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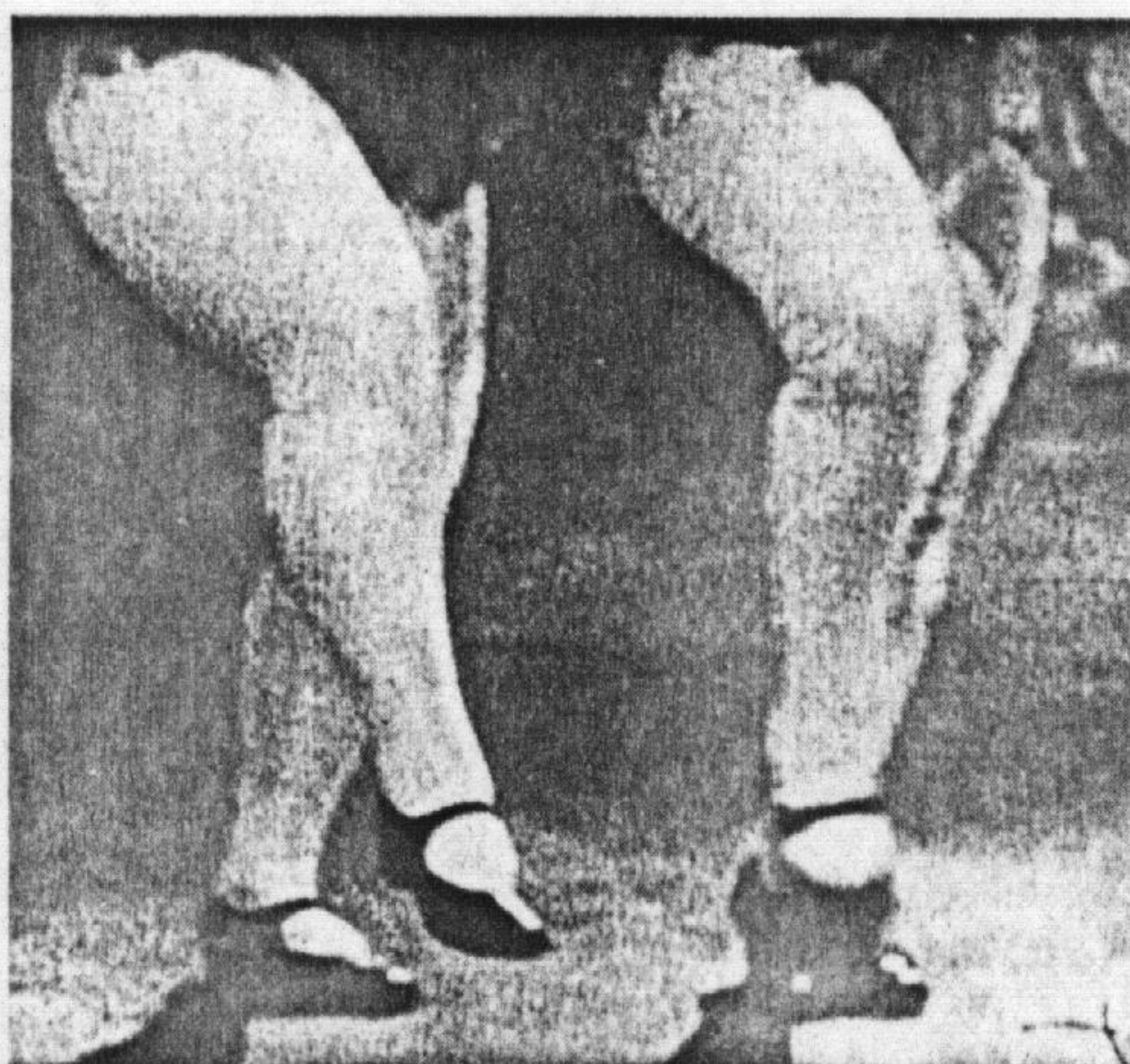
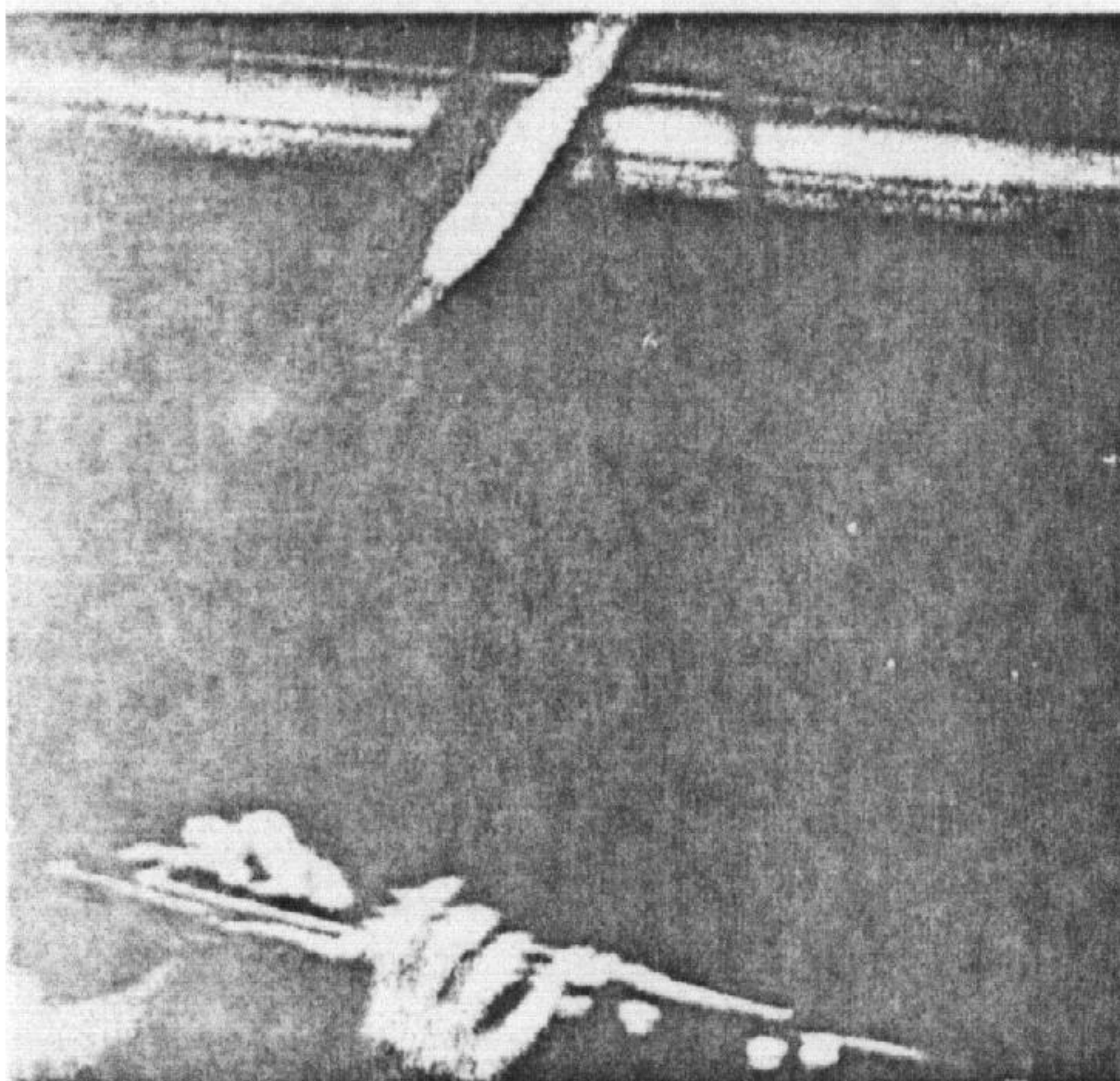
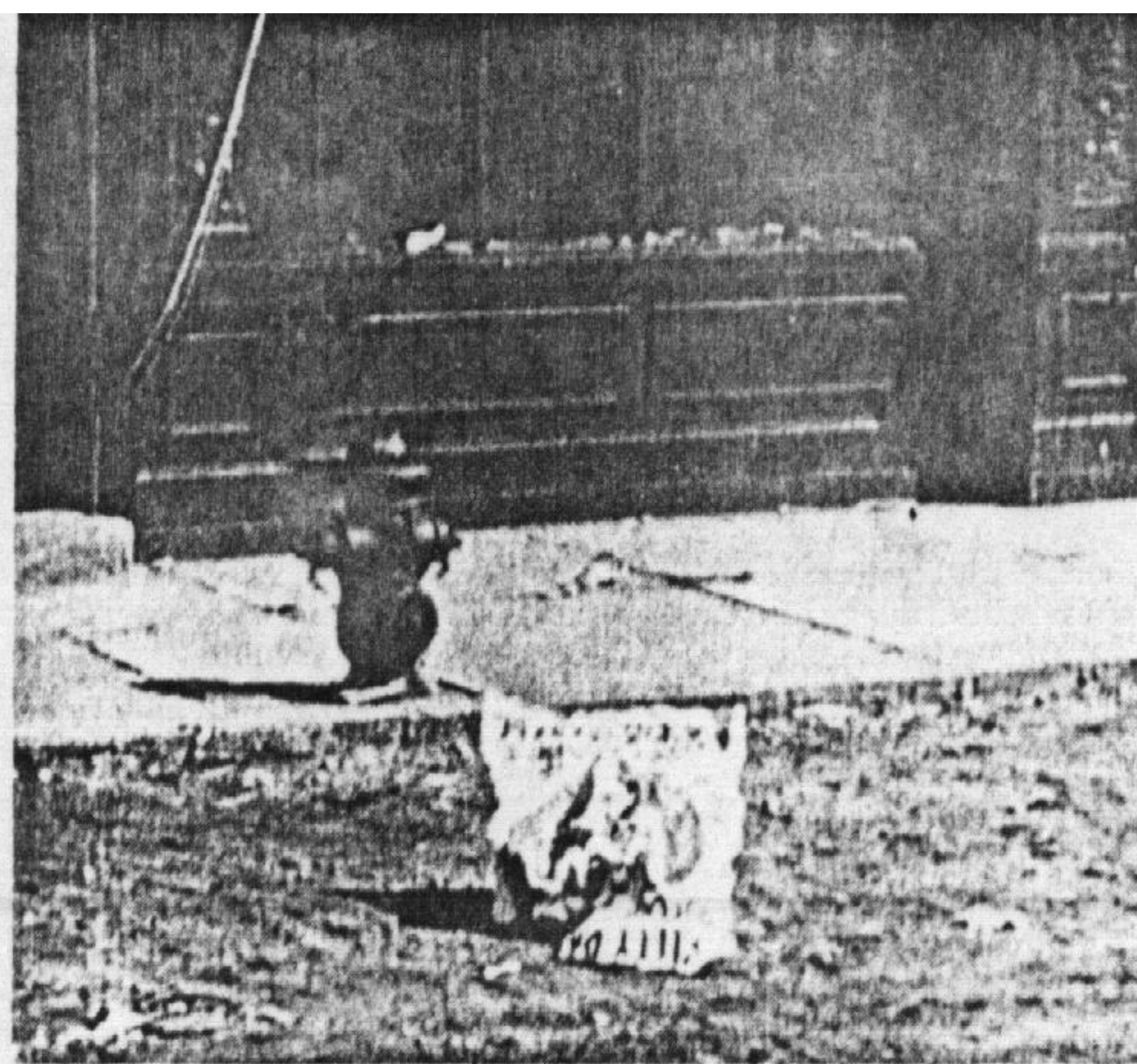
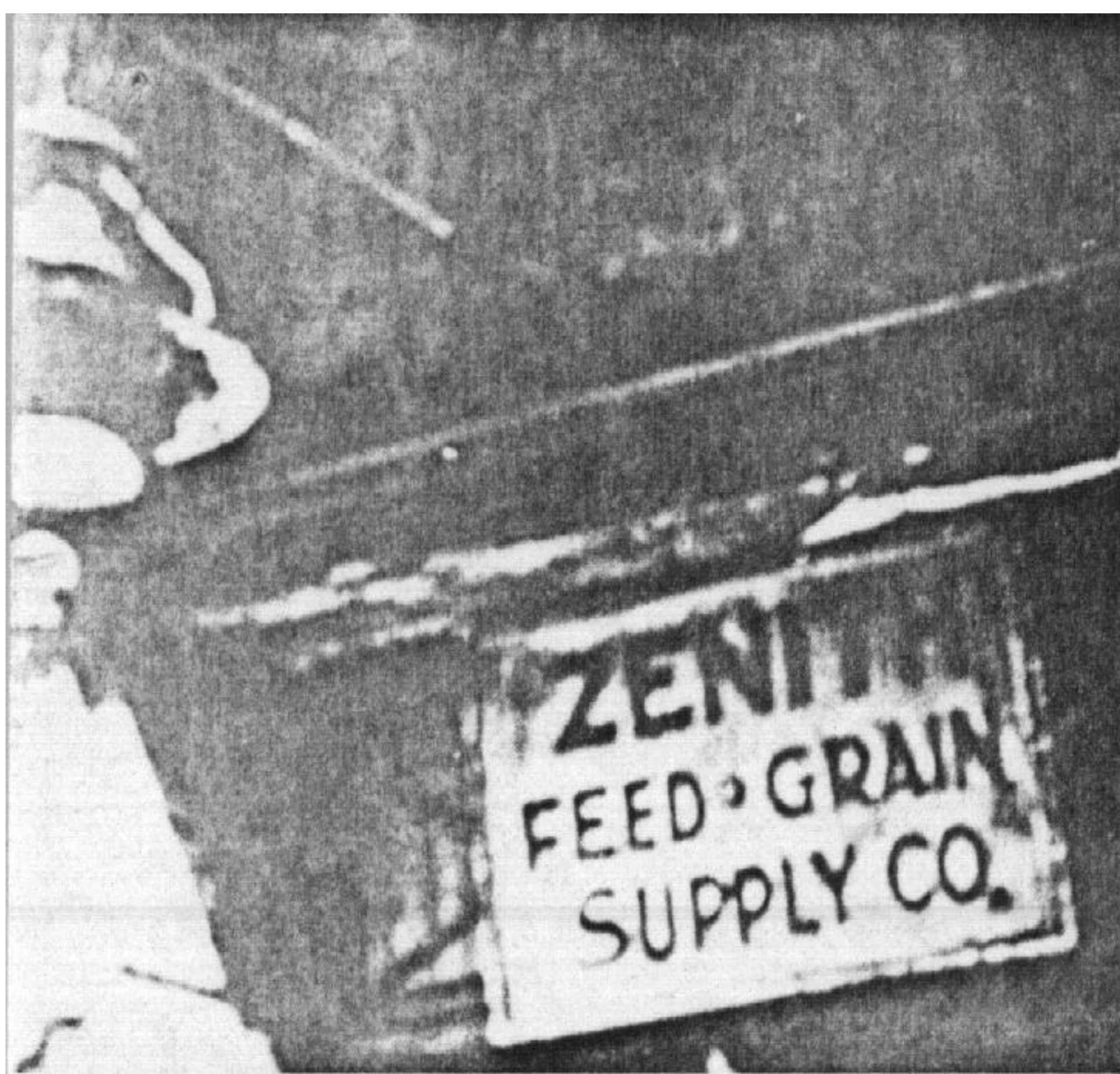
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I: Applause

1929 was the year of the great Coming of Sound panic in the film industry. Experienced stage producers were hurriedly summoned to cope with the problem, either as directors if they were famous enough, or as dialogue directors if they were not, and Mamoulian was lured away from Broadway – though not as far as Hollywood – by an offer from Jesse Lasky and Walter Wanger of Paramount. For five weeks he watched and absorbed the mechanics of film-making at the Astoria Studios in New York, where Herbert Brenon was at work and Jean de Limur was directing Jeanne Eagels in *Jealousy*. Then, at the same studios, having ‘learned what not to do’, he plunged straight into *Applause*, the story of an ageing burlesque queen who sacrifices herself for her daughter, set in the sleazy atmosphere of second-rate vaudeville halls, and edged from melodrama into tragedy by Helen Morgan’s superb performance and by Mamoulian’s cunning juggling of naturalism and expressionism into a stylised reality.

Remarkable enough even today, the film must have seemed – and indeed was hailed as – a real eye-opener in those days of talk, talk and more talk, stage-bound by cumbersome equipment enclosed in soundproof booths. The very opening sequence indicates that Mamoulian was thinking in terms of movement rather than sound, and in terms of cinema rather than theatre. It also, incidentally, establishes the elliptically swift, scene-setting opening which was to become almost a Mamoulian trade-mark.



Applause: the opening sequence

A close-up of a shuttered store-front, the sign reading 'Zenith Feed Grain Supply Co.' The camera tracks back, cuts to a forlornly empty street with newspapers blown about by the wind, among them a theatre poster advertising 'KITTY DARLING, QUEEN OF HEARTS'. A small dog running on to worry the poster is rescued by a little girl just as the sound of a brass band swells up on the soundtrack, and we cut to Kitty Darling herself (Helen Morgan), making her triumphal progress through the crowded streets in an open carriage. The music changes to ragtime, the camera cuts inside a burlesque theatre, and tracks steadily left past the musicians in the orchestra pit; pans up, and tracks right along a row of fat, lackadaisically kicking legs; pans up yet further, and returns along the raddled faces of the row of weary, bumping and grinding chorus girls.

Apart from its sheer brilliance as film-making, the sequence is cleverly contrived as a foundation for the whole film. It plants the idea that Kitty's fame will be shortlived, undercutting the slightly hackneyed 'fickleness of fortune' theme by getting in first, as it were; and, more importantly, it establishes in terms of harsh, grimy lasciviousness the weary reality that lies behind that fame. Without it, what follows would soon have foundered in a sticky mess of sentiment as just another of those tearful mother-and-daughter epics that Hollywood is so fond of.

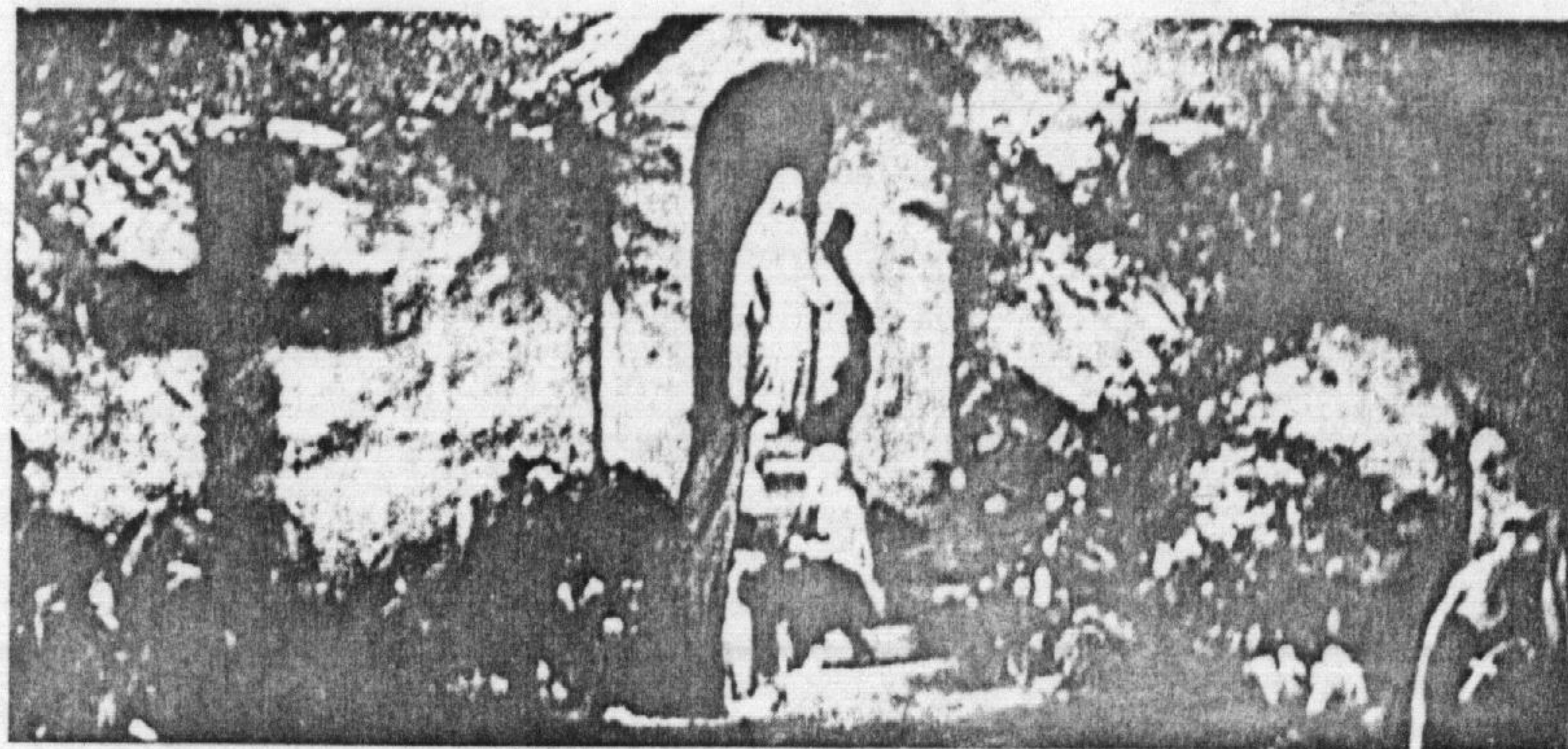
Kitty Darling, evidently pregnant, passes out while on stage with her clown partner and is carried to her dressing-room. It transpires that she has received a telegram to say that her husband, under sentence of death, has been refused a pardon. The show goes on, and within minutes the news is brought on stage that Kitty has given birth to a daughter. Far from being risible, however, the sequence is remarkably effective, thanks to Mamoulian's stylised handling of it as an extension of the vaudeville turns we have been watching, with the clown appealing for a doctor in a cross-talk act with the audience ('Is there a doctor in the house?' – laughter – 'No foolin' boys, is there a doctor in the house?'), and the news of the birth brought on stage by one of the girls and passed from mouth to mouth to the clown, who yelps 'Oh! boy' and turns a delighted



Helen Morgan as Kitty Darling

cartwheel offstage to Kitty's dressing-room. There, following a superb close-up of Kitty's face, streaked with make-up and haloed in golden hair, comes the first clumsy touch of expressionism: as the chorus girls file past the couch on which Kitty is lying to offer their congratulations, a shot vertically upwards shows a ring of faces peering down, and another vertically downwards shows the same ring round the couch – more Busby Berkeley than Mamoulian.

Thereafter, with the exception of another of these unconvincingly mannered and unmotivated overhead shots (which he never resorted to again), Mamoulian gets a grip on his expressionism, and brings it more and more into play as a counterpoint to the sordid reality of the burlesque theatre and the gracefully naturalistic iconography of the convent scenes. For Kitty – indeed, yes – sends her little girl to a convent school, whence she returns at the age of seventeen, knowing nothing of how her mother earns her living, to find Kitty ageing, slipping, and in the grip of an unscrupulous sponger who soon has his eye on pretty young April.



Applause: arrival at the convent

One only has to compare Mamoulian's handling of these convent scenes with that of almost any other Hollywood director – for instance, James Whale, himself no mean stylist, in the similar scenes in *Show Boat* – to realise that he was a master at stating the unstateable by understatement. No pious sermonising, no heavenly choir, no sticky embarrassment: simply an impression of almost Bressonian calm and intensity. When Joe the clown suggests that the child should be sent to a convent so that 'she'll grow up a lady', Kitty hesitates in an agony of indecision. 'Maybe I will,' she says, and Mamoulian cuts to a close-up of hands, pulling back the camera to reveal a nun talking to the child in a garden shrine, then pulling further back to reveal another nun praying under the spreading branches of a tree in the foreground, and finally moving in again on this image of almost pastoral simplicity before cutting back to Kitty, sitting on the floor sorting out old letters and souvenirs as she softly croons 'What Wouldn't I Do for That Man?' to a photograph of her lover, Hitch Nelson. A diagonal wipe, splitting the screen in two, reveals Hitch in his room kissing a girl in *deshabille*; the wipe completed, Hitch – a city slicker in spats, tight striped suit and patent-leather hair – leaves his room, crosses the corridor, removes a hair from his lapel, and bursts in on Kitty: 'Hello, beautiful!'

Already Mamoulian is adept in not wasting time. Having just made the transition from birth to childhood in one cut, he now leaps to adolescence in another. For as Hitch enters, Kitty is reading a letter from her daughter, now aged seventeen. Hitch insists that she be brought back to help the family finances; and Kitty, played throughout as a foolish, fond woman who loves not wisely but too well, tearfully consents when he threatens to leave her: 'It's her or me.' The scene ends with the introduction of a major expressionist motif: as Hitch comforts Kitty, assuring her that she has made the right decision and that they will be 'one big, happy family', his shadow looms, large and threatening, on the wall.

We cut back to the convent: a beautiful chiaroscuro sequence as April bids farewell to the Mother Superior, with the camera tracking slowly down corridors where nuns glide past or kneel in prayer, and out to the gardens where children play on the lawn, nuns stroll by the lake and swans float gracefully on the water. Largely silent, except for an 'Ave Maria' sung on the soundtrack, the scene enshrines a sense of pure tranquillity, almost as incorporeal as the nuns who flit like black and white shadows through it. 'Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the shadow,' wrote T. S. Eliot (*The Hollow Men*). A sequence shot on location in Penn Station amid the honking traffic and bustling crowds gives April her first taste of raw reality; but the real shock is reserved for another brilliant shadow-play when she is taken backstage at the burlesque theatre to see her mother.

The sleazy atmosphere of the opening recurs, intensified with a new cruelty. As Kitty goes on stage for her number, the audience jeers 'They ought to pension off that old blonde' in a montage of sneering, raddled faces and blackened teeth. Kitty's face dissolves into April's, watching in horror; and as Kitty goes on stage again for the finale in a scanty costume and fantastic feathered head-dress, after excitedly greeting her daughter, April is further assailed by huge, obscene images, performing bumps and grinds in silhouette against the backcloth. The final turn of the screw comes in a ridiculous, wonderful, touching scene between mother and



Applause: Kitty at the burlesque theatre

daughter at their hotel. 'Everything is so different from what I thought it would be,' cries April. 'It ain't what you do, it's what you are,' replies Kitty, and gently sings her daughter to sleep: a luminously beautiful scene – April's hand reaching under the pillow for her crucifix, Kitty tenderly stroking her hair, neon lights flickering on and off outside the window – until suddenly a huge shadow appears on the wall behind them, and one realises that Hitch has just come in.

It was this sequence – three days into shooting – which gave Mamoulian his first experience of the perennial technician's cry of 'It's impossible', and which led him to take his first important step towards breaking the sound barrier by insisting on filming the scene in one shot, with Helen Morgan's lullaby and Joan Peers's whispered prayer recorded simultaneously. In his own words: 'But, they said, we couldn't record the two things – the song and the prayer – on one mike and one channel. So I said to the sound man, "Why not use two mikes and two channels and combine the two tracks in printing?" Of course it's general practice now; but the sound man and George Folsey, the cameraman, said it was impossible. So I was mad. I threw down my megaphone (all directors still used megaphones in those days) and ran up to Mr Zukor's office. . . . "Look!", I said, "Nobody does what I ask. . . ." So Zukor

came down and told them to do it my way; and by 5.30 we had two takes in the can. Next day I went to the studio very nervous. But as I went in, the big Irish doorman, who'd always ignored me before, raised his hat and bowed. It seemed they'd had a secret 7.30 viewing of the rushes in the studio, and were so pleased with the result that they'd sent it straight off to a Paramount Sales Conference. After this, what Mamoulian said, went.'

Mamoulian's chief motivation, of course, was to unchain the camera: 'In those days, a scene was shot with three cameras, two for close-ups, one for long shot. And then into the cutting room to intercut the three. I insisted on a fluid camera which would pan freely, as well as move in and out of a scene.' And although *Applause* relies more on expressionistic effects than the overall rhythmic flow which begins to appear in *City Streets* and is brought to the level of a fine art in *Love Me Tonight*, the camera does frequently move with characteristic wit, nowhere more so than in the inspection of the chorus line at the beginning, or in the slow lateral track which marks the beginning of April's idyll with a young sailor. After the show one night – April having become a reluctant showgirl – as Kitty goes off to a spare-time job hostessing at a stag party, Hitch waits with lecherous intent to take April home, while April slips quietly out into the street. At sidewalk level, the camera follows her feet through a maze of dustbins, pauses as she stops to attend to a bothersome shoe, and notes a pair of watching sailor feet, which turn and follow as a dog yaps in the background and a white kitten (first appearance of the Mamoulian mascot) crosses their path.

Also alone and lonesome, the sailor takes her to a cafeteria and romance blossoms. The dialogue is hackneyed, the kind of *faux-naïf* folk idiom which Odets later made his speciality. Asked what his name is, the sailor answers, 'Tony. I don't like it much. Sounds like a wop bootblack.' Then, 'Gee, but your eyes are blue.' Yet it also rings tender and true because Mamoulian infuses their scenes together – falling in love in the seedy, deserted restaurant; dreaming together on Brooklyn Bridge as they watch the ships put out to sea; finding their first kiss under the open sky on the roof of a

skyscraper as an aeroplane soars overhead – with a simple lyricism which is neither *faux* nor *naïf*.

Kitty is delighted, Hitch furious, when April announces her decision to quit the stage to marry Tony. When April then overhears Hitch tell her mother that she is old, washed-up, and that April is her 'meal-ticket from now on', the stage is set for a grand climax of self-renunciation, which Mamoulian orchestrates brilliantly as Hitch storms out with a sneering 'See you in show business, beautiful', and Kitty, sinking down by the table to find herself staring at a photograph of herself as she once was, rises to gaze wonderingly at the ageing face reflected in the mirror. Tragedy is secure in Helen Morgan's superbly ravaged face at that moment, and the cross-cutting that follows, though a trifle dated now, still works. In the flat, Kitty suddenly smiles to herself and, tremulous with excitement, searches the bathroom cabinet for a bottle of poison; in the restaurant where they are supposed to be celebrating their engagement, April forces herself to tell Tony that she is giving him up to go back to the stage. Having unburdened herself, April asks for a glass of water, and as she lifts it to her lips, we dissolve to Kitty drinking the poison. Even here Mamoulian's rhythmic sense stands him in good stead. Instead of plunging head first into the finale, he pauses. Kitty, as though suspended in some vision of hell, sits at the window in a rocking-chair, her face flickeringly illuminated and plunged into darkness by the neon lights, while the traffic honks and screeches below. Meanwhile, in one of those offhand little naturalistic touches which are so cunningly deployed throughout the film, April sees Tony off on the subway; neither can think of anything to say, and Tony almost absently puts a coin in a slot-machine; as his train pulls in, he suddenly becomes aware of the sticks of chewing-gum in his hand, and thrusts them at her like a love token as he runs for the train.

After this the ending, melodramatic or not, has the same direct, overwhelming attack as the last scenes of *Tol'able David* or *Stella Dallas*. The dying Kitty staggers to the theatre in search of her daughter. April, arriving to go back on the stage, finds her lying,



The last sequence of *Applause*: Joan Peers and Helen Morgan

presumed drunk, on the couch in her dressing-room (same couch, same posture as in the scene of April's birth), and offers to take her place. She is a wild success, and as she retreats from the applause, Tony is there, waiting and now understanding. They embrace against a poster advertising Kitty Darling in 'Parisian Flirts', as the camera pans up to rest on Kitty's smiling face.

Applause has its faults, but they are mainly in the acting. Fuller Mellish, in particular, overplays grotesquely as the city slicker, while both he and Jack Cameron (as Kitty's clown friend) employ that flat, wisecracking delivery which is peculiarly of the thirties and which makes perfectly inoffensive lines, such as 'I got plans. I'm headin' for Broadway', sound absurdly overstated. Joan Peers, too, simpers overmuch, and is not exactly convincing in the leggily clumsy dance which supposedly brings out the roar of the crowd. Mamoulian obviously concentrated his attention on Helen Morgan, who is nothing short of superb. Already something of a legend as

a torch singer in cabaret, this was her first film role, and she brings to it something of the wistful, ravaged quality that Judy Garland revealed in *A Star is Born*. It is a tragedy that with the possible exception of Whale's *Show Boat*, where she plays the role of the star-crossed Julie Laverne for everything it is worth – and, incidentally, gives a truly fabulous rendering of 'Bill' – the cinema was never again to find her a part worthy of her talent.