

The Movies ROMEO and

If you step on the set with the immortal lovers, you'll see film history being made!



Caught by the candid camera, during a moment of relaxation on the vast *Romeo and Juliet* set, are (from left to right) John Barrymore, Prof. W. J. Strunk, Jr., Director George Cukor, Leslie Howard and Edna May Oliver

By Dorothy Spensley

THEY were shooting the fifteenth century classic *Romeo and Juliet* on Metro's back lot. Leslie Howard, the *Romeo* sat dozing in the sun. Open on his knees was a script of Shakespeare's great love tragedy. It was a quiet afternoon.

Juliet was nowhere to be seen on this Verona, Italy, street scene that covers one hundred acres. Norma Shearer, who is *Juliet* in the talking screen's first version of Shakespeare's play, was in the wardrobe department trying on the pink chiffon "balcony scene" dress that has a fabulously hand-embroidered and sequined blue cape.

Outside of San Zeno, the grand old 12th century Italian cathedral, *Tybalt* (Basil Rathbone) stood drinking a pint of chocolate-milk. He hadn't met his death yet, by *Romeo's* sword, and enjoyed the black tights, and the silver-and-gold trappings of his black blouse with its nail-studded sleeves.

Down a side street, the camera crew was working with Director George Cukor in charge. Cukor is the solidly-built fellow, imported from Broadway's stage in 1929, who directed *Dinner at Eight*, *Little Women*, *David Copperfield*. A hundred or more extras milled about the set, dragging their gold lamé gowns (cloth

of gold, in Renaissance days) on the cobblestones; the men were wearing peaked felt hats with single feathers swooping up from the pointed brims. The set could only be described as colossal.

I hailed Mr. Cukor with a question: Wouldn't he like to do *Romeo and Juliet* in modern dress, as John Barrymore did *Hamlet* in modern "tails" on Broadway, several seasons ago?

MR. CUKOR answered decisively. "It would lose much of its charm in modern dress," he said. "The Renaissance, one of the most romantic and brilliant periods in history, offers the perfect setting for Shakespeare's poetic thought. The more colorful costumes permit greater liberties than would modern costumes. It is possible to capture in costumes and settings the drama of any era, and the Renaissance was essentially a dramatic period in history."

The man actually behind this vast experimental production is Irving Thalberg, the husband of Norma Shearer.

"Why *Romeo and Juliet*?" I asked

They were rehearsing for the film when snapped here! Howard is below the "mike"



Capture JULIET

Mr. Thalberg. "Why not *Macbeth* or *King Lear*?" Here is what Mr. Thalberg told me:

"For ten years it has been my dream to produce *Romeo and Juliet*. The present highly developed technique of the sound screen has now made it possible to transform that dream into a motion picture. Like *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, *Romeo and Juliet* has every element of tried and true entertainment. After three hundred years of continued popularity, it still holds and charms its audiences. In more recent times, the appeal of this great drama has increased, not diminished. Purely from the standpoint of entertainment, *Romeo and Juliet* is the most logical selection of Shakespeare's plays."

Juliet brings Norma Shearer to the screen after more than a year's absence. Her last film was *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, released in October, 1934. Her current film is important in that it stars her with Leslie Howard in their first film together since the memorable *Smilin' Thru* of 1932. *The Divorcée*, made in 1929, won her a slim, golden



In a playful mood on the set, Norma Shearer is taking a picture, herself!



John Barrymore (at left) as *Mercutio*, and Basil Rathbone, as *Tybalt*, are at swords' point as Leslie (Romeo) Howard steps forward to separate them!



Academy award. What are Norma's reactions as she adds her *Juliet* to the stage *Juliets* of Dame Ellen Terry, Julia Marlowe, Laurette Taylor, Adelaide Neilson, Mary Anderson, Helene Modjeska, Ethel Barrymore, Maude Adams, Katharine Cornell, and others? Here is her answer:

"TO PLAY *Juliet* on the screen is a thrilling adventure. On the stage *Juliet* has been created by many great actresses, becoming a triumph of modern and individual interpretation in Katharine Cornell's glorious *Juliet*." Norma spoke with enthusiasm.

"But didn't you have any misgivings?" I asked her.

"Not in the least," Norma answered. She was now wearing the hand-painted chiffon dress, an important part of her film wardrobe. "*Juliet*, as Shakespeare created her, is a character that any actress would want to play. She is the epitome of love—an expression of all the rare beauty of a first great love." There was profound emotion in her voice.

John Barrymore, playing *Mercutio* in the film, [Continued on page 86]

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The Movies Capture Romeo and Juliet

[Continued from page 35]

predicts that *Juliet* will be Norma's greatest rôle. "She conveys the impression of extreme youth, so necessary to the part," he said.

"I was surprised that they used all twenty-four scenes of the original play for the scenario," said William J. Strunk, Jr., the learned professor who arrived in July from the academic atmosphere of Cornell University, to "work on the dramatic preliminaries" of the play. He was prepared for the worst from the movies. Imagine his surprise when he realized the screen's scope,—so much greater than that of the stage.

There was a gentleman from Harvard University in the conferences, too: Professor John Tucker Murray, authority on the Elizabethan theatre. Preceding Professor Strunk, he left in September.

THERE'S not much chance that anyone, but William Daniels will have a hand in the cinematography. It's too great an opportunity for him to film his lovely Shearer as *Juliet*. Daniels is also Garbo's cameraman. Talbot Jennings, with the assistance of Professors Strunk and Murray, wrote the *Romeo and Juliet* script. He was the *Mutiny on the Bounty* scenario man, too, in collaboration.

Leslie Howard, yawning in the warm California sun as it fell on the mock street of Verona, said: "I look upon my *Romeo* as a laboratory experiment. You see, I've never done anything Shakespearean, and this will give me an opportunity to see how I perform."

"They want thee on the set," yelled Eddie Woehler, assistant director, assuming the Elizabethan dialect; and then appeared the hair-dresser who said to Mr. Howard "I will check thy hair!" Howard permitted his hair to be combed, changed his white silk shirt to one of crisp, plaited organdy, swung his red cloak about him (it contains nine yards of imported fortuni cloth) and strode across the Verona street where the camera awaited him.

"We're going nuts around here with this dialect," explained Woehler. "Instead of calling lunch like we ordinarily do, we yell 'Hence be gone . . . until one-fifteen!' And when an extra starts an argument the answer is 'I will be deaf to pleadings!'"

THE assistant director turned and was gone in the direction of the giant umbrellas which house the camera crew, sound mixers, microphones, grips, props, actors, Mr. Cukor. *Tybalt*, "the king of the cats," mighty *Capulet*, otherwise South African-born Basil Rathbone stood reflectively sipping the chocolate-milk. Rathbone brings vast Shakespearean experience to films, although Barrymore, probably because of his *Richard III* and *Hamlet*, in modern dress, is credited with more "tradition."

Metro is filming *Romeo and Juliet* faithfully. There will be no "happy ending." Despite the tragedy of this "pair of star-crossed lovers," there is plenty of fun on the set. Perhaps it is an antidote. They serenaded *Romeo* with drums and tin cans when Howard insisted, one morning, that if other stars had music to get them into the right mood, he wanted music, too, for the dueling scene which he was about to do. At the end of five minutes' bedlam, Howard begged for silence. And Edna May Oliver looked up from crocheting.

"NURSE" OLIVER was the first player signed after the principals were announced. Underweight, she had to put on ten or twenty pounds for the part. Eating five meals a day, she added ten pounds. John Barrymore is *Mercutio*; Basil Rathbone, *Tybalt*; Reginald Denny is *Benvolio*; Ralph Forbes, husband to Heather Angel, is *Paris*; William Henry, in Reinhardt's 1934 Hollywood Bowl presentation of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, is *Romeo's* servant, *Balthasar*; Violet Kemble Cooper, direct descendant of the eighteenth century *Juliet*, Mrs. Sarah Siddons is *Lady Capulet*; Henry Kolker is *Friar Lawrence*; Conway Tearle, wearing a full suit of armor, made in New York, is *Escalus, Prince of Verona*; Ian Wolfe is the apothecary; Virginia Hammond is *Lady Montague*; Andy Devine is *Peter, Nurse's* bodyguard.

The wardrobe department, with five hundred people working at full speed for two months to make ready costumes for twelve hundred players, discovered that Renaissance ladies wore "slacks" under their many petticoats. Chester Morris, star in his own right, worked one day as an extra and got five dollars for it; Adrian, stylist de luxe, ordered that absolutely no rayon or synthetic silk be used in any costume. Only silk, for fidelity's sake. He and Oliver Messel, designer for London's Drury Lane Theatre, and Mr. C. B. Cochrane, collaborated on the costumes.

Talk of production cost is taboo. But there is no ban on the raves that the dueling sequences are getting in their unedited form. They are the finest, it is said, that the screen has seen. Fred Cavens, Belgian fencing expert, sixteen years in Hollywood, is responsible for the tutoring.

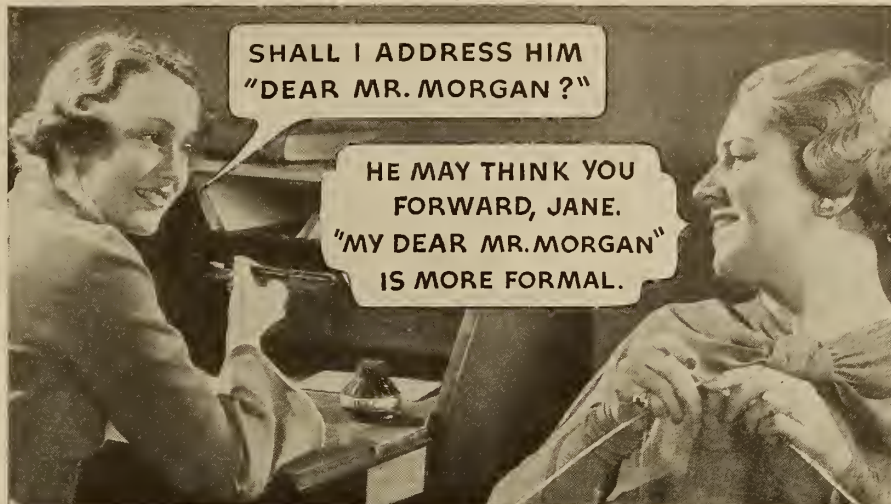
While this pageant of color, movement, beauty, poetry, is condensed for our entertainment, the music master of Metro, Herbert Stothart, is having his headache. Because of the musical cadence of Shakespeare's lines, Mr. Stothart is finding difficulty in choosing music that will harmonize with lyric qualities.

CEDRIC GIBBONS, real-life *Romeo* of Dolores Del Rio, has done the ten settings for the classic. All of his Irish genius has gone forth to make the most beautiful set—the *Capulet* Garden, scene of the balcony meeting—that Hollywood's eyes have ever seen. Two city blocks long, with a Romanesque tower, three stories high, there are two indigo pools of water reflecting magnolia blossoms, apple blossoms, pomegranates, shrubs, grasses, flowers.

"We have taken liberties with the sets," says Mr. Gibbons. "After all, Shakespeare could have laid his story in any Italian city. What we followed faithfully was the mood of the period, that of the individual, slowly emerging from the rule of the church, and expressing himself in lavish dress, better standards of living, entertainment."

Beneath all the casualness on the set, the great informality, an undeniably great experiment is being filmed. An "intimate" version of *Romeo and Juliet* is building to completion. The talking screen's first full length version of the "star-crossed lovers" is being given warm, human, impelling treatment. Not the usual chill, classical concept. Irving Thalberg's ten-year dream, almost an obsession, magnificent in his realization of it, should make motion picture history!

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