

THE MOTION PICTURE NOVEL

By Rodolph Valentino

IT is more difficult for a screen actor to make good after he has been starred than it is before that elevation. His name has become a box office magnet and in his producer's eyes he, himself, has ceased to exist. His company begins to put out "Smith" productions and not Smith himself, and yet the general public wants Smith as a personality.

His pictures are considered from the point of view of the exhibitor and the cost. Since he is a star his salary has increased; the amount spent on production is therefore cut down accordingly; and through the finished product the star is often seen wandering disconsolately with nothing but his name to recommend him.

I find this preamble rather necessary to make my position understood when I say that the only friend the star has, after stardom, is the novelist. Every time a star is shown the manuscript of the story of his next production, he visualizes his final resting place yawning before him and he prays for another lease on life. For our lives are very short. A stage star granted sufficient personality can do two or three unsuited rôles and still find an audience, but not we screen actors. We are primarily personalities and we have no background; we know that our fate trembles in the balance with each new film. It is an adage with film exhibitors — the men who show the films to the audiences

throughout the country — that a star given three successive weak vehicles is finished, and that a comeback is impossible. Therefore we stars can only hope for a novelist who will create characters real enough and big enough to rise triumphant over the onslaught of the continuity writer, film editor, title man, director, film cutter, producer, and one's own convictions.

The screen demands in a portrayal constant sincerity. One can never give a "colorful" performance in the sense of the theatre. The grand gesture must be eliminated. A stage actor can often do an excellent piece of work with his mind out in his dressing room, but that attitude on the screen photographs quite as clearly as one's cuffs. Then if the character which one is reproducing has no vitality, no truth or breath of humanness, do you see how difficult it becomes to simulate such sincerity?

It was for that reason that I hated Mrs. Hull's Sheik. I was forced by the censors, my director, and Mrs. Hull's original creation to play this wild Arabian charmer as though he were an associate professor of the history of English literature at Oxford. Or consider Lord Bracondale, the hero of Elinor Glyn's original screen story "Beyond the Rocks". The finest actor in the world could not have made him other than a passionate travelogue.

Between these two stories I played the hero in Frank Norris's "Moran of the Lady Letty". I have, you see, been lucky in authors, even securing a master like Balzac. A beautifully photographed version of his "Eugénie Grandet" was made but the plot was subjected to sufficient manipulation to permit of its being released under the filmesque title "The Conquering Power". But for "Moran" I was too

Latin to play a convincing Anglo-Saxon, and the reaction of my public to three such rôles as Moran, the Sheik, and the touring Lord Bracondale, following one after the other, had me distinctly uneasy. I am convinced that it was only the sheer luck of having preceded and then followed them with a character conceived by Ibáñez that saved me.

For Ibáñez, more than any writer today, seems to catch exactly the values which are finest for the screen. He has color, he has action, he has the conflict of a human soul against great external conflict. He develops a love plot but most of all his characters have substance. They fairly gaze at you from their printed descriptions. They are compounded on the same astonishing formula as ourselves: mingled vice and slender virtues, muddled thought and the illusive seeking for that which we cannot define.

Julio in "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and Juan Gallardo in "Blood and Sand" have been termed my best acting. I am flattered by such praise but I doubt that they were, particularly the former. I feel, rather Puritanically, that it is not great work to have done something that was so easy. I felt much more clever when I was told that I had made Armand in Dumas's "Camille" seem real, for to me he was a badly stuffed personage. But in "The Four Horsemen" I played what I knew to be myself, and when finished he turned out to be Julio because, granted the setting and the period, Julio is any man of the type who lets his weakness dictate his circumstances.

Juan Gallardo was more the puppet than Julio — a character, truly, but manipulated by the bull ring and Doña Sol. I enjoyed playing him more than any rôle I have created, however, for

there was the opportunity to show in him a complete life from early youth to death.

Definitely such characters possess "screen rights". Yet when Ibáñez wrote directly for the screen without first having developed his story as a novel, he failed. Personally, I believe he was contaminated by the lay figures which inhabit the studio imagination. He followed his instructions to concentrate on action, on plot motivation, not realizing that the most meagrely equipped continuity writer can usually more efficiently do such mechanical labor, whereas the development of a character would be impossible to him. Ibáñez, being a wise man, saw his technique was unsuited to such a task and went back to writing novels. They were written with one eye on the screen, but that is as it should be. I wish more good novelists did similarly. It is, I understand, rather the accepted thing for the better novelists to sneer at these movie made plots; but if they regard the material we do get as inferior, why do they not turn their fine talent to remedying this state? The whole film world would pay them homage. It would pay them both in dollars—to which, for all their artistic integrity, I cannot believe they are entirely impervious—and in vast publicity and a vaster public.

For the movies are a new art medium. The coldly intellectual expression of art acquires a sterility which eventually deadens it. It is my feeling that any creative expression that has so great a mass appeal must have a basis firmly founded on the instinct for idealism and perfection which is the beginning of all art.

It is to the novelists that we must look for an advancement in the movies. Mechanically the films are perfect.

From the point of lighting they could not be improved, in the selection of settings they are remarkable. We are daily learning to use better makeup. We are hiring better art directors and putting out better printed negatives. But the film stories, except to morons, are agonizing.

I realize the obstacle of censorship. I grant the stupidity of many continuity writers and directors. I admit the asininity of film editing. Yet a real character possesses a resiliency that lets it rebound. It cannot be killed. The Miracle Man lived; the mother in Fannie Hurst's "Humoresque" lived; Tol'able David lived; they stood out, artistically and financially, against a dozen Rich Men's Affinities and Calif's Sweeties. "Blood and Sand" has already amassed earnings considerably in excess of a million dollars, and without any undue humility I believe the big factor in its appeal was the real character involved.

We have worn out the complexities of situation. We are forced, willingly or not, to delve into the subtleties of characterization. Naturally no star actor is adverse to that. He can readily be persuaded that his profile holds infinitely more dramatic possibilities than a battle scene.

Seriously though, and very sincerely, I appeal to the better novelists to consider the screen. We could very well be the hope of each other.