

The Film's the Thing

NOW THAT "the first phase of the committee's investigation of communism in the motion picture industry" (the phrasing is Chairman Thomas's, not mine) is over, it might be well for your critic to review this show of shows, which because of its glittering cast, directors, writers *and* lively subject matter was turned into front-page news and headlines for several weeks. It is as difficult for the critic as for everyone else to see the facts through the glamor, but this much became more and more apparent as the investigations continued: the newspapers were having a field day about the whole thing, the alleged commies had the greatest contempt for the whole affair, and the House Committee on Un-American Affairs seemed to have no idea where they were going at any time.

During the first week the so-called friendly witnesses appeared and testified before the committee. I'm not exactly sure to whom they were friendly—unless this word was used to mean that they did not object to the investigation. Accusations flew right and left. It was during this first week that I fortunately began listening every night to radio's broadcasting of recordings which were made each day at the hearings; and it was then that I realized how biased was some of the newspaper reporting on the proceedings. Robert Taylor definitely stated that he was not forced into "Song of Russia," but a headline that day read: "Taylor Pushed In Red Film." It was just the old trick of papers' interpreting according to what they wanted to prove. In all fairness, however, it must be said that some of the papers deplored the manner of the investigation—particularly for its infringement of civil liberties. An editorial in the *New York Herald Tribune*, appearing early in the game, well sums up an opinion which might have been made at the end of the second week. It thoughtfully began: "The first two days of testimony upon communism in Hollywood before the House un-American Activities Committee have produced exactly what was expected of them: an abundance of unsubstantial charges, some dizzying new definitions of communism and a satisfactory collection of clippings for Mr. J. Parnell Thomas's scrapbook."

Former investigations of this kind were mainly concerned with what people had done or not done; this investigation set a precedent by being concerned about what people thought. This was well brought out during the second week when the unfriendly witnesses appeared. ("Unfriendly" to the Committee, I suppose; certainly not unfriendly to each other or to the cheering gallery.) Most of these writers, directors, producers, when asked if they were members of the Communist Party, evaded the question, tried to read a statement, were dismissed and

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cited for contempt. I'm not sure who won in these arguments between the Committee and the alleged communists. No one doubts that some of these witnesses are communists. Nor was anyone surprised that Emmet Lavery turned out to be not a communist. His testimony, by the way, made him almost the star of the show; it was lively, interesting and witty; and put a nicely tempered sparkle into the affair which smacked mainly of irresponsible name-calling.

Perhaps the point that surprised most observers of this strange show is that so few films were mentioned. After all, who or what was on trial? I have seen practically all the pictures that came into the testimony and I can't remember any communistic propaganda in any of them. "Song of Russia," which was mentioned most often, was of course friendly to our ally during the war; but it was probably no more friendly than "Mrs. Miniver" was to England. Mrs. Lela Rogers's comment that "None But the Lonely Heart" is a perfect example of communist propaganda because it is moody and somber throughout in the Russia manner could stand as typical of the confused thinking that weakened the investigation's intentions, if any.

Now that the "first phase" is over and Thomas promises the second will start after an examination of a few of the films themselves, we shall all watch the new pictures with interest. I doubt if we'll find communist propaganda, but at least we may be on our toes. I hope, however, that the investigation will not make producers overcautious or that some of this ill-advised mud slinging will not hurt established reputations. Perhaps the whole thing will blow over. Most of the statements made deserve to be forgotten. I suppose the *New York Daily News* didn't realize how funny it was being in a caption under a picture of one of Hollywood's foremost directors: "Edward Dmytryk rubs his nose during testimony yesterday." Perhaps this caption sums up the whole thing.

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