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"Doping Up My Bill for Next Week," He Explains.

All in the Day's Work

BY ALLAN MEADE

THE house is dark, a dramatic film is flitting across the screen. The audience sits in something like tenseness. Presently, the film is finished, the lights go up, and another show is over. In a few minutes the scene will be repeated exactly. Is it a little monotonous?

But wait. Here is the place again. It is past 11 o'clock. The last show of the night is over. The lights are up. In straight theater parlance, the house, when it is vacant is »dark«. In the language of the five-cent theater it is »light«.

It is light now. You are behind the screen, as it were. And now you meet the tired manager, the man back of it all; the one to whom all things are cause, and none effect. He is carefully scanning a typewritten pamphlet as you approach him.

»Doping up my bill for next week,« he explains. »Wait a second. This is the main section of my job. It's where I either get on or get off. It's the preliminary training. All you see's the score. Watch,« and he makes a little cross on a typewritten list in his hand.

»Let's see, I'll make that my— Say, listen to the things I've got to think about:

»Will this film suit the audience? Shall I run this or this one first? Is this one likely to put a crimp in somebody's line of morals? Will a comic or dramatic film fit in better there? And that isn't all.

»I've only got a limited assortment to pick from. And it's up to me to guess right.«

»Good deal like a vaudeville manager?«

»Sure. I have to balance the bill just the same. For instance, there's a dramatization of Rigoletto. It will be released Sunday. Now Rigoletto's all right. I've never seen this film but the opera's got lots of action and I'll bet on it. It ought to dramatize like a dream.

»But it's a little heavy, and I don't want to make it too heavy. 've simply got to lighten it up a little—«

»Throw off some ballast? That the idea?«

»No. —Shift the load, rather. Chuck in a little comedy. Liven it up!«

»Oh, where,« murmured the visitor. »Oh, where have I heard those words before? Could it have been at a dress rehearsal? Could it?«

»It couldn't. I never saw one. But I guess the stage manager with the \$20,000 company and myself need the same stuff to hold our audiences.

»Here, now I've got my choice of three comedies, each of them about four hundred feet long. I'm taking the only one that's never been shown here before. That's my play. Your moving picture show goer knows the old worn-out line of stuff as well as he knows his old shoes. So that's settled. Now —« the manager looked puzzled.

»What's the trouble?« ventured the visitor.

»Well,« with a smile, »I'm short about six hundred feet of film. Usually I try to run about two thousand. Let's see —« and he fingered the typewritten page over once again.

»Here! I've got it! An educational film; hunting seals in Iceland.«

»Great idea, that,« commented the visitor, admiringly. »Gives all the little children and everybody a chance to learn how to act the next time they drop up by the pole!«

A gleam of suspicion lit the manager's eye for a moment, but disappeared.

»Well,« he said, apparently by way of self consolation, »that isn't final. I may change my mind.«

»Say, there's more work about this than I thought!« exclaimed the other. »I'm beginning to understand that washboard brow of yours.«

The manager sighed.

»Oh, there's plenty of work. Maybe it isn't all necessary, and maybe it is. Some of the managers skip it. If you'll glance across the street you'll see a banner advertising an all-comedy bill. But if you'll compare our houses, you'll see I'm doing twice as much business as he is.«

»Does he know it?«

»Sure. But he's such a back number he's out of print. Get this! The moving picture has been traveling fast ever since it started, and you've got to keep an open oxygen hypodermic all the time if you want to run along.«

»Kind of a moving business, huh?«

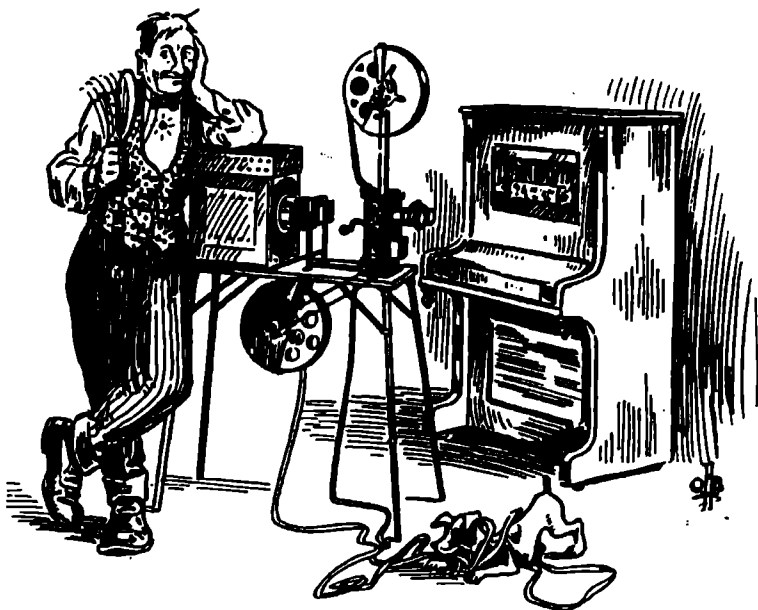
»Sure. Why, say; you can look back three or four years and recollect the time when the vaudeville theaters had a preordained clinch on every new film before the celluloid was dry. Well, that's Bible history. We beat the vaudevillers to them right along now. The manufacturers saw us coming and took a brace. We get more than an even break, now.«

»Don't seem to me that's speeding any,« joked the visitor. »More like getting the rail and sticking there.«

Some annoyance appeared on the manager's emotion screen.

»Three years ago,« he snorted, »I started with an electric piano, a bad picture machine that I bought from a Louisiana man, who'd been trying to show ›Tours of the World‹ through Arkansas; 200 feet of overworked film and a palm-leaf fan. The fan was thrown in. Now I've got two theaters, two orchestras of four pieces each; two of the best machines made and a considerably enhanced reputation. Is that speeding?«

»I guess so,« answered the other, weakly. »But the orchestra—«



**"Started with an Electric Piano, a Bad Picture Machine,
200 Feet of Overworked Film and a Palm Leaf Fan."**

»Say, that orchestra's the best in its class. It's purely pony size, but the leader's got long hair and artistic temperament to burn. He can arrange overtures to match anything from ›Hooligan's Fall Down the Coal Chute‹ to ›The Home-coming of the Prodigal Son.‹ I can absolutely bank on his not playing ›Mandy Lane‹ while the poor lad's Fletcherizing cornhusks is somebody else's pigpen.«

»I take it, then, that you use the old, straight minor scales for the quavery scenes?«

»Right! That's part of the business, same as it is of melodramas.«

»Put on much melodrama?«

»Scads of it. But it's a different kind.

»The ›Assassination of the Duc de Guise.‹ That's not melodrama. It's a tragedy, and a good one. I remember it was one of the best coin collectors I ever put on. ›Charlotte Corday‹ was another drawing card. Both of these, understand, are what we call high art films. They're posed for by the best actors in France, and many are retouched by real artists.

»Take ›The Reckoning.‹ The big part in that picture is played by Sarah Bernhardt's leading man, M. Krause. Some other high art stuff is a dramatization of Dumas' novel, ›The Tower of Nodre;‹ ›The Return of Ulysses,‹ according to Homer; ›La Tosca,‹ by Victorien Sardou and ›The Kiss of Judas,‹ a Biblical production. Also there is —«

The manager looked up and caught the visitor keeping time with his foot.
»Go ahead!« the latter urged. »Go on; That's real tony fall line of press agent stuff. Don't turn the faucet. Let it run. You won't? Then tell me the best thing you ever put on; the weightiest piece, you know.«

Just a moment the manager hesitated, and then:

»Drink!«

»Oh, no. Not the biggest load. That's too personal. I mean the heaviest, most ambitious film.«

A triumphant smile slipped around the edge of the manager's mouth.

»Drink!« he repeated. »A dramatization of Zola's book, ›Drink.‹ Do you know?«

»I do. Continue.«

»Well, it called for 2,200 feet of film, and the whole program. I had to sandwich the illustrated song between acts. It pulled a big house every day, but it was a risk. I wouldn't care to tackle it every week.«

»You speak of illustrated songs,« interposed the visitor. »Now,« and he said something very uncomplimentary about them.

»Don't blame me,« protested the manager. »There's always someone like them and they kill time. I do my best by alternating bass and soprano singers, but it wouldn't take an expert to prove they aren't Carusos nor Frenstads. Still, they may be some day,« and he smiled balefully.

»I should think,« encouraged the visitor, »that the bill could stand a little more comedy. Haven't any of your big successes been comedies?«

»Only one that I can remember. Probably you recollect it, too. ›The Run-away Horse.‹ It ran for a thousand feet—«

»The horse?«

»Sure. The horse in the film. I used to go in and laugh at it myself. Of course it was a little rough—«

»Horseplay, so to speak.«

»Sure. And, speaking of that, most comedy films are largely horseplay. It has to be broad, broad humor; broad enough to catch without the aid of any spoken words. How many comedians on the stage do you know who can do that?«

The manager paused. The workmen – or should it be stage hands? – had finished sweeping out. The light in the »machine house« up above vanished. Somehow, on a small scale, it was all very reminiscent of a large theater just before it is finally left to itself for the night. The visitor noticed it, if the manager, whose mind was set on something else, didn't.

»What's the reflection?« the visitor inquired as they went out.

»I was just thinking,« replied the manager, »that maybe that Iceland picture could be left out and a little scene in Hoboken used instead.«

And the door closed behind them.