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Looking Back on the German Invasion

By C. L. Yearsley, of 1st National

Of all industries ours is by far the most emotional and although it is, as an industry, also one of the most stable, we are one vast nervous organism insofar as major trade movements and influences are concerned. If self-examination and analysis of past events are helpful in fitting the individual to face the future with more confidence it may be equally beneficial for an industry to occasionally take stock of its forgotten ills with an eye to future cries of a possibly similar nature.

On Monday, Dec. 13, 1920, motion picture America was startled and mightily disturbed by the news that a German-made picture, under the title of "Passion" had broken the box office record of the Capitol Theatre, New York.

Following its sensational Sunday opening, the picture ran two weeks at the big Broadway Theatre, being the second production to justify a two weeks run and the theatre had then been open over a year.

Besides breaking box office records, it seriously alarmed some of our hitherto undefeated production champions and worse still, threatened to prove the advance guard of a German invasion that might ruin our production industry financially.

Motion picture annals, picturesque as they are, hold few sensations that equal the advent of Pola Negri in "Passion."

The screen of the world's largest theatre, had not been secured for "Passion" without effort.

History of "Passion"

David P. Howells brought the picture to America. He begged and pleaded with wise exhibitors to look at the production. Having admitted in advance that it was a German made costume picture, it took all of his superb salesmanship to get the big chiefs of First National to even screen it.

Robert Lieber, Harry Schwalbe, J. D. Williams and other of the Circuit's stalwarts first witnessed the Little Milliner's way with a king, in the dark, chilly projection room of the company's old headquarters in the fall of 1920.

Warned by the fire of Pola Negri, stirred by the genius of Lubitsch, they capitulated. Then followed a test run of the picture at Jacob Fabian's Garden Theatre, Patterson, N. J. and "Passion" made good.

In the meantime, S. L. Rothafel at the New York Capitol had viewed "Passion," rechristened from its original title "DuBarry" by Mr. Williams, and became convinced that the production was worthy a place in his theatre. Critics eulogized it. Pola Negri became a rage in a week. It lifted the ban on costume pictures and started the German invasion with a rush. The public's acceptance of German films on their merits as works of art and entertainment threw our production circles into a near panic. It was obvious that we could not pay American wages and material costs and compete with the Germans, whose labor, studio and laboratory experts, chemicals, building materials of every kind were so much cheaper.

Some of our producers at once planned to make pictures in Germany. It was conceded that a few Americans would have to be taken over to handle certain phases of production but upon the whole Germany was looked



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upon as a sort of production Klondyke. After four years, so far as is known, the net result of American production in Germany is that one big producer spent a great deal of money on the experiment and gave it up as impractical as well as for reasons to be explained later.

The early weeks of the invasion were full of promise for importers. A great many films were brought over, edited and titled to fit this market. Exhibitors generally showed little hesitancy about running them because the public had accepted "Passion" with no evidence of war prejudice.

Success and Failure

"The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari" was a success at its Broadway opening. People marveled at its weird novelty. Highbrows hailed it as the herald of an epoch screen impressionism. Its New York success was repeated in many large cities, largely due to public curiosity. The people in smaller communities apparently cared less for artistic fads.

Generally speaking, the big cities were interested in German pictures while the country at large did not care for them. Historical subjects of other than German national locale were more successful than German stories either historical or modern. Not a single modern German drama received a first run. "Deception," "Henry the Eighth," "The Golem," "Woman Against Woman," "Danton," and other spectacular productions achieved a varied degree of success.

Most popular of all were the Pola Negri—Ernst Lubitsch Productions. "Gypsy Blood," "Carmen," "One Arabian Night," "Sumurun," "Vendetta," and "Sappho," (retitled "Mad Love") all made money for both distributors and exhibitors—especially in the cities. All were truly artistic and gave little or no visual evidence of German origin or atmosphere.

The metropolitan success of the earlier German pictures roused American production workers to the perils of the invasion and national opposition began to crystallize. John Emerson, President of the Equity Association sounded the actors' alarm. American Legion members among Hollywood Studio workers created a street demonstration that forced the management of a Los Angeles theatre to withdraw "The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari" which had just opened to big business. The same picture had to be withdrawn in Dallas, Texas. American picture folk had determined not to submit tamely to the loss of their industry to the Teutons.

Exhibitors' experience the country over was beginning to demonstrate that while the public would accept true art and entertainment from anywhere our people did not really want German pictures, most of which were beginning to fail at the box office.

The public's curiosity had been satisfied, they were quickly tired by so many heavy historical, spectacular subjects no matter how well done. Modern stories of German life and atmosphere would not go at all.

So the German invasion fell of its own weight because the American product, even at higher cost, proved much more acceptable and therefore more profitable.

The influences and circumstances responsible for what success German pictures had in America may be summed up as follows. First, there was the really artistic and entertainment value of the better subjects. Second, the public, already sold on the idea that the Germans do many things exceedingly well, were curious to see how well they could make motion pictures.

Naturally importers brought in the best subjects first. The impetus gained by the few really fine German pictures secured distribution and first runs for the less desirable ones that followed.

Another contributing factor to the brief success of the invasion lay in the exhibitors' resentment at high film rentals caused by what was then considered excessive production costs. Many exhibitors, faced with ever increasing rentals and seriously alarmed by the decreasing attendance due to post war industrial depression, felt themselves forced to welcome anything which promised a reduction in operating expenses.

Having won the war, theatre men saw no reason why they should continue it industrially, especially as the public did not at first show any resentment to German pictures. Exhibitors hoped foreign competition that would lower production costs was at last at hand—and what exhibitor or merchant does not want more profitable merchandise if he can get it?

It was the box office that invited the German invasion and the box office that defeated it. As we look back upon the hysteria that attended Pola's seduction of our industry we may take comfort in the thought that we have met the enemy and they are ours. The effectives of the German invasion were Pola Negri and Ernst Lubitsch and they are now of us. It is also gratifying that art and genius again proved themselves international, for therein lies the security of our own foreign markets. American motion picture supremacy seems secure so long as we can capture the talent of the world.