

SMALL IS MY CINEMA, DEEP MY DOZE

THE hands of the clock pointed to one-thirty the other day, and my own, more flaccid than vermicelli, dangled inertly beside the dental chair as Dr. Yankwich shoved aside his drill, fired alternate rounds of compressed air and raspberry shrub down my throat, and straightened up. "There—wasn't it a breeze?" he asked gaily. "Let me help you off with that apron." He whisked off the plastic cocoon enveloping me and vigorously scrubbed at the dried foam on my chin. Mumbling several gutturals that sounded like Burmese participles dipped in novocain, I groped my way out of his cubicle to the anteroom. The right quadrant of my face, from nose to ear lobe and including a tongue unaccountably enlarged to the size of a bolt of brocatel, was frozen solid, and I looked forward bleakly to an afternoon of prickly, reluctant thaw. I couldn't have been more mistaken. I had extricat-

ed my trench coat—or what I thought was mine—from a rack festooned with them, and, pulling it on, had headed toward the bank of elevators when, halfway down the hall, the afternoon took a totally unexpected turn.

The corridor, in my dozen years of traversing it, had been lined with a variety of humdrum enterprises—accountants, custom tailors, import-export firms, and the like. Today, however, I saw that the legend "Little Cinema Lyceum, Inc." had blossomed forth in boldface on a door that now stood open, surrounded by an animated crowd. Most of its number, I became aware as I reached the periphery, were girls cultivating a resolute bohemianism; their hair was disordered, they wore a minimum of makeup and a maximum of leotard, and a dustier flock of ravens had never postured around an espresso machine. The half-dozen young men in their midst, if equally liberated, were

more colorful. They sported loud goose-neck sweaters, Breton fishermen's jackets, and, in one case at least, a single gold earring. All, to a man, had beards. The whole caboodle was chattering away nineteen to the dozen, everyone jockeying for position at the door, and despite my most strenuous efforts to get past, I was swept centripetally into the thick of the crush. Between the noise and the novocain, I was like to founder when a forceful young Amazon, with braids on the order of Alma Gluck's encircling her head, loomed over me.

"Did you get your admission card?" she trumpeted, waving a handful of tickets. I tried to disclaim affiliation with the group, but all I could achieve was a few strangled monosyllables. "You signed up for the complete course—no?" she said with a bright, affirmative nod. "I remember you by that long vest you've got on." She thrust a card at me and plunged off. Perplexed, I glanced down and discovered with hot shame that I was clad not in my coat but its interlining, a sleeveless, maternity-type garment of tan shoddy that persistently refuses to stay buttoned to the exterior. Had I displayed myself in it on the Avenue, I would have been a rare figure of fun, but in this assemblage I was just another rebel; in fact, I detected a certain amount of covert admiration. In the same instant, it struck me that since Fate had fortuitously cast me into avant-garde film circles, I ought to glean whatever profit I could from the encounter. I accordingly trained my left, or unfrozen, ear toward two vestals engaged in colloquy directly behind me.

"It was called either 'Bitter Berries' or 'Wild Fruit,'" one was saying *con brio*. "Gérard Philipe played opposite Danielle Delorme, or maybe it was Danielle Darrieux—"

"No, that was 'Sour Fruit,' with Daniel Gelin and Dany Robin," the other contradicted. "Gérard Philipe wasn't in that one."

"He was too—he's in all of them!" the first declared vehemently. "It was about this passionate young peasant with a big bust who's married to an old tyrant in a Provençal village, and she despises him, and one day she finds a tempestuous swineherd named Niedou in a haystack."

As I was passably familiar with the plot under discussion, having drowsed through endless stereotypes, I shifted my attention elsewhere. Everybody within earshot, I found, was advertising to his fellows his profound expertise on European films, the more obscure the



"Do you know, so much has happened in Scarsdale lately that I'd forgotten all about Sherman Adams..."

better. Quoted in evidence were Greek and Scandinavian pictures so experimental that nobody was quite sure of their content, except that all had the same glorious denominator of cuckoldry. The real phenomenon, though, was the zeal with which my neighbors had steeped themselves in the classics of the medium. Some had seen "Mädchen in Uniform," "Secrets of a Soul," and "Le Chien Andalou" thirty or forty times, and one pedant even exhibited a lock of F. W. Murnau's hair surreptitiously shorn from the director's head, he asserted, during the production of "Tabu" in the South Seas.

My speech, lamentably, was still too furry to ascertain the purpose of our bivouac when the Amazon sang out orders from the doorway to enter. We filed through a passage into a schoolroom of sorts, dominated by a desk at which a gentleman of obvious pedagogic status was busy shuffling papers. There was no hint of aestheticism in his dress or bearing; plump, a shade dyspeptic, and visibly in need of a shave, he might have passed for a millinery wholesaler on the edge of receivership. He coughed daintily, and restoring the dry cigar he had been chewing, rose to his feet.

"Welcome, friends," he began. "For the benefit of those that didn't attend the first session, I'm Gabe Fagin. As I told you last time, it's our mission to train personnel for little cinema theatres, which many applicants don't realize the special requirements of the work in that it differs radically from a job in the first-run houses and the nabes. So today we'll break it down into the different categories and see if we can't give you some pointers—inside trade secrets—that'll fit you for the post you want. First of all," he said thoughtfully, "how many of you girls figure on being cashiers?"

"Five hands," the Amazon reported from the sidelines.

"Good," said Mr. Fagin. "Now, will that person in the second row stand up? That's right, miss—you." A neatly coiffed brunette with wide eyes and vivid coloring arose. "Thank you. You don't mind if I use you for an illustration? . . . Well, then, let's talk cold turkey. This girl will never get to first base the way she is."

"She looks too healthy," a young man near me hazarded.

"Correct," acquiesced Fagin. "The chief requisite of the cashier in an art house is a sickly, jaded expression—a trace of the ghoul. Her hair should be long and unkempt, and no lipstick, remember—just rice powder. Furthermore," he continued, addressing his ex-



"Harold, can you hear me? Industrials are up, rails are up, coppers are up . . ."

emplar directly, "your attitude isn't half scornful enough. When the patron pushes his money through the wicket, you've got to learn how to lay aside your Baudelaire and sneer at him like he was a bindlestiff. Create the impression he'd be better off at a horror bill on Forty-second Street."

"But I like people," the girl confessed, with downcast eyes.

"Then find yourself another profession," Fagin snapped. "If it's love you're after, take up nursing. There's no room in the little cinema for humanitarians and do-gooders." Disconsolate, she subsided, and Fagin punctuated the point with his cigar for emphasis. "That goes double for the attendants in the lounge," he expounded. "Their job is harder, because they work in almost pitch-blackness dispensing the free coffee and cigarettes. Now, it's tough to be insolent there, because your natural impulse in the dark is to be clubby. So you have to evolve your own particular techniques for humiliating the customer, like spilling java on their lapel, lighting the filter end of the cigarette, et cetera. Once in a while, you get a golden op-

portunity; one of our trainees spotted a man in a celluloid collar and managed to set fire to it, but a chance like that don't come along every day."

"What about the murals?" a young woman inquired from the rear. "Sometimes people want to know what those spooky things with the urns and the cornucopias mean."

"A very good point," said Fagin approvingly. "The best way to handle these inquiries is to pretend the murals don't exist. The patron's already so dizzy from the gloom and the coffee that he starts doubting his own sanity, and by the time he reaches his seat you've sowed the seeds of a breakdown. And right there," he cut in, indicating the males in the audience, "is where you budding theatre managers come in, you fellows who arrange the programs. A generation ago, this whole problem of what we call 'exacerbation' was hardly understood, but since then we've made great strides. Let's take the short subjects to start with," he proposed. "What type would you favor to bore your clientele beyond endurance?"

A goat-bearded stripling clad in

chamois raised his hand. "Anything with caverns or stalactites in it," he declared. "Or the annual tulip celebration at Holland, Michigan, showing floral windmills and tots in wooden shoes."

"How about 'The Making of a Drum Majorette'?" another asked.

"Big-game hunting with bow and arrow," called a third.

Fagin nodded benevolently. "All first-rate," he said, "but you've overlooked the most reliable, the very cornerstone of the art cinema—skiing. No bill is well balanced without at least one short called 'Mile-a-Minute Antics' or 'White Wilderness.' To set the folks really squirming in their chairs, you add a Bugs Bunny, or Wabbit, cartoon not less than twenty years old. The other components, the newsreel and 'Coming Attractions,' are a mite tricky; they must be skillfully pruned to render them as deadly as possible. On the first, you retain the whole opening montage of troops in review, water sports, and annual Mummies' Parade as a teaser."

"But then give 'em only one news clip of a flood or mine disaster—right?" a voice behind me suggested cunningly.

"Precisely," agreed our mentor, with a twinkle. "You're catching on fast. With 'Coming Attractions,' of course, you don't show any footage at all—just a few static cards with one-word plugs like 'Arresting—*Tacoma News-Tribune*' or 'Saucy... libidinous—*Women's Wear Daily*.' Between the different novelties and Terrytoons, it goes without saying, you keep opening and closing the scrim wherever the chance presents itself. Finally, there's the question of the chaser. Some managers use a commercial film they get for free—'Water Power, Your Magic Genie,' or 'The Romance of Tuna,' made by this or that cannery concern. Myself, I prefer to turn up the house lights and play a good, dismal sound track of Chaminade, say, or Charles Wakefield Cadman." He paused, ignited his cigar, and looked about. "Any questions?"

"Yes, sir," a young man spoke up. "What about lovers in the audience—the couples with the tall hair that neck through the feature? How can they be placed so as to best interfere with the vision of those behind?"

"If your theatre is properly constructed—that is to say, without any pitch at all—that'll take care of itself," Fagin returned. He cupped his ear to catch a query from somebody in the rear. What if a foreign import, with every expectation of failure, proved a

THE CCC

CCC campers near West Cummington
In the middle thirties built a sensible dam,
Considering the river—three strong piles
Of squarish field stones, rescued from old walls,
Held solid by concrete; between these piers,
Two slabs of tightly banded logs, let down
To make a pool in summer, taken up
In October when the after-swimming air
Would be too cold even if the water wasn't,
Then dropped back into place in middle June
When the ice-flood floods from springs of melting snow
Had reached the larger rivers and the sea.
I swam there seldom as a boy; the place
Seemed tame and dull compared to other parts
Of the same river, natural, undammed.
I liked much better what the CCC
Had done upcountry: stands of spruce and fir
Planted in rambling patterns, some my height,
Some more, some less, all young and growing,
Handsome and sturdy in the midsummer air.
But I thanked the CCC boys most of all
For what they did at Windsor Jams, a gorge
Of rapids and waterfalls—they let it be
Essentially as it was, as today it is,
Neither cutting nor planting trees atop its sides,
Sweeping no needles up, breaking no rocks,
Letting the waters fall as waters will.
They took away nothing. All they thought to add
Was a series of sturdy posts along the edge
Of its cliffs, above sheer drop-offs—thick brown posts
Connected by three strands of stout steel rope,
Which, as I walked, I could run my hand along
Like an electric train, adding my game
To the natural beauty into which I gazed.
When I went back, at twenty, after the war,
I found the tent floors rotting, the dam unused,
The pines far taller than I, growing on,
But the Jams the same, and every post still strong.
Only the rust on the ropes, which stopped my hands
From feeling extended echoes, showed that here,
Even here, in time, like all things, time would change
And make forgotten the works of the CCC.

—THOMAS WHITEHEAD

surprise hit? "That's where your true showmanship, your flair for operating an art house, will emerge," he said instantly. "Pull it out and substitute 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.' . . . No other problems? O.K., then, until next week, when we'll discuss twenty ways to withhold ice water and to cheat on your air-conditioning."

That night, strolling off our dinner of South African rock-lobster tails, my wife halted suddenly as we came abreast

of our local art cinema. "Look, they're showing 'Acrid Fruit,' with Gérard Philipe, Danielle Delorme, and Danielle Darrieux!" she exclaimed. "Jesse Zunker of *Cue* gave it five mango-steens! It's all about an eager, middle-aged woman with a tyrannical husband—"

"Which is the part I play," I broke in, hustling her past. "And I'll tell you this much, puss: you won't get me into those grottoes for a while. Not even if they're showing Daniel Webster, Daniel Deronda, and Daniel Defoe."

We rounded out the evening in a bowling alley, where I cracked a metatarsal flange, but despite it I came out ahead. At least, I didn't have to watch any Chinook salmon fight their way upstream.

—S. J. PERELMAN

