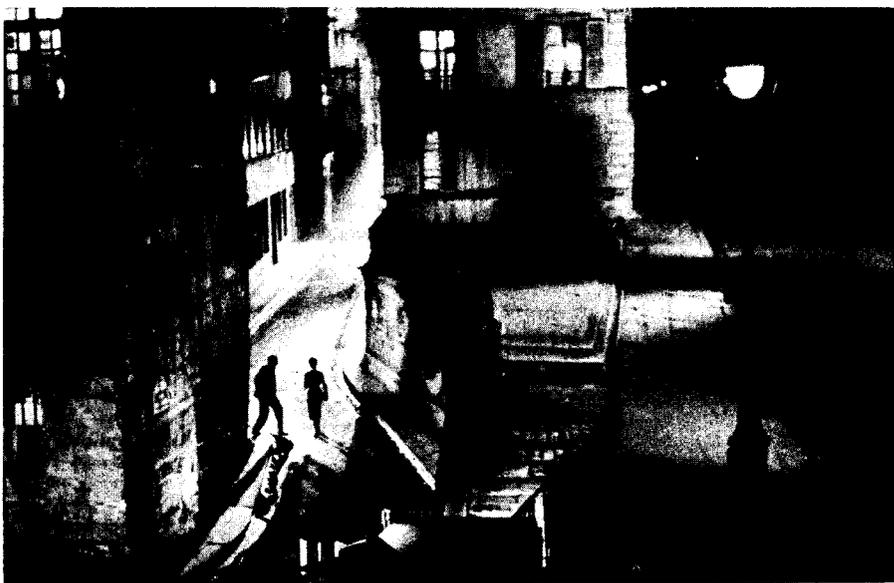
And of the new imports, certainly among the best is Julien Duvivier's "Under the Paris Sky" (Discina). One of the leading lights in the French revival of the Thirties, Duvivier became famous through "Un Carnet de Bal" for a *portmanteau* type of picture with many sections ingeniously threaded together. Here he tries it again, orchestrating a bizarre assortment of lives into a sort of city symphony of Paris. His film starts as the city wakes up. And as the day progresses the lives of utter strangers begin to cut across each other for better or for worse. An old woman wanders through the city begging money to buy milk for her cats. A child runs away from home, setting off down the Seine on a voyage to Mauritania and the Canary Islands. A young girl arrives in Paris to make her fortune. Her friend, a model, worries about her fiancé who is taking his final examination in medicine that afternoon. A worker is celebrating his silver anniversary with a sit-down strike inside the factory walls. And a mad sculptor stalks through the city, a killer.

All of these themes Duvivier manages to manipulate with considerable agility. Sometimes it is the commentary, spoken in English by Duncan Elliott, that ties the separate stories together, sometimes a simple encounter. But always there is a sense of fate

directing the chance meeting and a careful balancing of youth and age, life and death, joy and sorrow. It is life shaped by art rather than simply the random reflection of a teeming city, and Duvivier proves himself still the skilful technician in the juxtaposition of his many types. He has cast his picture judiciously, Christian Dior has clothed it handsomely, and Paris itself—the stalls of Montmartre, the graceful bridges over the Seine, the steep white stairs to Sacre-Coeur, the granite arches of the Place des Vosges—provides an ever-fascinating background for its absorbing and varied incidents.

The French enthusiasm for seeing the many facets of a comic situation, drawing from it all its humor and all its sting, underlies the action of Jacques Becker's slight but sprightly "Edward and Caroline" (Commercial) and gives it a special flavor. The story, what little there is of it, centers about two delightful young people, the boy an unsuccessful concert pianist, his pretty wife a girl of good family. There are quarrels and misunderstandings, flirtations and seductions, all laced with warm, human perceptions and wry commentaries on temperamental artists, on degenerate high society folk, and on life in general. Daniel Gélin as Edward is small, dark, and unhandsome, but filled with charm; and Anne Vernon is a lovely, effervescent Caroline. It's a light, gay, graceful, and strikingly handsome production.

These same virtues are conspicuously lacking in "The Prize" (Classic), and this is the more surprising since the film is a Marcel Pagnol adaptation of one of Maupassant's better known short stories. Basically, it is a good satiric theme. A group of ex-



"Under the Paris Sky"—"a mad sculptor stalks through the city."

tremely virtuous ladies in a provincial town decide to award a purse of 100,000 francs to the most virtuous local girl. None can be found, so the prize goes to Isidore, the town's most virtuous young man. A trip to Paris with one of the committee women, however, changes Isidore completely. Director Jean Boyer creates a good deal of amusement with his artfully drawn local types, and Pagnol has supplied them with many really funny lines. But Bourvil, as Isidore, dominates the proceedings and his ideas of comedy, given free rein, prove disastrous. His strenuous overplaying turns droll satire into tasteless farce.

"The Perfectionist" (Discina) is probably best representative of the French producers' idea of a safe and solid picture, a long and dreary account of life in a Paris hospital starring Pierre Fresnay. For the French, of course, Fresnay can do no wrong. And in justice to him, his portrait of the gloomy Dr. Delage is everything it should be, well modulated, intelligent, apparently sincere. But the script picks up the good doctor at nowhere in particular, involves him in a half-dozen spectacularly uninteresting subplots, and then unceremoniously drops him at the conclusion of somebody else's story. By that time, however, one is grateful simply to be released.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

SR Recommends

Under the Paris Sky: Reviewed in this issue.

The Sniper: An intelligently executed melodrama about a compulsive killer. (SR May 10.)

Outcast of the Islands: Conrad's early novel transformed by Carol Reed into a film with a full quota of authentic atmosphere. (SR Apr. 26.)

Miss Julie: Based on Strindberg, this importation from Sweden is gloomy in tone, sensitive in execution. (SR Apr. 26.)

Walk East on Beacon: An admirably detailed filming of counter-espionage in the USA, made with the cooperation of the FBI. (SR Apr. 19.)

Encore: Another trio of Maugham short stories turned into an engaging film. (SR Apr. 5.)

The Man in the White Suit: Alec Guinness invents a fabric that will never wear out—with hilarious consequences. (SR Apr. 5.)

The Marrying Kind: Matrimony runs a bumpy but witty course as delineated by actress Judy Holliday, director George Cukor, and writers Kanin & Gordon. (SR Mar. 22.)

5 Fingers: L. C. Moyzisch's "Operation Cicero" turned into a spy film that avoids all the usual clichés of the genre and includes an abundance of the Mankiewicz sophistication. (SR Mar. 8.)

African Fury: A rather bizarre retitling for U.S. distribution of "Cry, the Beloved Country," with screen script by Alan Paton and starring the late Canada Lee. (SR Feb. 2.)

Stage & Screen.

In Europe when a scholar whose influence on his field has been considerable reaches three-score-and-ten, his admirers customarily honor him with a Festschrift volume. In the American theatre few men of his time have had as far-reaching an influence as George Jean Nathan. To celebrate his seventieth birthday, one of his admirers, Charles Angoff, has shown why that is so by publishing a representative collection of his writing, "The World of George Jean Nathan" (below) One of the great training schools for the present-day stage and screen, little known during its existence two decades ago, was the University Players. An alumnus, Norris Houghton, has recorded its checkered but distinguished history in "But Not Forgotten" (page 36). . . . The still meager shelf of books available on the film has three new additions, reviewed this week: "Dynamics of the Film" (page 37), "Hollywood USA" (page 37), and "Film in Education" (page 37).

The Fearsome "Mr. Critic"

THE WORLD OF GEORGE JEAN NATHAN. Edited by Charles Angoff. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 489 pp. \$5.

By LAWRENCE LANGNER

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN, according to the blurb on the cover of this book, celebrated his seventieth birthday on St. Valentine's Day 1952, and the volume honors Nathan by reprinting the best material from his almost three dozen published books, selected by his admiring friend, Charles Angoff. The occasion is, therefore, primarily one for bouquets and congratulations. Regarded as a Valentine to commemorate the event, this lively and readable volume of Nathan's essays, articles, manifestoes, credos, and self-revelations recalls the past of our theatre with a nostalgic perfume of sweet lavender mixed with the pungent odor of old vitriol. One misses from this volume, however, a picture of Nathan against a background of hearts and flowers surrounded by a wreath of forget-me-nots. Nathan is still the gayest and youngest-looking of all the drama critics, for all his three-score-and-ten. An extremely likable fellow, he is a veritable Adonis who, for years, ran neck and neck with Brooks Atkinson and John Mason Brown in the annual Beauty Contest of the Drama Critics' Circle, but eventually outstripped them both since, according to his own view, as he grew older he grew even handsomer.

Lawrence Langner, founder, director and co-administrator of *The Theatre Guild*, is also a playwright, producer, and patent agent.

This volume of Nathan's writings recalls the great service rendered by him in the early days of the modern American theatre in making dramatic criticism readable, vital, and exciting. Beginning in an era when the newspapers supported a bevy of resounding bores as their drama critics, it was the young Nathan in the pages of the monthly magazine *The Smart Set*, which he edited with H. L. Mencken from 1908 to 1923, who led the vanguard of the critics and paved the way for such vigorous young writers as Heywood Broun, Alexander Woollcott, John Mason Brown, Robert Benchley, and the group of contemporary critics, many of whom are still with us. These critics wrote about the theatre with such youthful zest and enthusiasm that they literally drove their readers to share their excitement in the plays and players. Alas, according to Nathan at a later date, "No critic in his first days is worth a hoot. . . . The best critics are and have been blasé men." And he adds, "It is the critic that has a hard time keeping awake at the Metropolitan, at the theatre or in an art gallery, that is the critic who is worth reading." Poppycock, Mr. Nathan!

Nathan, as these pages reveal, has never been a temperate critic. Like the little girl with the curl, when he is good he is very, very good, and when he is bad he is horrid. Like all important critics, he has been a crusader for his preferences, and has promoted the objects of his critical affections with all the zeal of an impassioned evangelist. Since I share with him an unqualified admiration for two of the objects of his affection, Eugene O'Neill and Bernard Shaw, I feel grateful that his pen has been wielded so powerfully in their behalf. Indeed, his kind-