WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE MOVIES?

The Industry Seems to Be in a Critical Condition,—and Perhaps It Deserves to Be

By Aleister Crowley

IT is bad taste—and not the World War—which is killing the movies. Bad taste in every direction. In the first place, the wretches in power, when they get a perfectly competent author—say a novelist of great repute—will not trust him at all. The great writer's story has always been a "movie"—on the screen of the author's mind. It was complete in every picture, before he ever put pen to paper. But the producing wretches do not know that. They do not realize that he has done the thing *right*. They do not even realize this in the case of a famous novel—or play—where a long success has proved it. These preposterous people do not understand that they insult the public and make themselves ridiculous into the bargain when they offer to "improve" Victor Hugo; to bring Dumas "up-to-date"; to put "punch" into Ibsen; or to "alter" history a bit in order to give Joan of Arc an earthly lover.

SOME months back two wealthy gentlemen were lunching at the Knickerbocker Hotel, in New York, where all movie magnates seem to make a habit of foregathering. They were trying to think of a book to "film." A pause. One suggested Victor Hugo's "Hunchback of Notre Dame." "A grand sweet story! Some story! Some punch! Some pep!" A longer pause. "Say, why, in our film, shouldn't that hunchback marry the beautiful gipsy chicken?" "But, say, we can't have that little pippin tied up to a hunchback." "I got it, bo, we'll get a Johns Hopkins guy to straighten him out on the operating table." "Say, you're *some* artist, Al."

And so, alas, it all came about.

These two master minds could not foresee that everyone who had read Hugo's great story would leave the theatre foaming at the mouth, raving for blood.

Similarly with "Hedda Gabler." They had to improve on Ibsen's great curtain, and bring in George Tesman to confront Brack, who faints on hearing the pistol shot, and asks, "Why should *you* faint at *my* wife's death?" with all the air of one who proposes an amusing riddle!

One could go on for hours describing the fatuity of the movie men. It is not that their ideas are necessarily wrong in themselves, but that they are inappropriate—and in bad taste. They forget that the author has thought out all his contrasts and values, and even a better author could not alter them without destroying them utterly.

SUPPOSE that I make up my mind that one of Charles Condor's painted women on a fan lacks distinctness? Do I call in Zuloaga to put a new head on her? Zuloaga will paint me in a fine head, no doubt; but he is certain to throw out the rest of Condor's picture. In the realm of painting I much prefer Gaugain to John Lavery, but I should not ask the former to paint a Samoan head on the shoulders of the portrait of "Lady Plantagenet-Tudor" by the latter. Consider the diffident reverence with which a great artist like Sir A. Quiller-Couch finished a novel by Stevenson—and always from the master's notes.

NORMA TALMADGE

Has just vivified—on the screen at least—"Poppy," Cynthia Stockley's African novel. The article on this page has something to say concerning the lack of good taste shown by our movie managers. Miss Talmadge's acting seems effectually to disprove that theory

It has often been said that the worst author knows his business better than the best critic, just as the feeblest father will beget more children than the biggest naval gun. But in the movies we have men who are such atrociously bad critics that they permit the most shocking solecisms in almost every scene.

See the wealthy New York man of fashion, dressing for a dinner at Mrs. De Peyster Stuyvesant's! See how deftly he shoots on his detachable cuffs and snaps on his elastic tie. See how charmingly he wears his derby hat with his evening coat. He even retains it, possibly fearing that it may be stolen in Mrs. Stuyvesant's drawing-room, which is, of course, furnished in the manner of the gentlemen's lounge on a Fall River boat.

IN this connection let us observe how the Russian Ballet gets its splendid effect of art. There is a true and tried artist for the scenery, another for the arrangement of the dances, another for the music, another for the costumes, and so on. All conspire, all contribute, the one careful never to impede the work of the others. The result is an artistic unity. Tinker with the whole, bring in one inharmonious element, and the entire conception goes by the board. A Zulu chief is a magnificent object—but you must not exchange his gum-ring for Charlie Chaplin's derby hat.

MODERN opera is suffering in the same way. The only pains taken at the Metropolitan, let us say, is with the hiring of the singers. The same old scenic conventions must do, the same old wardrobe traditions, the same old lighting arrangements, and the same antiquated ballets. The result is that an "art impression" is never made. People go away, praising the orchestra and the singers; but they are not stunned, carried out of themselves by the glory of witnessing a really artistic operatic creation. There is everywhere evident this same blind fatuity in the movies.

TO return to the question of the author. Who invented modern musical comedy? Gilbert and Sullivan. Gilbert insisted—made it a point in every contract or license—that his libretto was to have no cuts, no modifications, no gags; even his minutest stage directions were to be followed implicitly.—Take it or leave it. Most of his stuff is therefore as strong and sound and playable today as it ever was.

But his successors have not his willpower. To-day every inartistic man in a movie production must needs have a finger in the artistic pie. Some of their suggestions may possibly be good, some bad; but the unity and coherence of the author's conceptions are lost, and the outcome is a muddle. *Ne sutor ultra crepidam.* Too many cooks spoil the broth.

In the movies this confusion is accentuated to the point of dementia. What costumes! What furniture! What ladies! What ballrooms! What clubs! What love scenes! What butlers and footmen! What dinner tables! What débutantes! What boots and slippers! What coiffures! What jewelry! What manners!

Several times, of late, I have seen films where the tinkers had improved a good novel out of existence. The beginning, end, and middle of the story had been dexterously amputated or "arranged." We were not informed of the relationship existing between the various characters; the motives for their acts were utterly obscure. A "situa- (*Continued on page 88*)