



Opening the famous classic is the magnificent 15th Century pageant in the square of Verona. It closes with the discovery of the tragic lovers in the tomb; Norma Shearer as Juliet; Leslie Howard as Romeo at her feet



Filming
the

World's Greatest Love Story

Never before has this distinguished director talked for publication. He tells why he considers "Romeo and Juliet" the apex of his career

ON a spring night, not long ago, two black limousines slid through the tall gates of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, turned right into the traffic, and drove at breakneck speed down the long roads of Los Angeles County until they came to a little town called Riverside.

They pulled up in front of a small theater there. Out of the first car jumped a couple of technicians carrying tin cylinders of film. Out of the second stepped four or five studio moguls. The cars pulled around to a parking lot as the men went into the cinema palace and asked for the manager.

Fifteen minutes later, when the second feature had ended, an audience reaching for its collective hat was halted by a flash on the screen. "You are about to witness a major studio feature preview," said the title succinctly. The audience settled back with little murmurs.

"Romeo and Juliet" was being sneaked. Said George Cukor, who directed it, to me the next day: "The people of that town are genuine American people, unpretentious, entirely middle-class in the best sense of the phrase.

"While the first reel rolled they shuffled, coughed a little, wriggled in their seats. I sat there and stewed with fright. I knew what they were thinking: 'Good Lord, two hours of this! Two hours of Hollywood gone arty, of unintelligible poetry . . .' I could feel the current of uneasiness shifting through the theater.



International scholars gave their advice to authenticate such elaborate scenes as this banquet hall. Agnes de Mille created the romantic dances. The ancient bronze tomb of the Capulets was designed by Cedric Gibbons from the original. Below, Director Cukor talks to her whom he considers "the first really beautiful Juliet,"—Norma Shearer



"Then, quite suddenly, the story was clear to them. They realized we weren't trying to declaim; that on the contrary we were bringing them a beautiful, tragic love story crowded with action, brilliant with

all the glory of the Renaissance. And they could understand it!

"They were so delighted they nearly crowed. They forgot themselves and the time. They laughed and cried and applauded. They loved it."

A few days later Nelson Eddy, in the course of conversation, told me. "The movies are doing such wonderful things these days—'Romeo and Juliet' for instance. Imagine—they're actually giving the American public a Shakespeare they can know and enjoy, without pedantry and without trying to be obscure about it. That's progress. Have you seen it yet?"

I grinned. "Just watched them make it," I said.

YOU will want to know the story of this particular picture because it's the most important film achievement of the decade; because it opens at last the limitless field of classic art and literature producers have ogled for years but haven't dared to

BY FRANK SMALL



"Take thou this vial, and this distilled liquor drink thou off." Henry Kolker in the rôle of Friar Laurence gives the fatal potion to Juliet in his cell. Every scene that Shakespeare wrote for "Romeo and Juliet" is shown in M-G-M's production, the most fabulously expensive picture of all time



Ralph Forbes as Paris, C. Aubrey Smith as Lord Capulet, Violet Kemble Cooper as Lady Capulet, Basil Rathbone as Tybalt, greet the guests. Below, the Prince of Verona banishes Romeo. 2,000 extras were employed

touch; because, in itself, it is a fascinating study in the art of movie making.

You must have an account of the unbelievable processes and preparatory work that have gone into this most expensive of all epics. You must slip onto the closed sets and watch the riotous color, the pageantry of the scenes themselves in the making. And you must talk with Director George Cukor—who never before has given an interview for publication—in order to hear from his lips and see through his eyes the troubles and barriers and eventual triumph that marked his task.

No criticism of the splendid merits of Warner's "Midsummer Night's Dream" is intended when I speak of "Juliet" in terms of superlatives. The "Dream" is rightly laying a rich golden egg at sundry home and foreign box offices. As the first Shakespearean production it deserves every bit of the handsome praise being tossed its way. But it is a fantasy, and "Juliet" is a down-to-earth love story. The "Dream" is sheer beauty intended for the select senses of the Bard's disciples, while "Juliet" is a motion picture aimed at the other ninety-nine percent of America—you and you and me. Wherefore it ceases to be an experiment in art for the few (relatively) and becomes an artistic appeal to the latent artistic qualities of the many.



I wandered onto the "tomb" set, sought out that smiling, spectacled genius named Cukor, and climbed up on a tall stool beside him. This I did with misgiving, I confess, because he has never talked for the press before, and because even on the lot people who stand in awe of no one stand in awe of him.

Rearing up into the sky was one of the best artificial hills I've ever seen, winding with little pathways and covered with the pointing fingers of Italian cypresses. Down below, in the artificial miniature valley, an artificial cemetery lay in the sun. Carved with infinite labor in the papier-mache granite, stood the ancient, bronze-doored tomb of the *Capulets*, with the fair corpse of *Juliet* inside. Overhead droned a six-passenger monoplane with bright red wings.

"I'm in no swell mood," laughed Cukor—his incongruity is that he smiles anyway, even when he's furious about something. "That's the tenth plane in two hours. How can I have *Romeo* [PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 98]

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Adrienne Ames, lovely motion-picture star



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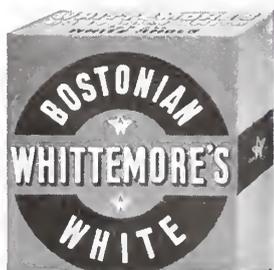
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Paulette was thoroughly a kid having a good time.

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That's the Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard I know.

WHO now? I know Carole Lombard, the girl who gamely fought her way up from extradom to her present heights—and who is

probably the most "regular feller" in the whole movie field.

And the adorable pixie Arline Judge. And the inimitable and limitless Norma Shearer, who came to our funny little "Wop dinner" party on her very first excursion into Hollywood night life.

And, to harken back for a moment, the Jack Gilbert whose keen wit and eccentricities made him one of the most amazing of Hollywood figures. And the time that Fleck stood in line to buy three tickets to a movie theater—and how she got the last laugh—

And—And—And—

I'm awfully lucky. I know a lot of grand people! They're all "picture people," too! You ought to know them. Perhaps you will—

Filming the World's Greatest Love Story

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48]

slipping into the tomb to find his *Juliet* against a sound background of air-transport motors?

At the carved metal doors Leslie Howard stood patiently waiting. Ralph Morgan, in green velvet, stood flexing his rapier. Photographers stood yawning behind their waiting cameras. Time and a small fortune passed by.

"Try it again now," Cukor called finally. *Romeo*, muttering immortal lines, forced the seal of the tomb; he was accosted, swords flashed . . .

"There was a train whistle in that," shouted someone from a sound booth.

THEY got the scene at last, about fifty-three. In the meantime Cukor gave me, in essence, the story of a motion picture—the greatest, most fabulously expensive production of all time—from the viewpoint of his own directorial chair.

"I've learned more about my work," he told me, biting into the polished red apple I'd brought as a gag, "and about Hollywood and its stars than I ever thought it possible to know. And I'm so pleased with the result.

"Shakespeare wrote his masterpieces for the screen, you understand. That sounds insane, but it's quite true. He didn't think about the limitations of the early English stage when he picked up his quill to scratch on paper deathless love scenes, bitter hate and the innermost dramas of human lives. He wrote 'Juliet' in twenty-four scenes—more than any tiny theater could have thought of staging in his day.

"He wrote continuity, envisioned close-ups, flash-backs and all the other magic the movies have. He imagined feasts with 'twenty cunning cooks' without remembering that they would have to look like small luncheons or buffet suppers on any stage. Everyone knows the limitations of the Seventeenth Century theater."

The nuisance of noise on the set, the many delays, were obviously forgotten. He hurried on: "They had no grand setup at all then—no space, no paraphernalia, no props. You imagined everything or you didn't understand anything. People walked back and forth in front of a backdrop, which the audience was asked to see as a garden one minute and as a ballroom the next. Shakespeare with his vivid imagination, ignored all this.

"Every scene he wrote for 'Romeo and Juliet' is shown in the picture version. When

the wealthy and noble Capulets invite their powerful friends to a banquet, it's a *banquet*—with all the trimmings. When there's a street fight you know somebody's irked at somebody else in a big way. And all the hitherto unexplained lapses in the play, which had to be ignored because stage scenery could not be changed every other minute, are detailed on the screen—so that now—for the first time—the full meaning of the story is clear.

THERE was a short interlude while he took the tomb scene again, was informed that three passing trucks had betrayed the mood, and came back again to the stool beside me. I asked, "Making 'Juliet' must have made a big impression on Hollywood, didn't it?" and he replied, "No one really knows how much it has done for us. It has taught us an infinite number of facts about the business of movie making. It has taught the stars who have played in it the final compromise between overacting and too much restraint, between the nasal inflection in speech and the broad 'a.'

"And its success with the public opens to the studios the opportunity for combined art and costume pictures—which is the third and final step the industry had to take.

"You see, in the beginning we had to be contented with modern stories about contemporary modern people—we had to present them in Twentieth Century houses, dressed in Twentieth Century clothes. That was our little world with a fence around it."

He started in on the jar of candy I had brought with the apple. "When some producer finally dared give the public a picture about people who lived a couple of hundred years ago, that was the second milestone. But there was still a fence—the scripts had to be written by modern writers and the treatment had to be thoroughly contemporary. No one dared touch the magnificent things created by the masters of the past.

"Too much art for the lame-brained public," said producers and directors. What they really meant was that they were afraid to try. And what they overlooked was the point that genuine art has a universal appeal if it's presented unpretentiously, as it was intended to be.

"When that preview audience the other night suddenly came out of its collective shell and appreciated Shakespeare, delighted in

Shakespeare, adored Shakespeare—then our year and a half of hard work and one of the biggest gambles in picture history were justified. Now we can go into production on the innumerable masterpieces that time has handed down to us, and at the same time know that at last our industry is on a plane with the finest in the world.”

AT this point my watch and my stomach remarked simultaneously that it was getting late, with the sun nearly gone. “More tomorrow,” Cukor said, and slid off his stool.

Next day, however, he suddenly decided to make the dreaded nine-minute and fifty-three seconds long “balcony scene,” now of cinema fame. So the set was closed as tightly as a leper colony. Wherefore, when you see that sequence at your theater, if you will watch closely you may discern this reporter’s nose sticking cautiously through the vines that cover a tiny window in the garden wall.

It was the only place of concealment on the stage, and I had to be there. It would be impossible to describe the tremendous tension, the almost tangible nervousness of everyone present before the cameras started. Finally, when Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard stepped on the set, waited for the signal, and proceeded to live the entire scene through without a single hesitancy, a single flaw—relief flooded down and expressed itself in the congratulations, in laughter a little too high-pitched to be real.

Afterward Cukor, Miss Shearer, the inimitable, acid-tongued Edna Mae Oliver and I sat at a little table while technicians prepared the final shot of the picture—a simple matter of three people walking down a Verona square.

And Cukor talked on . . .

I said, “What about the story of how you did it all—details and things?” He looked a little harassed.

“Well, it wasn’t any sort of an easy job. When Thalberg announced that his dream of ten years—the production of ‘Juliet’—was to become a reality, and I was assigned to direct it, I realized I was facing the challenge of my life. So was everyone connected with the picture.

“The first problem was of course, research. We decided to choose the most charming period of the Renaissance, with all of its gorgeous reaction of the dreary, straight-laced era that preceded. We sent camera crews to Verona to photograph the city. Adrian designed gowns and coiffures from paintings of the masters: Botticelli, Benozzo Gozzoli, Fra Angelico, Bellini, Signorelli. And of course there were the usual studio preparations, with those staggering statistics that you can put in your story if you want to.”

(Ninety thousand flagstones, two hundred tons of cement, seventy-five thousand feet of lumber, three hundred barrels of paint, eighty books of gold leaf, five hundred yards of carpets, six hundred feet of garden hose, thirty crates of grapes, one hundred gallons of kerosene for torches, three pounds of ginger roots for the parakeets, twelve milliners, twenty-five knitting machine operators, twelve bootmakers, two hundred and fifty seamstresses, thirty embroiderers, one hundred tailors, twenty-five dyers, five hundred painters, one hundred paving workers, one hundred and fifty millworkers, thirty thousand miles of film, ad infinitum and until death do part me from my typewriter.)

“And then came the script,” continued Cukor. “That was the biggest worry, and proved the least troublesome. We didn’t want



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a single line changed, but quite naturally some of the original text had to be cut for the screen. Our revision of Shakespeare is no Hollywood sacrilege—you understand 'Juliet' has been tampered with on the best of stages. One version even gave it a happy ending.

"So we called in Professor John Tucker Murray of Harvard, and Professor William Strunk, Jr. of Cornell—both accepted international authorities on Shakespeare. Together we read every version of 'Juliet' ever printed, took the best passages from each, and built our script out of that.

"We didn't worry about the censors. Since Shakespeare himself had had his characters make rollicking, bawdy remarks, we weren't going to ruin his immortal poetry by priggish interpolations and substitutions.

"In the incredible 1460's men and women didn't always call a spade 'a utensil of special nature.'"

MISS OLIVER snorted. Miss Shearer grinned. Cukor paused for breath.

"But 'Juliet' as a story," he resumed, "takes place in four days, in the course of which the headstrong young man forgets an erstwhile sweetheart and discovers *Juliet*, daughter of an enemy house.

"They fall desperately in love and are married. He kills her cousin, *Tybalt*, is banished to Mantua, learns that *Juliet* has died, kills *Paris* in her tomb and then dies beside the bier. That's a lot to happen in such a short space of time.

"And to meet the demands of the public for reality, for events that seem possible and credible, we had to prepare a good many explanatory scenes.

"We, finally, hit upon the idea of ignoring all precedent and pretending that the ink was hardly dry on the manuscript; that this was the first time the play had ever been produced. That took away whatever inhibitions we might have had.

"So far as casting was concerned; remember that *Juliet* has never been played by a girl lovely enough or young enough to give the impression of being sixteen.

"At first the heroine was played by young boys because there were no actresses in that day. Later middle-aged plumpish women and heavy men with fallen arches simpered through the passionate, tender lines of the balcony scene.

"I'm speaking from the popular angle, of course, and intend no criticism of the magnificent stage performances given by Katharine Cornell and others of her kind. Generally speaking, however, the stage casting was unfortunate.

"Miss Shearer, here, is the first really beautiful *Juliet*.

"Leslie Howard isn't a slip of a boy by any means, but I think the public would have howled if we had given them authentically adolescent players who had neither the maturity nor the understanding of life to read the lines as they should be read."

I STEPPED on my tenth cigarette and lit another. Miss Shearer sipped at a bowl of soup. Miss Oliver sat listening rigidly.

"Anyway, we had this problem; that America would not under any circumstances swallow the accepted melodramatic portrayal and the usual presentation of the play. Offering the story so that its effect might be one of reality meant a careful segregation of the prose from the poetry—too many actors have stood and singsonged the bits that Shakespeare meant only as explanatory matter.

There's no ham acting in this production. As a result scenes that have had only a suggestion of power heretofore, now stand out in startling relief.

"Thanks," said Miss Oliver, drily.

Cukor ignored this. "The reason 'Juliet' is the one love story of the world that represents the very symbol of love is that it is completely genuine.

"There was no coquetry in *Juliet*; she played no games and used no wiles. She saw *Romeo*, loved him, and didn't try to hide the fact. Yet the entire play gives the lovers only three scenes together—the rest of the story is told in terms of separation and anticipation.

"I think from an educational standpoint this picture may teach the youth of the nation how to really love. They've watched the sordid games of gangsters' molls and of gaudy, glamorous ladies on the screen for so long that now the junior high school miss is almost incapable of anything but infatuation. She loses any real love she might feel in the artificial business of beating out the girl next door.

"If pictures have caused that reaction in youth, then pictures can change that reaction. The love of *Romeo and Juliet* is so simple and yet so all-encompassing that it makes the typical 1936 affair of coy deceit and jealousy entirely cheap.

"Anyway—the picture has taught me a lot, not necessarily about love, you understand" (the Oliver lips, parted for pointed comment, closed sharply) "but about my profession. I'm a thrice better director than I was a year ago, and the players are better actors. For one thing, they know how to speak English, now."

I said, "Think so?" to Norma Shearer.

SHE looked up. "Too right," she said. "When we first came into pictures we spoke carelessly, nasally, with slurred consonants and loose inflections.

"Then, after hearing ourselves talk on the screen, we leaned over backwards in an attempt to correct our faults. We took elocution and diction lessons. We broadened our 'a's'.

We were so precise as to be stilted, and immediately lost all the value of what we were saying.

"But you can't read Shakespeare in either of these ways. You can't be careless and nasal or the result is ludicrous, and you can't be pompously precise or the dramatic quality of the lines is gone. You have to speak the language in its true, perfect form.

"And having learned to do that, you can give great power to the simplest sentence, whether it be in a classic picture or a simple modern story."

Someone came up, then, to tell Cukor the "Square" set was ready.

We drove out and watched them take, casually and in three minutes, the scene that ended the greatest job of his long and brilliant career. When it was over the extras and bit players lined up in the afternoon sun for their checks—wealthy nobles swathed in ermine and priceless jewels, jostling Nubian slaves and bishops.

And when finally they had their money, one by one they came and offered their hands to Cukor. "Thank you so much, and good-by," they said.

I'd never seen that happen at the end of any picture before. It tells you more about this particular director than I could explain in a dozen articles.