Dumb Dora’s Swan Song

How the Talkies Are Taking the Curtain Calls Nowadays

The talking movie sings the swan song of the Dumb Dora star. America’s youth looking through eyes veiled with star dust to a glory written in electric lights and painted bill boards is going to find it even harder than did its big brother and sister to crash the gates of Hollywood, for film land has gone the way of all professions and industries, and established a school of the motion picture.

Though yet in an embryo stage, the sound picture is achieving potent revolutionary effects. Because of its introduction, thousands of dollars worth of manuscript bought for silent pictures are being thrown in the waste paper basket by up-to-date producers and old screen idols are being sent to school for voice culture.

That the popularly termed “talkie” which has precedence over the latest novel or the crime wave at bridge tables, and which has received the greatest display in the theater sections of newspapers for the last two or three years to develop its own distinctive art quite apart from that of the silent picture or the legitimate stage, and thus become a permanent contribution to the theater world, is the prophecy of Prof. Ray E. Holcombe, director of the Playhouse of the University of Oklahoma.

It was at the National Teachers’ association meeting which he attended recently that Holcombe had occasion to meet Dean Immel of the University of California who has been a leader in the new movement on the west coast and national authority on the subject. Dean Immel who was given a start in his profession by Dr. Charles M. Perry, head of the philosophy department here, reviewed the motion picture situation before the teachers of public speaking and led in a group discussion. When Professor Holcombe returned from the convention held in Chicago, he brought with him a summary account of the present development in this particular field.

As a result of the attention he was accorded several years ago, following his establishment of a strong school of speaking and his conducting of an extensive research program in that field, directors of the motion picture industry went to him with their problems of speaking involved in movie synchronization.

Dean Immel helped to organize an academy of motion picture arts and sciences with many well known persons including Milton Sills, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, Jesse Laskey, D. W. Griffith and Goldwyn-Mayer backing him with their time and means. To investigate and develop the science of motion pictures in a manner not unlike that of the research project of university supervision, this enterprise was distinct from all others in that it was not commercial.

Later, liberal entrance into the studios having been afforded Dean Immel and members of the academy, a survey to determine the probability of introducing motion picture courses into the university curriculum was made. Finally, a four year course was outlined and approved by both the academy and the University of Southern California. Beginning with the second semester of this school year students were given an opportunity of enrolling in classes of directing, acting and scenography with the celebrities, Barrymore, Griffith, King Vidor, DeMille, Gilbert, Pickford, Sills and many others as instructors.

Because during the investigation which resulted in the establishment of the professional film school, the positive change to the sound picture was effected, courses in voice and public speaking are being much emphasized.

According to Professor Holcombe, the most frequent question of the average theater-goer is “Can the talking last or is it a passing fad?” Milton Sills, who addressed the association in a talking picture best voiced the sentiment of the movie colony, believes Professor Holcombe, when he replied, “I wish we knew.”

“However the fact that the men most deeply and sincerely concerned in the business have sunk their capital in the new venture is a convincing demonstration of its soundness,” says Professor Holcombe. He points out that the defects in the present talkies are fully appreciated by the movie people who do not deny that many of the pictures on the market sound like people talking in a barrel.

“The amazing thing about it all is,” he explains, “That the American public complains so decidedly to the innovation when it is in a state of experimentation, having appeared scarcely more than a year ago, whereas a decade or two ago it was proud to have any kind of picture and endured unfinished products for years while the silent picture was in a relatively slow process of perfection.”

He accounts for this by citing the nervous staccato-like pressure which is being brought to bear on human activity and compelling life to move at a lightning rate of speed. In the improvement of buildings that house the taking of pictures and in the microphones themselves, he thinks the improvement in movie tone lies.

One of the greatest technical difficulties which producers of the new pictures experienced was that of avoiding the recording and amplifying of irrelevant sound. To eliminate undesirable vibrations, buildings, hermetically sealed, that rest on concrete foundations reinforced by layers of rubber and cork are employed. The door to this type of building weighs 10 tons and air is furnished by oxygen tubes.

Another problem was that of selecting subject matter. The tendency at first was to reproduce material borrowed from the silent picture or the legitimate stage. “This,” Professor Holcombe thinks “can never be successful. The talking movie has a field all its own and will profitably develop a distinct art far removed from that of either of its predecessors. The one act play and short sketches are proving very popular when presented in this medium,” he observes.

Actors who have had voices for synchronization but were signed for lengthy contracts before the new trend took definite form are being given voice instruction, in fact, required to take it. Producers are trying desperately to salvage for the talkie as many as possible of these men and women who have to be paid whether they work or not.