WANTED: SHORT OR LONG RESPITE BY FORMER CINÉASTE

I OFTEN ask myself these days as I shell out four dollars, stumble over people's feet in the murk, and gingerly settle down on the slag of their popcorn just what sort of will-o'-the-wisp I'm still pursuing. Surely anyone marinated by sixty-five years' exposure to the silver screen, mile upon mile of acetate etched with the hallucinations of ribbon clerks and debauched waitresses, would be much better off at home sipping hot cocoa and reading Pascal's "Pensées" in his nightgown—they now have nightgowns embroidered with Pascal's thoughts—yet there I sit, slack-jawed, a grizzled prospector still avid for whatever nuggets might turn up in the sludge. To be candid, the only ones I hope to unearth someday were encapsulated, say my informants, in two foreign films of such unrelieved tedium that projectionists fainted away in their booths. The first was an Italian production, laid in ancient Greece, which bumbled along inexorably up to the moment its hero declined an invitation to dinner. "I really would love to come," he assured the host, "but we're having a dialogue at Plato's tonight." The second, a Mitteleuropean strudel based on the life of Mozart, contained a passage wherein the young genius tremblingly approached his patron, a Herr Mossbach, for an estimate of his latest work. The verdict, alas, was devastating, and Mozart, streaked with tears, tottered out into the snow. Waiting on the corner, his confidant, Bill Eugenspiel, refused to be daunted by the news. "Courage, Wolfgang," he said, clapping him cheerily on the back. "Who cares what that old mossback thinks? Let us go and compose 'The Magic Flute.' "

While treasures as dazzling as these are of a rarity beyond price, it should be noted that there are equally precious ones that were never recorded on film but that sparkle in the memory of graybeards like yours truly, who was once connected with the cinema. During the spring of 1935, I was briefly employed at the Warner Brothers-First National studio in Burbank, spot-welding the dialogue on a number of its pictures. Among the dozen or so screenwriters on the assembly line, which included Flotsman and Jetsman, a team that wrote several gangster classics, was one Winston Finston, a scholarly, withdrawn chap with a hearing aid, whose deafness, mercifully, shielded him from our boisterous witticisms. His particular achievement, I learned, was that he had furnished the idea for "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet," the movie, starring Edward G. Robinson, about the epochal discovery of arsphenamine, the anti-syphilitic compound marketed as Salvarsan. Even had Finston and I been marooned together on a desert island, however, the pallid spirochete would have been a dubious basis for friendship, and in due course we left the lot without exchanging so much as an imprecation about its godhead, Darryl Zanuck.

A decade passed before I heard of the man again, and then in a context so different that it defied credulity. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, Finston, despite other seeming disabilities, like flat feet and membership in the Consumers Union, had applied for entry into the United States Marine Corps and been accepted. His experience gained as a screenwriter enabled him to survive the rigorous training of the Corps. He scrambled through mire, demonstrated he could eviscerate any opponent, and in general displayed sufficient barbarity under pressure to qualify him for jungle warfare. Shortly thereafter, his outfit received a forty-eight-hour leave, along with the strict admonition to hold itself ready to be shipped out. Four days later, a couple of burly M.P.s ransacking the Los Angeles area for strays came abreast of a renowned delicatessen called Woloshin's, on La Brea just off Wilshire. Through the window they caught sight of a figure in Marine uniform staging a culinary orgy. A cornucopia of smoked salmon, sturgeon, pastrami, corned beef, chopped liver, sauerkraut, dill pickles, sour tomatoes, rye bread, bagels, and seeded rolls ranged before him, Finston sat, chewing blissfully, his eyes closed and hearing aid switched off —a man literally at ease in Zion. His bubble, woefully, burst in a twinkling when the M.P.s yanked him to his feet and branded him AWOL.

"I'm not! I'm not!" he pleaded. "They sent me here!"

His captors gaped at him. "They what?"

"They told me to go to Woloshin's."

"Not Woloshin's, you fool," they cried in outrage. "The *Aleutians!*"

CAME postwar Hollywood, when McCarthy's tumbrels rolled and the mournful cry of the fink—"Bring out your dead heresies"—resounded through the streets. From Azusa to the shores of Malibu, from the throne of Harry Cohn, at Columbia, to the cardboard spires of M-G-M, where Louis B. Mayer and Dore Schary were suzerain,

dissent was hushed, and no man gave ear to his neighbor lest Communist henbane be poured in while he nodded. Under the iron heel, the crucible well-nigh cracked, but along with the dross it produced one gem of purest ray serene. Its mineral elements, so to speak, were two—Keenan Wynn, the actor, and an executive at M-G-M named Serge Kolodny. The latter, a porcine type akin to those that root out truffles in Périgord, had been chosen by management to sniff out lurking subversives, and though Wynn bore no taint, he had been observed at meetings of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, a supposed branch of the Comintern. Inviting the young man to his office, Kolodny proceeded to massage his ego with chicken fat. Like his immortal sire, greatest of all comedians, Keenan was B.O. dynamite, the most blazing talent since Warren William, and Clark Gable's own choice to inherit his mantle. Hence it was imperative to inoculate him against insidious foreign doctrines. Could Keenan by any chance, he asked silkily, recall the names of any individuals he had encountered at the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League?

"Jiminy crickets," Wynn protested. "I meet hundreds of people every day, Mr. Kolodny. I never listen to their names, I just autograph—"

"Of course, my boy," his inquisitor soothed him. "Nobody could answer a question like that off the top of their head. Now, why don't you go home, have a couple of highballs and a good feed, and tomorrow, when your brain clears, we'll have another chat—O.K.? . . . By the way," he called out as Wynn was closing the door, "the option on your contract's just coming up for renewal, isn't it?"

A sudden, inexplicable fantasy that he was being drawn up into Kolodny's snout as into a vacuum cleaner seized the actor, and he left hurriedly.

The interrogation resumed next day, with Kolodny using every means short of threat to elicit the identity of the League's conspirators. In vain, he wheedled, flattered, cooed. Wynn's forehead beaded over with perspiration as he lashed his memory to no purpose. All he could recollect, he asserted, was a sea of faces, speeches, applause.

The other man resorted to guile. "The human mind is like a maze," he pronounced, formulating what might be termed Kolodny's Law. "The more you hock away on it, the less you can drain out. Now," he added, with apparent irrelevance, "I understand you're very fond of motorcycling. Is that correct?"

Wynn signified it was.

"Then forget everything we said. Take a carefree little spin on your wheel—go to Vegas, Tijuana, lay in the sun and commute with nature. Remember what Shakespeare said: 'Where the bee sucks, there suck I.' By Monday, you'll be as fresh as a baby, ready to spill out names, dates, all that poison they fed you."

Three days thence, Wynn sat once more in Kolodny's office, oil-stained and travel-worn, fiddling with the helmet and goggles in his lap. "The next night, we went on to Bakersfield," he recounted. "After dinner, I shot some pool there—"

"Yes, yes, must have been a great trip," Kolodny said impatiently. "You look fabulous, Keenan. But, getting back to our little problem—did you at least think of one person you recognized at those League meetings?"

As Wynn hesitated and nodded slowly, Kolodny half rose from his chair. "Who, who?" he fluted like a barn owl.

"Dore Schary," said the actor.

Kolodny's face went livid. "What the hell, kid, you're only human," he sputtered. "If you can't remember, you . . . can't . . . *remember!*"

"You stay here and watch our markets in the States. I'll open China."

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AMONG the regrets most of us harbor in common, I daresay, is the wish that we could have been a fly on the wall at some colloquy of the great. I once grew dizzy when Sax Rohmer, the creator of Dr. Fu Manchu, in the course of narrating some trifling incident observed, "At the time, I was strolling arm in arm with E. Phillips Oppenheim at a hotel in Évian-les-Bains." Similarly, what a privilege it would have been to eavesdrop on Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler at the dinner *Black Mask* gave its contributors in the twenties, even though each swore he was unconscious of the other's presence. No less historic was an occasion in 1933 when two celebrated poets converged in Hollywood, giving rise to a line that lit up the sky like Vesuvius. Flies on the wall there were none, but one of the duo, E. E. Cummings, generously confided the details many years later.

"God knows what I was doing on the Coast," he said. "Some impresario with a pointy head had read my play 'him' and thought it would make a good musical for Jeanette MacDonald and Bertrand Russell, so Marian and I

"Say, isn't that Saunders, Brown, Orito, Smith, Smedley & Parks?"

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went out to see if there was any catch. There was—he wanted me to play Russell, in a sailor suit. Well, when that fell through, we figured what the dickens, you're only dead once, let's be real Angelenos. So we visited the homes of the stars, watched the grunion run at Santa Monica, drank malted milks too thick for a straw—it was stupendous. Those people really know how to get the marrow out of life." He paused, obviously derailed by a random memory. "Say, who was the fat poet who used to hang around Lee Chumley's place down here in the old days?"

"Fat poet?" I pondered. "Would it be Eli Siegel, who wrote 'Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana'? He was thin, but his poetry was quite fat."

"No, no, this one wrote light verse. Used to contribute to F.P.A.'s 'Conning Tower' in the *World*. . . . Well, doesn't matter. Anyway, just before we left L.A., some face card in the movie colony invited us to a party, a very stylish affair, in a gorge called Pussy Willow Canyon—or am I making that up?"

I assured him that naught was impossible in the Land of Nod.

"Well, we had a devil of a time finding the place—drove up and down endless ravines, blundered into the wrong haciendas, châteaus, palazzos—and finally got there an hour late. The house was lit up like Versailles. Rivers of champagne, two hundred magnificoes milling around the lawns—it was a floorwalker's idea of heaven." He stopped again. "Look, this fat poet whose name escapes me—you must remember him. He was pretty well known; in fact, he wrote some very sprightly stuff for the old *Life* and *Vanity Fair*."

"I can't think who you mean. Wait a second—could it have been Louis Untermeyer or Arthur Guiterman?"

He brightened. "Yes, the same *galère*, the W. S. Gilbert school, but it wasn't either of them. Oh, well, it'll come to me. So there we were at this shindig, Maid Marian and I, strutting around with the other peacocks. Eftsoon, some rake like Lew Cody or Lowell Sherman besought her to trip the light fantastic, and away they whirled to the strains of 'There's Danger in Your Eyes, Chérie.' Just as I was heading for the bar, someone grabbed my shoulder, spun me around, and wrapped me in an embrace, drenching my shirtfront with his tears. It was this poet from Chumley's. He'd been out there writing movies for fifteen years— And now I remember his name. 'Look on me, *cher maître*, and have pity,' he was sobbing. 'You knew me when I was Sam Hoffenstein, a bard. Cummings, I'm a whore!' "

But, of course, that was just a metaphor. I worked in the place. They never made any of us wear kimonos.

—S. J. Perelman