

The Ufa Palace in Berlin, now Europe's largest movie theater with three thousand seats, was redone in red and gold, and it sports thick, soft purple on the floors and walls. In spite of its gargantuan size, it is more comfortable than a good number of intimate theaters. The establishment's seventy-five-piece orchestra creates a sensation, as do the vast, undulating golden curtains, which, lit by dozens of spotlights, continuously shimmer in fantastic colors.

Following an American model, this movie theater will, in addition to films, offer musical acts, dance numbers, songs, and stage shows in quick succession. In other words, it will provide a mix of vaudeville, revue, and concerts. We are therefore forced to ask whether the public wants this full menu of offerings and, secondly, how well the combination works in the end.

The answer to the first question depends on whom you ask. For my part, I go to the movie theater to watch movies. If I wanted to hear music, I would go to a concert; if I wanted to watch vaudeville, I would seek out an establishment where I know I will be treated to unexpected, precisely orchestrated, first-class numbers. But I go to the movie theater to relax. I go to avoid being annoyed by human voices and bored by the sluggish tempo of daily life and the theater. I watch movies to experience the rapid motion of human activity, the quick succession of images, cheerful and sad emotions created through cinematic means.

As for the second question, when I hear music in the movie theater, I want it to be suited to the essence of film; it should match the quick tempo and rapid transitions. So in this Ufa theater, I expect a tantalizing jazz symphony to match the symphony of bursting colors on the gold curtains—especially since Ernö Rapée, who up until now has worked at the Capitol Theatre in New York, is said to be an excellent jazz conductor.¹ But instead, I am forced to listen to the same *Tannhäuser* overture that is played in every single beer garden. And it is played in such a way that toward the end, the orchestra and listeners are practically knocked to the ground by the brash fortissimo issuing from the trombones. I am forced to listen to two ladies in early-nineteenth-century dress singing a schmaltzy song accompanied by a plodding ballet-pantomime in an outmoded, kitschy style. I am forced to watch *Deutsches Studentenleben in der Fremde* [German student life abroad] for nearly half an hour, in which twelve costumed background actors mimic living a pleasurable life by drinking from empty liqueur glasses and belting out songs that were popular ages ago, all while a collection of poor imitations of revue dancers hop about the stage. That is, instead of being relaxed and delighted by a good film, I am forced to sit for an hour through an exceptionally poor attempt at entertainment, one that would have me fleeing a provincial vaudeville hall. And I am forced to endure all of this simply because the films that I came to see have been shoved in between all of this nonsense.

So which films are these? The first is an animated film, *Die Walrossjagd*,² which is full of animals moving in the most comical way amid their icy habitat. The film's musical

illustration allowed the conductor to demonstrate to us just what he can accomplish when he is allowed to do precisely what he wants. Next came an Ufa newsreel. And finally the main film, *Charley's Aunt*,³ an indifferently shot, coarsely and unimpressively staged film with an excessive amount of poorly rendered intertitles. These inspired more audience laughter than the film itself, as these genteel Oxford lords, students, and young ladies all speak in an idiom that you can hear on the corners of Friedrichstrasse in the midnight hours. Had the lead actor not been born of the same mother as Charlie Chaplin,⁴ absolutely no one would be lining up to see this film.

I have no desire to say much more about it. More important is the question of what the future holds for smaller movie theaters and provincial establishments that will undoubtedly want and need to follow this example of squeezing mediocre films full of nonsense in between vaudeville acts that are even more mediocre. If the biggest, most profitable, and most luxurious movie theater in all of Berlin puts on this type of show for six thousand visitors daily, can you imagine what dreadful things hundreds of thousands of viewers will be subjected to in these other theaters? After all of the trouble and effort to bring a degree of culture to cinema, it is now poised to tip straight into an abyss of inartistic barbarousness.

Notes

1. Ernő Rapée (1891–1945) was a Hungarian American conductor who headed the Radio City Symphony Orchestra and also composed music for silent films. In the mid-1920s, he led the eighty-five-piece orchestra at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo and served as guest conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic.

2. A likely reference to *The Walrus Hunters* (1923), an American animated short by Paul Terry for Fables Studios.

3. *Charley's Aunt* (Scott Sidney, 1925) was an American film adaptation of Brandon Thomas's popular British stage farce from 1892.

4. The reference is to Syd Chaplin, half brother of Charlie Chaplin.