

Sunless Temples of New York's Movies

SUN worshippers from Los Angeles get a rude shock in the modern motion picture studios of New York when they begin airing their outworn notions of what's what in illumination. New York scoffs at California. Here substitutes for sunshine have been developed to a point where they far surpass in photographic quality the merits of old-fashioned daylight.

In *Neustra Señora la Reina de los Angeles*, which the gifted Secretary of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce freely but beautifully translates into "Nature's Flower-Shaded Sun Parlor," the word of Ecclesiastes xi., 7, is yet regarded as gospel: "Truly, the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun."

"Sweet—but passé!" retort the cinematographers of New York.

Beneath the glare of the "sunlight arc lamp," it is as easy to get sunburned as upon the sands of Long Beach. Two of these arcs, beating down together, would singe an actor's wig to a crisp in five minutes. Three would create a conflagration like the rays of a mammoth burning glass and blind the beholder more swiftly than the flares of acetylene.

The trouble with the sun, as viewed by the efficiency experts of New York's many picture studios, is not only that its illumination is of an inferior quality, but also that it is un dependable. Some days it functions not at all, at other times raggedly. It stands not still upon Gibeon, as it should do during the "abooting" of a big scene; but moves relentlessly across the heavens. It indulges itself in pale reds and yellows (requiring orthochromatic emulsions) in the early morning and in the late afternoon; and its elevation even at midday in latitude 40 degrees north has never given satisfaction to discriminating producers. And never in history has the sun been known to function properly when needed for a retake of a bad piece of film.

Thus, in this business, in every respect except the matter of expense, electric light is coming to be regarded as superior to sunshine. Electricity works day or night, at the touch of a switch. An artificial sun can be lowered or elevated at will, and the quality of its rays is absolutely dependable. Your modern picture director, when he is working indoors, can assume a patronizing attitude toward Joshua. In fact, some of the cinema men so much prefer artificial sunlight to the natural product that they bar the sun from doing any more work around their studios.

The two newest and most modern picture production plants, one erected on Manhattan Island, another opened only last week in Queensboro (just across the river, and easily accessible by a new subway), are both built with opaque roofs. Not a ray of sunshine ever penetrates to the floors where the cameras grind. Local prophets of filmdom declare that the day of the studio modeled after a plant conservatory is swiftly passing, and point to the fact that even some of the possessors of photographic greenhouses are covering the glass of their roofs with tar paper or black paint, so that, in the words of the Psalmist, "they may not see the sun."

Naturally enough, Los Angeles—whose celebrated sunshine is its stock in trade—does not relish these tendencies of the times. Two years ago the City of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels was gloating over the threatened annihilation of New York as a rival in the field of picture production, and forecasts were freely made that the metropolis would soon be as completely off the map of production as the ill-fated colony that once thrived in Chicago.

This gloating was loudest in the dark winter time of war, when coal ran short and "heatless days" and "lightless nights" were decreed by ordinance. The producers of New York City and Fort Lee, N. J., began winging to Los Angeles in flocks. From a boast that Los Angeles produced 80 per cent. of the movies made in the United States, the Sun Parlor raised its estimate to 90 per cent. In the same year the figures on the manufactured products of Los Angeles jumped from \$304,248,000 to \$618,000,000.

But one of the economic consequences of the peace that followed shortly was that the tide began to turn back toward New York the minute the coal shortage ceased.

First, D. W. Griffith deserted Los Angeles, and when asked if he meant to be gone long answered tersely "Forever." After establishing his business offices at the corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway, he proceeded to invest something like a million dollars in a studio near Mamaroneck, on Long Island Sound. His field headquarters is the former mansion of Henry W. Flagler, the railway magnate.

On his heels, the Fox Film Corporation expressed a substantial token of faith in the future of New York as a producing centre by opening a huge studio and laboratory building on Manhattan Island, in the block bounded by Tenth Avenue, Fifty-fifth Street and Fifty-sixth. This despite the fact that Fox had hundreds of thousands of dollars already invested in a plant in Hollywood, Cal.

Then, only last month, the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, likewise heavily interested in a Los Angeles plant, opened in Queensboro a studio as impressive in size and appearance as a huge convention hall.

Each of these two newest studios cost in the neighborhood of \$2,500,000. Both are sunless temples, doing all their photography by artificial light; and both have floor space for twenty companies to work at once. The Famous Players-Lasky studio has the fittings of a palace. Every star occupies a suite consisting of a reception room, secretary's office, dressing room and bath. The Fox property is architecturally not so impressive; it looks more like a factory than a public edifice; but it is a marvel of a production plant, wherein the whole process of making a picture, from idea to eye, goes on under one roof. The Famous Players house their laboratories in separate buildings, and use their big convention hall only as a stage floor.

Then, to make matters worse, the shops of Los Angeles—a city only about a tenth as large as New York—

are often deemed lacking in articles essential to "truly artistic" productions. California film stars frequently hop across the continent to New York on the pretext that they can't find gowns in Los Angeles exquisite enough to express their personality. Furniture stores on the western coast often fail to produce the "period stuff" demanded by designers of luxurious settings; the research department is disappointed with the local bookshops; the music department with the music stores.

And then, to cap it all, though Los Angeles has a White Way as long and as broad and as glittering as Times Square, there is no place like our own Babylonian Broadway when a producer goes out scouting for a competent cast. Two stock companies, three vaudeville houses, a musical comedy, one "road show" and a Little Theatre are about the high-water mark in Los Angeles theatrical production at the top of the Winter season. Not much hope for trained assistance here! And, say what you please about the lure of Western gold, it never has been sufficient to attract to Los Angeles quite the army of big and little thespians that a casting director for the movies feels he really ought to have. New York's Broadway is the actor's paradise—or just this side of paradise—and where the heart is, there the treasure!

To complicate the problem further, Los Angeles always has had to contend against homesick actors and actresses who marry into New York families.

At the Famous Players-Lasky plant I was told that ten companies were at work in the neighborhood of New York, twelve around Los Angeles. Half a dozen companies were busy under artificial light on the floor of the as yet uncompleted Queensboro studio. Some of the scenes being taken represented exteriors—"for if there is much action to be shot around a 'location' these

days we always photograph it in the studio."

At the offices of the Goldwyn Corporation I heard a different story. Not one of their companies at the moment, if you exclude subsidiary organizations, was working in the East, and no one knew of any contemplated action to establish a plant here. That this corporation had encountered certain difficulties in operating in Los Angeles was admitted, but hastily followed the declaration that all these difficulties finally had been solved. A repertory company had been formed in Culver City, Cal., to furnish the corporation's casting directors with a goodly troupe of leading men and women.

"But isn't sunshine becoming passé?"

Emphatically—No!

"Then you never take any pictures under artificial light?"

"Oh, yes! We have a new sunless studio for that kind of work. But we find that we can take just as good photographs in California sunlight on our own fifty-acre plant, the biggest in the world, as New York can turn out in any of its cramped little halls. We can build big sets in our big lot and leave them standing as long as we please."

Fox, too, reports twice as many companies working in California as New York—but the biggest of our new feature pictures are being turned out here. The reasons given for this were substantially the same as those reported by the local Famous Players-Lasky men—the advantages of working under dependable light and in a big city where the producer can procure for his picture plays everything that his heart may desire. Another point mentioned was that many of the best stories are laid in New York.

At the offices of the "big four" of the First National—Mary, Doug, Charlie and D. W. Griffith—came

another confirmation of the growing importance of New York production. Though Mary and Doug make their homes in Los Angeles, they come East as often as necessary to film plays that have metropolitan settings; and D. W. Griffith, as already related, is thoroughly sold on the East. Charlie sticks to Los Angeles both on account of his new studio there and because California, with its cheerful sunlight, flowers and palms, its elbow room to work in and no New York traffic or rubberneckers to interfere, is esteemed ideal for comedy. Though the East is cutting heavily into the production of society drama, it never has made much headway toward luring away the laugh-makers.

A number of other big film corporations asserted their faith in the secure future of the East, but reported most of their companies at present working in the Sun Parlor. Universal owns a Fort Lee studio not much used by their own companies—but the reason for this is that a good profit is being taken on this investment by renting it out to other producers at \$2,000 a month. Vitagraph, which pioneered into the New York field some twenty-three years ago, declares no intention of ever deserting its plant in Flatbush, though the heaviest part of the company's production is carried on out West.

But the booster of boosters for a New York headquarters is D. W. Griffith—a prophet of tendencies who has often been laughed at but never for long.

Mr. Griffith is bolder than any of the others to speak up for New York.

"When I film a picture with a New England setting," he told me, "I want to film it in New England and have it right. Not fake it in a suburb of Los Angeles among palm trees and mesquite. If I need palm trees, it is only a two days run from here to the coast of Florida. Picture consumers are eager for new settings, and there is a wealth of these within easy striking distance of Times Square. The territory around Los Angeles has been filmed to death. There is a little stream out there which is used so much that the producers have to stake off their claims on its banks to keep from photographing one another. Sometimes three companies are found shooting along its banks at once."

"Here in the East are all the properties and backgrounds, interior or exterior, that we require for luxurious settings—New York is the metropolis and the home of wealth. Also it is the home of much of the best brains of the country. It stimulates imagination and rivalry with new ideas. It is the home of the best actors, the best artisans, the best and the newest in theatrical production. In the future I can't see any other centre possible for the picture producer who seeks the best of everything to score artistic successes."

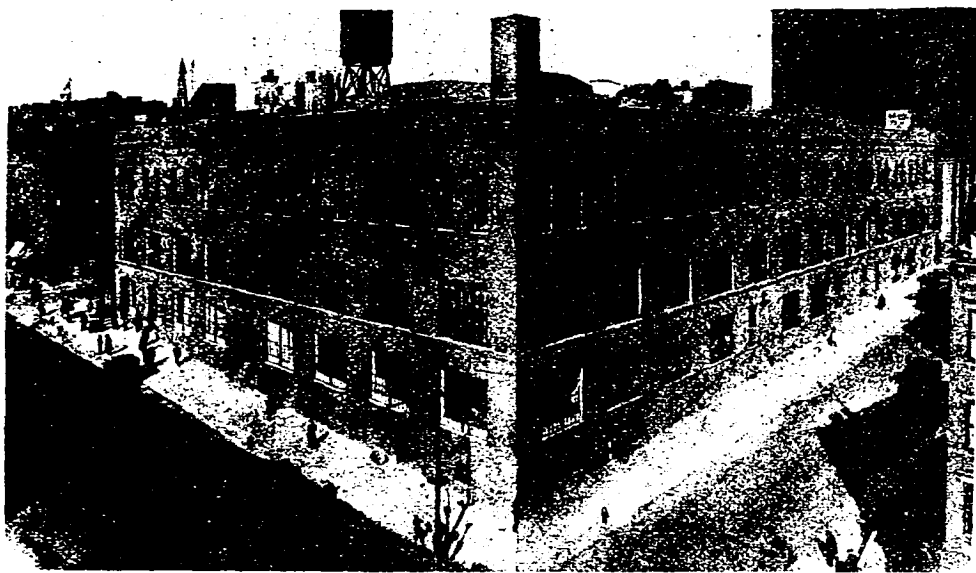


Photo by Charles Phelps Cushing

New Two and One-Half Million Dollar Fox Film Corporation Plant, Tenth Avenue, Fifty-fifth to Fifty-sixth Street, New York City.



Facade of New Two and One-Half Million Dollar Famous Players-Lasky Studio, Just Opened in Queensboro.