DON'T BRING ME OSCARS

(WHEN IT'S SHOESIES THAT I NEED)

IS there anybody hereabouts who would like to pick up, absolutely free, the exclusive American rights to one of the most thrilling documentary films ever left unfinished? I know where such a property can be acquired, together with the exclusive worldwide rights, a brand-new Bell & Howell camera, a director's whistle, a folding canvas chair (my name can always be painted out and your own substituted), a pair of white riding breeches, and a megaphone for barking orders at actors. In fact, I am even prepared to slip a deuce to anyone who removes a bundle containing the foregoing from my flat, and, what's more, I'll throw in the issue of the *Times* that inspired the whole business.

The impulse to capture on film a small but significant segment of the life around me was awakened by a feature article, in the Sunday screen section of that paper, on Roberto Rossellini. "Armed only with a movie camera and an idea," reported a Berlin correspondent, the gifted director of "Open City" and "Paisà" has been shooting a picture called "Berlin, Year Zero," with a non-professional cast headed by an eleven-year-old street urchin. It was the account of Rossellini's iconoclastic production technique that particularly riveted my attention:

> The script is literally being written as the shooting progresses in an effort to keep it as realistic as possible. When young Edmund, the star, is in a dramatic situation, Rossellini asks, "What would you say if this really happened to you?" The boy comes back with some vivid remark which probably would not get by the Eric Johnston office and if it isn't too obscene it goes into the script. Once during a street scene a truckload of bread went by. Forgetting everything, Edmund piped, "My goodness, I could eat all that bread!" "Don't cut, don't cut!" shouted Rossellini. "Leave it in!"

The unabashed, Rabelaisian coarseness of Edmund's remark understandably brought a tide of crimson to my cheeks, but when the shock had subsided, it presented a challenge. If Edmund's exclamation was dramatic, the casual dialogue around my own household was pure Ibsen. For all I knew, the prattle I brushed aside as humdrum or picayune had a truly Shakespearean majesty and sweep; collected on celluloid, it might wring the withers of moviegoers across the nation, send them alternately sobbing and chuckling into a thousand lobbies to extol my genius. I saw myself fêted as the poet of the mundane, the man who had probed beneath the banality and commonplaceness of the American home and laid bare its essential nobility. The thought of the prestige and money about to accrue made me so giddy that I felt a need to lie down, but as I was already lying down, I merely removed the *Times* from my face and consolidated my plans. Using the family as actors, and the Rossellini method of improvisation, I would make a documentary of an afternoon in the life of some average New York apartment dwellers. I summoned my kin and excitedly outlined the project. My wife's enthusiasm was immediate, though she cloaked it under a show of apathy; it was evident she was livid at not having conceived the idea herself.

"A really crackpot notion," she admitted, confusing the word with "crackerjack" with typical feminine disregard for the niceties of slang. "You've outdone yourself this time."

"I ought to be the star," whined my son, an eleven-year-old house urchin. "I was in our school play last year."

"No, me, me!" shrilled his sister. "I want to wear Mummy's mascara!"

"Get this, Mr. Burbage," I snapped, "and you, too, Dame Terry. This is one picture without stars, or makeup, or any of that Hollywood muck. I want authenticity, see? Don't try to act; just be natural. Behave as if there were no camera there at all."

"If you want *complete* realism," began my wife, her face brightening hopefully, "why not do away with the cam—"

"That'll do," I interposed. "Now put on your *rebozos* and slope out of here, the lot of you. I've got a pretty heavy production schedule, and I haven't time to *schmoos* with actors. Remember, everybody on the set tomorrow at three sharp—we start grinding whether you're here or not." I spent the remainder of the day as a seasoned old showman would, gulping bicarbonate of soda, reading *Variety*, and evolving a trademark for my stationery. The trademark offered something of a problem. After toying with the idea of combining the emblems of J. Arthur Rank and M-G-M, to show a slave striking a lion, I rejected it as Socialistic and devised one that portrayed a three-toed sloth pendant from a branch, over the motto "Multum in Parvo." The exhibitors might not understand it too well, and, frankly, I didn't either, but it had dignity and a nice swing to it.

THE first player to report at the appointed hour next day was my son; he entered the foyer wearing an Indian war bonnet and a bathrobe, an outfit that did not seem characteristic of a lad fresh from school, especially in the dead of winter. He assured me, though, that he and his mates occasionally liked to vary their standard costume of snow jackets and arctics, and I got a trucking shot of a small Indian in a pitch-black hallway that I will match against anything of the sort Hollywood has to offer. Renewing my strictures that my son was to behave spontaneously and follow his normal routine, I dissolved to the living room, crouched down between the andirons, and prepared to take an arresting camera angle of his movements, shooting through the fire screen. In a rather self-conscious, stagy manner, the boy deposited his briefcase on a table, lit a pipe, and, settling into an armchair, buried himself in an article on Kierkegaard in the *Antioch Review*.

"Hold on a second, Buster," I said, puzzled. "There's something wrong here. I don't know what it is, but an artificial note's crept in. Somehow I get the feeling you're acting. Think hard—is this what you actually do every afternoon?"

"Sure." He nodded. "Sometimes I add up the checkbook and then kick the dog, the way you do. Shall I do that?" Eventually, I managed to impress on him the difference between reality and make-believe, a distinction philosophers have been struggling to clarify for the last twelve hundred years, and he consented to reënact his habitual procedure, warning me, in all fairness, that it might entail a certain amount of damage.

"Smash anything you like," I ordered impatiently. "Let's have the truth, the more gusto the better. The rest is mere bookkeeping." He shrugged and, retrieving his briefcase, scaled it across the room to indicate how he generally discarded it. An exquisite porcelain Buddha that had cost me thirty dollars and two days of haggling in Hong Kong crashed to the floor. It made such a superb closeup that I could not repress a cry of elation.

"Bravo! Tiptop!" I encouraged. "Whatever you do, keep rolling—don't break the rhythm! I'm getting it all!" Humming a gay little air, the actor turned in to the kitchen and helped himself to a bowl of rice pudding, half a

"He's put us on the spot, I'm afraid. He refuses our offer to settle for fifty thousand dollars—says he'll marry you first."

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cream cheese, an orange, a stalk of celery, and a glass of charged water, leaving the cap off the bottle and the door of the refrigerator open. I then panned with him to the breadbox, where he surreptitiously trailed his finger through the icing on a chocolate cake and nibbled the corner of a napoleon. In the ensuing shot, another transition, we milked the hall closet for some surefire footage. He made a routine check of my overcoat, observing that he frequently found change in the pockets and that it tended to gather rust if left there indefinitely. On the threshold of his room, a strange hesitancy overcame him. He paused, obviously loath to reveal the next phase, for fear of parental censure.

"I—I just turn on Jack Armstrong and do my homework till it's time to black Sister's eye," he said evasively.

"Come, come," I prodded. "We're not in the cutting room yet. You left something out."

"Well-l-l," he said, "once in a while I blow up the toilet."

"What for?" I demanded, aghast.

"Nothing," he replied. "It makes a nice sound." All the fellas, it appeared on cross-examination, diverted themselves with this scholarly pastime, and since I realized that my canvas must stand or fall on its fidelity to nature, I set myself to film it. Preparations were soon complete; with smooth efficiency, the boy emptied a can of lye into the bowl, attached a long cord to the handle, and, flinging a lighted match into the lye, yanked the cord. There was a moment's ominous silence. Then a roar like the bombardment of Port Arthur shook the plumbing, and a nine-foot geyser of water reared skyward, subsiding in a curtain of mist. The effect, photographically speaking, was similar to what one sees when standing under Niagara Falls (except for the towels and the toothbrushes in the background, of course); actuarially speaking, it shortened my life ten years. The end result, nevertheless, was worth while, for in his exultation the child uttered a line immeasurably more graphic than that of Rossellini's young hero.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed. "I'd certainly hate to have to mop up all that water!"

"Don't cut, don't cut!" I shouted. "Leave it in!" The fact that we had no sound equipment and that Junior's *mot* had not been recorded in the first place weakened my position somewhat, but then, you can't have everything.

WITH the poor sense of timing you might expect of amateurs, my wife and daughter chose this, of all moments, to arrange their entrance, arms heaped with groceries, and in the restricted area of the foyer I was unable to maneuver the camera to obtain a first-rate composition. The good woman instantly raised a hue and cry over the state of the bathroom, forgetful of the fundamental movie axiom that omelets are never made without breaking eggs. My brief statement that we had simply blown up the toilet reassured her, however, and, pointing out how the overhead was piling up, I urged her to go about her customary activities. A sequence chock-full of human interest resulted, in which she deliberately mislaid or hid all my important papers and shirt studs, sent out the wrong ties to the cleaners, and made a series of dinner dates on the telephone with people she knew I could not abide. To quicken the tempo and ensure flexibility of mood, I intercut several shots of my daughter daubing water colors on the rug and writhing in a tantrum before her music stand.

"Capital," I applauded my troupe. (Performers, and very young ones in particular, are like children—you have to play upon their vanity.) "Now, son," I said, "you'll have to handle the camera, because here's where I usually come home." To a man, they all cringed involuntarily, but my directorial eye was quick to detect and rectify the fallacy. "Get those two shakers of Martinis ready, and remember, everyone, shouts of glee when Daddy walks in." In a trice, I had slipped into the part—merely a matter of sagging a shoulder or two and assuming a murderous scowl. Just as I was shuffling toward the outside door to build up suspense for my arrival, it burst open violently, and three characters I had not foreseen in my budget catapulted in. In the order of their ascending hysteria, they were the furnaceman, the elevator boy, and the superintendent. The last carried what we theatrical folk call a prop—a fire axe—and, in the parlance of the greenroom, he was winging.

The scene that followed, though noisy and fraught with tension, was of little cinematic consequence. It dealt with some argle-bargle about a flood in the apartment below, and its audience appeal, except to plumbers and, possibly, a lawyer or two, would be slight. I understand that additional scenes, or "retakes," are to be made on it very shortly in Essex Market Court. I may drop down there just out of sheer curiosity. My schedule isn't nearly as heavy as it was, now that I've shut down active production at the studio.

—S. J. PERELMAN