

ON THE SCREEN

On With the Show. In the leading parts: Li Li-hwa, Yen Djuen, and Wang Tan-feng.

The Call of Spring. In the leading parts: Liu Chuen and Hu Foong.

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Much of the box-office appeal of *On With the Show* depends on its promises of sophisticated sensuality; yet the film is curiously naïve. Li Li-hwa (her photograph appeared in Vol. IV, p.141, of this magazine) takes the part of a beautiful and oratorical waitress in a restaurant picturesquely old-fashioned in the European style. Making her first appearance on a cart loaded with hay and farm produce, Li Li-hwa sings and recklessly throws apples to street children. With her songs, her charms, and the aid of the Takarazuka dancers, she finally raises enough funds to found an orphanage.

Justifying the entertainment by the worthy cause of charity is one of those usual attempts to assuage the demand for an immediate purpose in art. However, *On With the Show* fails to please everybody all round. Mosquito papers, by far the most favored reading matter among certain urban sets, have contributors who suspect that they do not like *On With the Show* because of its moralizing. They cannot help complaining that Li Li-hwa shows her famous legs only once, and then half buried in furs.

In Chinese eyes, the Takarazuka dances are expressive only of the splendor of youth, health and intelligent discipline. To the average Chinese, the fascination of ballet lies chiefly in its difficulty. They also find the traditional Japanese dances hard to understand on the screen without the help of the symphonic colors of costumes and background. But on the other hand the audience laughs heartily at the practical jokes the hero and heroine play upon each other—Li Li-hwa fries some bad eggs for her admirer and he sends her an empty cup of ice cream. Also well received are the Chinese Laurel and Hardy who mess about in the restaurant kitchen. *On With the Show* is a success with the public in spite of its banal situations, its structural weakness, and its apparent clashing of adult and infantile interests. The last-mentioned shortcoming may be disregarded, because modern Chinese of all ages are like children in their fondness for birthday cakes, with or without dancers swirling around one as in the charity performance in *On With the Show*. The whole picture is modeled on the Hollywood series of *Gold Diggers* and *The Big Broadcast* and is meant to "feed the eyes with ice cream and seat the heart in a sofa"—to quote the phrase a Chinese critic once applied to these American extravaganzas.

The Call of Spring presents a far more serious problem. With the modern, Westernized stage as its background, it is written, directed, and enacted by Liu Chuen (also portrayed in Vol. IV, p.145, of this magazine), the idol of girl students. *The Call of Spring* finds an enormous following among the young intelligentsia and is formidably advertised as "recommended by the critical public." In the role of an actor, Liu has the opportunity to do bits as Romeo and as Armand of *La Dame aux Camélias*. In another "play within the play," Liu makes a convincing old man, but an Occidental one who digs his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets à la Lionel Barrymore. The hero of the picture writes plays with the help of coffee, and the camera dwells with genuine delight on the glittering coffee-pot. When in distress, he gets drunk in a bar. When he falls into poverty, he works as a coolie in a park, his overcoat shabby but shapely like that of a smart foreign tramp; his life in the park seems a perpetual picnic with lots of time for brooding by the campfire.

It is appalling to reflect that, in the imagination of young Chinese intellectuals nurtured on a quarter of a century of foreign films and fiction, there is so little room for anything really Chinese. The transformation has clearly gone past the stage of "fundamentally Chinese, functionally Western," the slogan invented at the beginning of this process of Westernization.

The unanalytical acceptance of foreign romances—reality twice removed—results in much posturizing. In modern Chinese art as well as life, the expression is often affected when the emotion is genuine. Liu Chuen is doubtlessly sincere in *The Call of Spring*, especially in his passionate exposure of greedy theatrical managers. The hero acts always in accordance with the new sense of propriety. Accidentally crippled, he feels he stands in the way of his wife's happiness. He leaves the scene. In a tragic little note he gives her his blessing and asks her not to look for him, as it would be futile. A glance at the personal column in Chinese newspapers ("Since you disappeared, mother refuses to eat or leave her bed. Grandmother had her heart attacks. Whole family daily washes face with tears. Return at once") shows us that Chinese under thirty are prone to walk out of their homes because of abstract principles, domestic disputes, failure to pass examinations, the incompatibility of cultural atmosphere, etc. Perhaps no other work has influenced the average educated Chinese of this century so much as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and in this, as in everything else learned from the West, the Chinese are more impressed by the bleak beauty of Nora's gesture than by the underlying thought.—Eileen Chang.