The Language of Hollywood
And How the Talkies Are Changing the Picture Outlook
By B. Sorenson, ’33, Famous Players-Lasky Photographer

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HOLLYWOOD jargon as she is spoken—slang as the movie folk know it—has probably earned a right to an explanation, after the article “Filming the Stars” that appeared in the last issue of The Sooner Magazine. If you were left in the dark as to the import of a “quickie” or yet a “horse opera,” you shall be given a chance hereby to get that and other lowdown on cinema slang. Picture people have a potent language of their own as do the members of many other trades.

A common and the most overworked phrase is “If I could only get a break.” Every person that is out of work relies on that poor hackneyed clause. To those who are so unfortunate it is the perfect alibi. Always it means the same, incompetence and a great lack of natural ability coupled with the ordinary lack of ambition, that seems to be a part of all “hams.”

Every one that is an extra in pictures is referred to as a “lousy ham” and treated just as the name implies.

“I am working on a ‘horse opera’” to the stranger, would mean very little, but to the “old timer” the words horse opera mean the hardest picture job in the world. From sun up to sun down, you work, and by the phrase “sun up to sun down” I mean that the company leaves the studio in time to be on location and be at work by the time the sun peeps above the horizon in a most bashful manner, with the look that seems to express its utter contempt towards any one that catches it coming out of bed. And long after the sun has retired the company still “shoots” (the term for actual camera work). The salaries paid on pictures such as westerns, range from $25 to $250, never more and usually the average is $50, and take it from me the minute you get your check, make some kind of an excuse to get away for a few minutes and beat it to the bank in the manner of self-preservation and protection. Many a time I have been held on location a few days after pay day because the company was in such a bad financial way (a very common condition among the small producers) that we could not cash our checks. Even now I have a working interest in a number of pictures that I photographed because the company was not able to make the checks good.

The word “grip” to a layman may mean several kinds of grip, but in Hollywood it tells you that the man who does the manual labor in a picture is a happy moment.

Von Stroheim smiles while Sorenson, at the camera, looks on. This was taken during the filming of “The Wedding March.”

“Grip.” I held a company up half a day waiting for me to send them two grips while I was trying to reason from the story whether they would want a hand bag or a gladstone.

“Four day wonders” are pictures that are made in four days and nights. Starting early and finishing late, they are somehow ground out, and in a couple of days are on the screen in your local theater. Which is one of the reasons why the average movie is so terrible.

“Quickie” is another name for the last picture. Good talent is hired for a day or so and in order to keep expenses down they are worked many 24 hour shifts. This enables the producer to enjoy the returns.

“Gadget and Gag,” are short words that might mean anything from the director to the big boss. And when you make your visit to Hollywood do not be surprised to hear every thing and everybody referred to as a gadget or gag man.

“Lousy” is the most overworked word in the theatrical business. When you hear it used don’t forget that it means the world’s worst, whether in reference to an individual or piece of work.

PLEASE do not think me boastful or one of those persons that every one despises, because that is what I am afraid you will do when you read the answer to the one and most common of questions that I am asked every time I am with a gathering or an individual.

“Why did you leave such a marvelous position and such an enviable business to come here and study?” It is going to take a lot of careful explaining to cover that, and if you have the patience to bear with me, perhaps I will be able to make it clear.

In the first place the position that one holds is not obtained purely through ability. Every job is obtained, through politics and pull. If it so happens that you know some one that is influential in a certain company and they think enough of you to ask for you on a picture, some one is going to lose his or her job in order to make room for you. And it matters not in the least whether you are as competent or not. You are a friend of Mr. So and So, and your job is safe as long as you are a good “Yes” man to him. I have seen whole companies lose their jobs (by companies I mean the working crews that actually make the pictures) just because the producer changed directors in the middle of a production, and the new director had
BEHIND THE SCENES IN FILMING "THE WEDDING MARCH"

Here is the atmosphere behind the scenes, so to speak, in "The Wedding March" which Sorenson filmed. Starting at the left, the man in the striped jersey is Matthew Betts, the girl with the white hat is Willow Ray, next is Fay Wray and Mikey Ware. Erich von Stroheim has the megaphone. Harry Carr of the Los Angeles Times is seated near the sun shade. The man in the uniform is von Stroheim's double, Captain Peters. Sorenson is corking at the camera. At his right is his assistant, Don Brigham. Jesse L. Lasky is seated at the extreme right, but is lost in the shadows of the picture.

a lot of friends out of work. My advice to any one that wants to work in the movies is to pick out a director that seems sympathetic, and hang on. Don't let him out of your sight because if you do some one else is liable to move in, in your place. There is the common belief that the man who signs your check is the man you are working for, but when it comes to pictures don't believe a word of it.

The collections from the income tax and theater tax on tickets show us that the average theater audience is decreasing at the startling rate of ten million people a year. If you depended on pictures for a living that would startle you. It has created a panic among the motion picture companies and they are trying in every way to regain that audience.

Looking at it from the logical side they cannot possibly last. Here is the chief argument against them. There are over 72 different languages that the subtitles are translated into. In making a "talkie" it would be impossible to find any one that speaks all those languages and even if they did to make the picture 72 different times would mean the expenditure of millions on one small story.

With the advent of the television machine in a very short time, my guess is that in less than five years, every one will be able to see and hear pictures in their own home. I think that all pictures will eventually come under one head, and that on certain nights, that company will television its pictures and with the use of one of their machines every one will see and hear it at the same time. Every time any thing of importance happens even now, it is transmitted by wireless and reproduced on a motion picture screen. The theaters will be the first to adopt it and every time the Prince of Wales falls from a horse we will be able to see and hear it. And when ever you think that the producers are not frightened, go to Hollywood and see for yourself.

Another reason and a very good one I think that influenced my leaving was the fact that the average life, or active life in any theatrical profession is not over ten years. When you have been associated with the theater that long you are considered an oldtimer and gradually shoved out. All the time you might be just as good as ever, perhaps even better, but the general consensus of opinion is to get you out.

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By the time that I shall have finished I would have been considered an "old timer," with nothing to look forward to in so far as future is concerned. No matter how terrible a surgeon I may turn out to be, perhaps I will be able to fool the unsuspecting public. There is one thing though I could never be any worse as a doctor than as a cameraman. So if you feel that you are due to have anything go wrong with you please put it off for a few years and give me "a break."