Familiar Actors of Bits Are Important to Films

The 'Little Champs' Who Are Typed For Character Roles Are Kept Busy by Studios

By Harold Heffernan.

HOLLYWOOD.

"Little champs," they're called by the casting directors. You know them by face; not always by name. In the movies they're unstarred. Mostly they're unbilled on the credit sheet. They may not mean as much at the box office, all combined, as the annual "10 best" box office stars—headed last year by Mickey Rooney, Clarke Gable and Spencer Tracy—but let them walk out of Hollywood in a body and the movies would lose all their flavor.

The "little champs" are important to motion pictures because they are so expert in some particular style of characterization that audiences easily and quickly get the idea of what they're portraying, thus cinching story points.

Some get typed in one character and remain happily in such roles, while others run a wide range of face-making. Most of them are recognized immediately by theater audiences.

When Billy Gilbert flashes into the action they'll whisper: "Oh, there's that sneezing man again." Let the pompous, white-haired Berton Churchill stroll into a scene and the fans realize at once from his blustering appearance and long record in similar roles that some political skullduggery is afoot. Churchill is the screen's foremost "stuffed shirt" type.

Cautious Fellows.

Just as stars get typed and can't pry loose their shackles, so do these "little champs" of character fall into a specialized groove. Hence whenever a script comes up with a demand for judge, lawyer, drunk, motorcycle cop, minister, butcher, baker or candlestick maker, there are men and women whose names immediately pop into the minds of casting directors to fill that spot. These are the "little champs."

Casting heads are cautious fellows, but examples of these big-little folks were pried from several. In citing them, the casting director says: "Don't make us say no one else can play such parts as the ones we name or that folks we mention can't do anything else."

The big-heartedness of casting directors having thus been established, let's make mention of some of the foremost specialists in their line.

A few, it is true, have become definite "names" to the public. One such is Edgar Kennedy, champion of the slow-burn and restrained agony. Edgar has to "burn" and maul his face in every movie, but he doesn't mind—he is rewarded to the tune of $1,500 a week and is always busy.

Another is Herman Bing, who gets first call when a character must grow sputteringly excitable. On the "bittersweet" set, where he was chewing up his words in another Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald musical, he bemoaned his fate. "All the time, every place, every one makes me roll my 'r's,' he complains. He can't escape it. But Herman was once a European opera singer. Some years ago he was a Hollywood writer who sputtered in describing scenes—until a director made him do it in a picture.

When you see a comical drunk, bleary-eyed, hiccoughing and staggering, the chances are it's Arthur Housman. Ever since he did an inebriated role in an old Harold Lloyd comedy, producers have let him do nothing else. But he doesn't mind. "It's all right if there are enough drunk parts," he mutters.

Comes a part for a motorcycle cop, and there's Ed Dearing, who has played more of those "what's your hurry?" fellows than any actor in films. On the other hand, Billy Gilbert carved his own niche. He boldly went out and set himself up as a ker-choo expert. Remember him in "Rosalie" and "Destry Rides Again"? Incidentally, Billy solemnly swears he has never had a head cold in 25 years, so you don't need to imagine him sneezing all through the house.

The screen's No. 1 Indian is an Italian named Nick Thompson who has been doing Redskins for 29 years. Nobel Johnson and Mitchel Lewis also do Indians, from half-breeds on up. Neither is an Indian. It's a cinch for these fellows. Their vocabularies are short. All Lewis says in "Go West," the new Marx brothers comedy, is "Ugh!" But he says it often.

On the assumption that screen butlers are best when comical fellows with slow mental machinery, Barnett Parker and Arthur Treacher have become the butlering champs of Hollywood. Parker right now is looking vapid in "Hullabaloo," with Frank Morgan, while Treacher recently did a neat job in "Irene." Each has played more than 40 such parts.

Even servant parts can carry these "little champs" to fame. See what "Gone With the Wind" did for Hattie McDaniel! She's now in the big money, and it takes a stellar maid role before casting directors dare approach her.

Also, the timid soul can become a soaring star to which an acting wagon may be hitched. Donald Meek let his name be his guide and became so undeniably the title-holder that M-G-M signed him for the "Nick Carter" series.

In Every Field.

Serious judges and comedy judges, sympathetic lawyers and shysters all have their champs. Spencer Charters is today's leading comedy jurist, while the dignified administrators are best represented by Howard Hickman, George Irving and Henry O'Neill. Before his death a few weeks ago, Granville Bates ("My Favorite Wife") had the edge on comedy and small-town judges. There are no nastier jury-baiters among the celluloid attorneys than Warner Bros.' Claude Rains.

Roscoe Karns is the leading cab driver. For pompous politicians, Burton Churchill heads the field. George Chandler and Ray Walker have played so many newspaper reporters that few city editors would show surprise to find them sitting at a typewriter in any local room. Eddie Gribbon comes most readily to mind when a frozen-faced, stony-hearted bartender is sought. Robert Emmet Geane feels right at home, and so do the fans, when he hurries into a home, carrying a doctor's kit. And how about Jean Hersholt, the screen's perennial "Dr. Christian"?

The dumb, gossipy telephone operator is almost always Marie Blake, a sister of Jeanette MacDonald, who plugs them in and out steadily for the "Dr. Kildare" series. Most famous of all effeminate floorwalkers, hotel clerks and the like is Franklin Pangborn, whose flexible facial expressions have no counterpart. For grim, gossipy women, film casters think of Sara Edwards, Grace Hayle, Margaret Seddon and Margaret McWade, all expert at trading a bit of spicy goings-on. Margaret Main tops the field of shrewd, biting landladies and board-inghouse-keepers.

The list of "little champs" is by no means exhausted. We've merely skimmed the field. Nor is any class, type or category the sole property of any one person. For example, in a book of classifications at any studio, one can find listed the names of 150 persons who play waiters, 200 butlers, 175 lawyers, 450 reporters and 450 gangsters. As one reporter among many real ones, it is gratifying to know the latter two groups are evenly matched.

(Released by the North American Newspaper Alliance, Inc.)

"LITTLE CHAMPS"—That's what Hollywood casting directors call these and other well-known character actors who mean much to every film. You will recognize the faces, if not the names, of Donald Meek, Marie Blake, Spencer Charters (inset), Billy Gilbert and Franklin Pangborn, and the types they portray.

These Are Brighter Days For New Tunesmiths

Battle Between the Radio Chains And Ascap Proves a Boon By Creating a Demand

By the Associated Press.

NEW YORK.

The new song writers, the hopeful ones who aspire to be another George Gershwin or Irving Berlin, are finding a "welcome" sign on Tin Pan Alley today. This is a development of the current battle between the major composers of the Nation and the radio chains, which are now busily lining up their own staff of independent composers.

Both Broadcast Music, Inc., and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, the two groups which control virtually all rights to songs which are popular today, are now greeting with eagerness the works of unknown composers. Those who show promise are given either a salary or advance royalties so that they will be financed while they develop their talents for song writing.

This boon to young composers as a result of the quarrel between the radio chains and the composers over the fees to be paid for playing music over the radio after next January 1 when the current contract expires. Where Ascap composers received $4,142,000 for the use of their songs over radio in 1939 they are demanding approximately double that amount for the use of their music in 1941, and with the new contract charging the networks 7½ per cent of their gross income while fees for about 550 individual stations will be reduced.

Where Ascap composers are paid according to the number of hit songs they have written and how many times those songs are played on the average, B. M. I. pays royalties on a basis of the actual number of times each song is played.

Opened the Door.

The radio chains, anticipating that they might be deprived of the use of Ascap music after January 1, set up their own group of Composers, Broadcast Music, Inc. This rivalry opened the door for the youngsters who had not yet won their niche in Tin Pan Alley.

Joan Whitney, as a B. M. I. example, is a golden-haired, blue-eyed glamour girl who sang in the choir of the Homestead Presbyterian Church near Pittsburgh. She was sent to New York to attend a fashionable finishing school, but she went over to Broadway instead and became a singing show girl in "The Great Waltz."

Then she started singing her own songs in a supper club and that's where B. M. I. found her to write such songs as "Leave Me With Your Kisses," "So You're the One," "I Could Tell That You Knew," and "Serenade in Blue." This latter is a modern melody in blues form, for example:

"There's a breath of ecstasy, and
a plaintive rhapsody—
Running through my serenade in
blue . . .
You've been gone so very long,
Now I'm alone and a blue mood has
found me."

400 Songs a Week.

Or, another discovery of B. M. I. is a couple of 19-year-old girls in Brooklyn High School. They wrote a song called "I've Got a Date With a Gate," which Russ Morgan introduced with his orchestra while the authors were still running to their school classes. One is pretty, black-eyed Leah Worth, who now, when not writing songs, clerks in the toys section of a department store. The other author is soft-voiced, blond Jean Barry, who clerks in a dress shop when she can get away from her piano. Owners of a not too dependable flivver, it nevertheless gave them the inspiration for another song, "The Old Jalop."

Since B. M. I. started assembling the non-Ascap song writers they have had about 400 songs a week submitted, out of which they find an average of about 14 a week they think worthy of publishing.

They have Remus Harris, a grandson of the noted Joel Chandler Harris, who wrote the Uncle Remus stories. A sales promoter for a chain of grocery stores in the South, he refuses to come to Tin Pan Alley, but he has written such songs as "Cry, Baby, Cry," "Sweetheart, the Moon Has Gone From Heaven" and "You Made a Touchdown in My Heart."

Too, B. M. I. has Stuff Smith, a composer from Broadway's real swing alley. He composed "It's Wonderful" and "I'se a-Muggin'" and his newest ones are "Don't the Moon Look Pretty" and "Do Whatcha Wanna Do." Also, they have introduced Robert Sour, a Princeton graduate who quit his valuable seat in the Stock Exchange because he thought there was a better financial future in song writing than there was in Wall Street. He wrote the lyrics for "Body and Soul" which Libby Holman sang into fame, and his most recent hit is "Practice Makes Perfect" which has been recorded by six name bands.

Sour also composed another B. M. I. song, this one a bouncy, semi-ballad that is good for a dance farewell. The title is "I'll Be Goin'."

Take No Chances

On the hottest day of the year in Hollywood, a bevy of snow hats today unexpectedly made their appearance on a sound stage.

Hollywood snow—the artificial kind—was falling liberally on the "Love Thy Neighbor" set at Paramount. Fred Allen, Jack Benny and Mary Martin were ensconced in cars, safe from the falling cornflakes. But Producer-Director Mark Sandrich, and his crew were sporting hats, caps, berets and other types of head covering. A test had been the previous day and it was discovered that some chemical in the treated cornflakes actually took chromium right off the automobiles. The boys weren't taking any chances with their hair.

It's All Work and No Woo For Poor Film Stand-Ins

They Merely Set Cameras for the Kiss Which the Stars Actually Exchange; Caresses Increase in Fervor

By Ted Gill,
Associated Press Staff Writer.

HOLLYWOOD.

It's all work and no woo for the unsung movie stand-ins. They toil and sweat through repeated rehearsals right up to the final stages. But when the cameras start rolling, the stand aside and let the hero and heroine do the kissing.

It's not that the studio begrudges the stand-ins a kiss or two. It's because so much care must be used to obtain exactly the right camera angles and lighting effects for such delicate scenes. And those that are precisely perfect for one player could not be used for another.

Kisses More Fervid.

Speaking of osculations, in these days of war and short skirts, the length and fervor of movie kisses is increasing, says Director Michael Curtiz.

"This is as it should be," he explains. "In wartime, any kiss may be the last the happy pair will ever exchange."

That means that record-breaking 56.2 second kiss Ann Sheridan and George Brent engaged in recently in "Honeymoon for Three" is liable to be shattered to smithereens most any day now.

Short snort: Bank robbers and safe crackers in the movies come in for a lot of heckling sometimes from fans. Some "professional" is always writing in to criticize the technique of studio "thugs," telling them they don't know how to do the "job" properly. But for some reason, the critics always take care not to reveal their identities.

It's Difficult Trick.

Orphaned: Movies certainly do employ ingenious means in order to take a picture of the face of a man standing in the dark smoking a cigarette. The cigarette alone doesn't produce enough light, so a small leather box is strapped to the actor's belt, hidden by his coat. A lighted cigarette is placed in a holder inside the box and from it a tube extends up inside the actor's coat and down his sleeve to his hand. On the end of the tube is a dummy cigarette equipped with a flashlight. At a given signal, the actor lights the flashlight with a tiny button. And at the same time draws in a puff of smoke through the tube from the lighted cigarette in the box fastened to his belt.

Silly sallies: Those club sandwiches you see in the movies are nothing but layers of bread and lettuce, since that's all that shows up in the picture . . . and film caviar is either plain buckshot or else it's sago, made from the pith of East Indian palm trees and colored with India ink . . . Chains never clank just right for the movies . . . Propmen find that a bunch of jingling keys sounds more like chains on a sound strip than real chains . . . And whenever you hear what you think are canaries singing sweetly in a picture, don't think that that necessarily is what it is . . . Most time the sound is produced by small mechanical devices that operate similarly to a music box.

The Mode Becomes Curves

Or Curves Become the Mode Again, Whichever Way Public Likes It

By Franklin Arthur,
Associated Press Staff Writer.

HOLLYWOOD.

Curves are back in movie favor, and Travis Banton—who designs the gowns which drape such livelies as Alice Faye, Lindan Darnell and Betty Grable—is mighty happy about it.

"For one thing," he says, "it indicates a healthier state. For another, it's easier for us who design. We have freedom to make the best of whatever the feminine figure has to offer."

Banton is 20th Century-Fox's chief stylist. For more than a decade he's been clothing feminine stars for the camera. He knows whereof he speaks when he observes:

"You can find more curves on one movie set today than in all Hollywood five years ago. At a rough guess, I'd say the average feminine star's weight today is higher by 12 pounds than it was in 1935." Newcomers, too, show the trend, he finds, mentioning Gene Tierney, Mary Beth Hughes and Sheila Ryan—"whose alluring curves alone might have disqualified them from screen careers not so long ago."

The American public is responsible, Banton believes, by rebelling against rigid dieting. Women are eating sensibly and like their cinema favorites to appear well fed, too.

"No woman," he says, "whether she be movie star, co-ed or housewife, can look or be at her best if she's half starved. Nervous breakdowns were much more common among feminine players when starvation diets were the order of the day.

"And with the movies' pronounced effect on the habits and fashions of the time, there must have been millions of women who tried to ape the stars by thinning themselves to the point of emaciation. We can only hope those days are forever gone.

"Not only that, outfitting today is less of a problem. A few years ago it was a question of concealment. Much of the feminine allure, which we try to accent by proper styling, had to go out the window. Now we have freedom to create."

No Redeeming Features

Geraldine Fitzgerald Is Happy To Be That Type in New Film

HOLLYWOOD.

Geraldine Fitzgerald, to her own great satisfaction, has at last embarked on a career of unmitigated cinema sin.

The flamboyant creature she is playing in Warner Bros.' film, "South of Suez," according to Miss Fitzgerald, hasn't a redeeming feature, socially speaking. But the red-headed Irish star believes she has tremendous histrionic possibilities.

"This will be the first part in pictures that has given me what I feel to be plenty of acting scope," she declared out on a location where the San Fernando Valley doubles for the African mining country and is just about as hot.

Emphasis on Curves.

Attired in a white and lacy costume which put lush emphasis on curves, and sporting a hair-do and make-up which would get a "double-take" even on Hollywood boulevard, let alone in Africa, Miss Fitzgerald was doing her first scenes in the picture.

Playing the wife of George Tobias, she is bidding for the love of George Brent. Not that she doesn't wish to stay married to Tobias, who happens to be doing well in the diamond-mining business. Later in the picture, her chores will be to double-cross Brent, then double-cross Tobias. Incidentally, he will get Brent hounded from hither to yon by police for James Stephenson's murder, which he didn't commit.

Mean and Soulless.

This deed is more dastardly, as the old melodramas would put it, since Stephenson plays the father of Brenda Marshall, the girl Brent loves. From all this it can be seen that Miss Fitzgerald is playing a character about as mean and soulless as Bette Davis' Mildred in "Of Human Bondage."

This is the star's first picture since her return from Ireland, and the birth of her baby. Her Warner Bros.' contract provides for a six-month uninterrupted interval each year during which she may do a stage play, if she wishes. Like John Garfield, she originally told Hollywood quite frankly that movie work could not win her from her first love, the footlights.

Lead for Gargan

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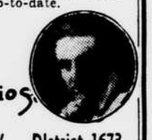

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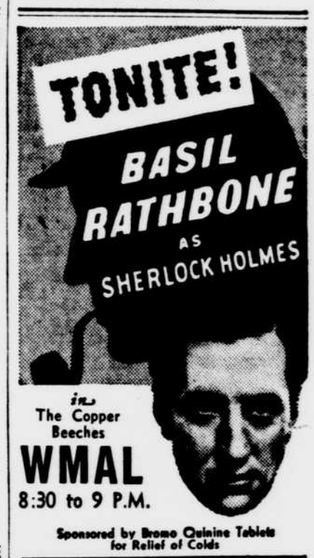

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