

CLOSE UP

this type of film that the hybrid offspring of such methods as, it seems, are now beginning to be applied to them, will not only have lost their *raison d'être* but with it the very power to attract sufficient numbers to balance the box-office ledger.

HAY CHOWL.

ELSTREE'S FIRST "TALKIE"

At midnight on Friday, June 22, in *This Year of Grace, 1929*, the world's greatest talking picture made its bow to the jaded journalist at the Regal Cinema, Marble Arch, London, England.

Personally, long before I went, I knew it was the most magnificent talkie ever made. A fortnight had elapsed without us having a "greatest ever," and the event was about ten days overdue.

So *Blackmail*, British International's first full-length talkie, made at Elstree, had an auspicious premiere. Even the poor critic received an invitation to refreshments afterwards. That, of course, constitutes the all-in-all of the English trade show.

Strangely enough, the times were not otherwise out of joint. No comets had been seen for some months, despite

furious trunk calls by the Elstree Press department; no new stars had been discovered. The Copernican theory was unaffected by the event. Einstein, speaking relatively, is said to have regarded the affair as being of no celestial importance, although it has been suggested in certain quarters that Mercury's eccentric orbit veered slightly towards the Earth that night.

There was the usual jam, of course. At least one critic arrived, after a desperate stud hunt, to find that the best seats were filled by friends of the men who trimmed the spotlights, maiden-aunts of the supers who appeared in the artistically-focussed backgrounds, or travellers for the firm who hoped to reap a fortune from the bookings of the masterpiece.

There was a hush in the air. Time, particularly when the show was twenty minutes late, began to drag very slowly. After a grinding of needles and flickering of backcloths we were treated to an "acceptable programme fill-up" in which a gentleman in evening dress informed a lady in ditto ditto that he was hers for ever and for aye, a fact which was repeated a number of times during the singing of the lengthy ditty.

The audience applauded politely, and adjusted their ties for the more serious dish awaiting them. General managers and company promoters were observed to fidget, small part players were getting excited, assistant cameramen were ready, elbow advanced, to point out their own particular close-up to their admiring relatives.

One critic looked at his watch and yawned.

When it was all over the process was repeated. The Press

CLOSE UP

maintaining the reputation Paramount has just given them in that direction, crowded to the Lounge, which looked like the Battle of Hohenlinden. In the background were the waitresses, like the Iser, rolling rapidly.

Flashlight photographers did their stuff, the Elstree stars obtained a due meed of publicity for waiting up half the night, the men who once walked on in a picture made fifteen years ago wrought havoc around the refreshments, the ladies who supply the loungers in our cabaret sequences grabbed the sandwiches.

A dozen critics looked at their watches and grabbed taxicabs.

* * *

And so to *Blackmail*. Alfred Hitchcock had finished the picture at the time the talkie wave broke. Frenzied conferences resulted in his re-shooting most of it and making it into a dialogue picture.

It must be said at the outset that, considering that he was toying with a medium about which we knew nothing, considering he had a finished picture to doctor into a talkie, considering his star could not speak English and had to be "ghosted" throughout, he has made a good job of it.

Blackmail is perhaps the most intelligent mixture of sound and silence we have yet seen. It is not a great picture, it is not a masterpiece, it not an artistic triumph, it is not a valuable addition to the gallery of the world's great films, it is not even, I think, a great box-office picture.

But it is a first effort of which the British industry has every reason to be proud. It is Hitchcock's come-back.

While seeing it you can hardly believe that it was made by the man who gave us *Champagne* or *The Manxman*.

For perhaps the first time in the history of the commercial cinema we are faced with a good film based on a dreadful play. Usually, however low the stage, the screen can be depended upon to go one lower.

As is usual in the more serious Hitchcock pictures, all considerations are secondary to the Almighty German Technique. If you shoot up a stairway you must tilt your camera until the result looks like Gertrude Stein reduced to a cross-word puzzle. If you want to show a Flying Squad car in full blast you begin by showing a revolving wheel and draw away until you run parallel to the car. Very clever, of course. Yet Hitchcock has a way—at his best—of justifying his weaknesses.

The first reel is silent. The dialogue is in arithmetic progression with the speed of the picture. The story, which is too thin from the commercial angle, and too inane from the artistic, concerns a detective in the Flying Squad whose girl murders an artist who attempts to seduce her. He is put on the case, sees she knows something about it, keeps back his evidence, and is blackmailed by a goal-bird. He rather cleverly succeeds in making a suspect of the blackmailer who, releasing his record, runs from the police and is killed through falling through to the Dome of the British Museum!

The girl, by this time, resolves to confess, and goes to Scotland Yard, where the detective, returned from turning over the corpse, tells her everything is cleared up and butts in very effectively on her confession. The last we see or hear

CLOSE UP

of them is their laughter as they talk to the policeman on reception duty.

An altogether inconsequential theme for a good picture. Yet Hitchcock succeeds in wedding sound with silence. He has one sequence which, despite the way it has been glorified in the English press, gives one a clear idea of the potentialities of the medium. The girl overhears a chatterbox discussing the murder, while the memory of the knife is still fresh in her penny-dreadful mind. The talk dies down and down until only the word "knife" emerges, stabbing, hurting.

Inasmuch as that particular sequence is about the only one we have on record in which sound has been definitely instrumental in the development of the drama, the picture is worthwhile.

Hitchcock's Cockney humour adds to its appeal. A scene in the Underground Railway, satirical sequences in a Lyons Corner House, an altogether delightful portrait of a charwoman by Phyllis Monkman, give the film a vividness which makes it fascinating. A remarkably clever study of a C.I.D. man, played by an ex-detective, is a delight to watch. It passed without comment in the Press.

* * *

Within twenty-four hours of the show being over, the optimists were predicting an immediate revival in British production. *Blackmail* has put us on top of the world. Pudovkin is dead, Eisenstein has ceased to be. Even Carl Laemmle, a greater figure than either, is forgotten for the moment!

We shall see.

HUGH CASTLE.