

"Camera!" Shouts Director as Caruso Enacts "Canio"

And Douglas Fairbanks's Newest Rival Sings in Half-Voice as a Gaily Bedecked "Audience" Aristocratically Fans Itself in the Manhattan Opera House—What Happened as "My Cousin Caruso" Was Being Translated Into the Celluloid Films

By CLARE PEELER

THE "audience" for Caruso's opera scenes in his very first moving picture, a group of observers ranging in age from three to fourteen, inclusive, four or five impressive-looking limousines and two or three perspiring policemen were blocking up the stage entrance to the Manhattan Opera House when I added myself modestly to the aggregation on a certain warm Friday morning. Had I wanted to elope with any of the scenery, it would have been mine for the taking. Everybody was entirely too busy finding out where to go and what to do when he or she got there, to bother about any undersized, overheated scribe. That is, everybody was, except the courteous director, who was presently discovered not far from the standees' rail, in animated conversation with three people at once in different parts of the house, keeping meantime a casual eye on the activities of two cameras in the aisles, two overhead in the gallery, and one or two in the boxes.

He took time, however, to offer the house, metaphorically speaking, to the representative of MUSICAL AMERICA, who presently found herself the sole occupant of a proscenium box, whereof the outlook was excellent, not only on the "audience" perspiring in full evening dress in the parquet, but on the Metropolitan chorus in Italian costume on the stage, disporting themselves more or less joyously in front of an ancient set of "Pagliacci" scenery.

"Who placed these people, for God's sake?" somebody remarked forcibly, apparently over my left shoulder, and a shirt-sleeved gentleman, looking guilty, hastily removed himself from the possible sphere of action of one of the nearby cameras. Meantime, forty-seven varieties of Italian and French dialect resounded from the stage while fifty-seven kinds of good American vivified the parquet. It was friendly, the atmosphere. An empty ginger ale bottle on the floor of my box gave that charming home-touch without which all our local color is nothing worth. The audience fanned hard, to keep the greasepaint from dropping down on its evening clothes, in many cases gorgeous to behold, and took in its surroundings with deep interest. Several Beaux Brummel disposed handkerchiefs gracefully inside of their stiff white collars. Everybody broiled, but cheerfully.

"All by yourself?" one white-haired, white-moustached, white-vested pillar of society for that morning only, called cheerfully over to the scribe, who smiled non-committally and wrote down in her notebook a bitter retort to the effect that of course she wasn't; she was in the middle of a mob of Western cowboys, and couldn't he see it? Which mysterious performance so frightfully impressed the too-inquisitive pillar, however, that it effectually ended the inquisition.

"Anybody outside of this rope is outside of the picture, see!" somebody called down the aisle, and the audience resorted itself so as to be included in a line made by two ropes held fanwise by four men, the handle of the "fan" toward the back of the house. A flood of French breaking out at this minute between the first and second cornetist was dammed by murmured "Ecco's," "Voila's" and "Look who's here's." For Caruso was strolling unobtrusively on to the stage in his *Canio* costume, hands behind him, ghastly in the thickest, whitest, heaviest layer of makeup that apparently any human countenance ever wore, but cheerful as always.

On with the Play

And now things really begin. Pretty *Nedda* greets the tenor effusively; to the audience he waves a cheerful, inclusive

greeting, and then renews his acquaintance with the chorus, who cluster about him as worshipfully as they dare. Some of the women even fan him surreptitiously. With a small girl of four or five, he immediately starts a game of play, pretending to beat her with a roll of paper. The child laughs, dodges, runs away, then feminine-like, comes back for more of the same.

A piano is being hoisted over the footlights into the parquet. In three languages and four dialects the process continues, and when the twelve men principally engaged land it in the haven where it should be, the audience promptly give it a hand of applause.

"Say, can I have the floor swept now?" the assistant director pathetically implores of someone in general. His passion for cleanliness seems a bit out of place just then, somehow, but it is conceded to, and the floor painstakingly swept all the way from the footlights back to the camera. Now the orchestra of ten or so gathers itself together, and the chorus strike their "Here he comes" attitude.

Caruso saunters forward, drops a curtsey, and for his own amusement, apparently, sings a few bars in half voice, then saunters out of sight back. Again the orchestra plays a note or two. That orchestra is a fearsome thing. Only the specially trained could sing to it; but presently they do, with the "Here he comes!" gestures. This time the donkey heaves into sight with its familiar freight. Caruso is beating the drum; *Nedda* smiling in front of him, *Tonio* leading the procession. In half-voice the tenor sings his "Wondrous Performance" and the two audiences applaud until they draw the genial director's, "Ladies and gentlemen, not quite so loud!"

Comes a pause in the day's occupation. "Go back!" somebody shouts. "Go back!" cheerfully echoes Caruso, and everybody does.

Meantime, a long dark man has drifted into my box, as one might say, "without asking, whither hurried, whence?" His first remark is whether I know that Lucy has just signed up with the Paramount. It makes me think of the French exercise books: "Have you seen the green goggles of my uncle?" "No, but I have worn the petticoat of your aunt." For I come back at him with the statement that Geraldine bumped her head awfully yesterday. This inspires my friend to reminiscence, mostly of a personal character, and including the statement that he could play leads all right to these people; but will he get the chance? No, he knows darn well he won't. I intimate that jealousy is as cruel as the grave, and he goes back to his alleged work, refreshed and strengthened.

Meantime, he has left with me the information that Caruso's *Canio* costume is that pale tan color, because white would photograph too white; also that the audience is seated fan-wise because the rays of light from the camera go like that. Which seems reasonable.

Camera!

There is a call now of "All right! *Camera!*" Caruso and his contingent come on again, and it's all done over. The tenor then straightens out *Tonio's* hair, and mops his brow for him. Still that produces nothing exciting; so he lapses into an attitude of dreamy resignation, with hands folded across his—well, his hands folded.

Evidently, all that has happened before has been but merry play. For now the director, armed with a megaphone, comes on to the stage. Two more cameras follow in his train. Meantime, the great tenor, having nothing else on hand, plants a chaste salute on the brow of the

donkey. The chorus all follow his example and then they all return to what they were not doing before, happy and rested. Not satisfied with which success, Caruso next interests himself in the details of stage management. Carefully he drapes *Tonio* around the neck of the donkey. The donkey is very tiny, *Tonio* very big, and the result is sufficiently funny to satisfy even a great tenor with a sense of humor.

Elsewhere all is gloom. There is on this stage no prompt-box, apparently, as the film-director, who has an eye for detail, discovers with agony.

"Whassa prompt-box?" demands his assistant.

"All right," on being explained to. "I've seen opera lotsa times, and I never looked at the prompt-box. They won't know the difference."

"My God, I hope not!" feelingly observes the manager. "*Camera!*"

This time, the same action is soundless. Caruso pantomimes madly for about thirty seconds, and all is over.

A minute "dresser" fully equipped, has been hovering at Caruso's elbow ever since his entrance. So also has a very tall, thin young man. The singer beckons this entourage to him; one brings a mirror; the other an enormous powder-puff. The tenor removes about half a pint of perspiration that has been making his face look more or less like the Japanese flag; then makes himself up all over again. He lets out a cadenza or two just to show there is no ill feeling, straightens *Nedda's* hat for her, and with a beaming smile, faces another shout of "*Camera!*" He may have made more telling melodies than to-day, but never has he made more effective facial gestures. The comedy in the man is surely to the fore this morning.

All Ready for the Last Act!

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, let's get ready for the last act, shall we?" suggests the director, as one who implores a favor of your grace. Here is a man who has destroyed all my illusions as to the "Terrible-tempered Mr. Bang" type of film-director. He is so hoarse by this time that, even with the megaphone he can only be heard two feet away, and the mercury is romping gladly around in the hundreds, but his good-nature is perfectly unimpaired by either fact. He talks French and English interchangeably sometimes both at once, but always politely. "Boys, I just hate to give you so much darn trouble," he says once to a convulsed group of stagehands.

Meantime, the star performer is sitting in a wooden chair in the middle of the stage, mirror in hand, giving his hair that look of "desperation" that the last act requires of it. That done, the chorus group themselves in the "audience" posture before him, and while he eats pears out of a paperbagful brought him by the thin young man, the tenor addresses them facetiously from time to time. His whole attitude is that of the teacher confronting the Sunday school class, but if the giggles that emanate from his hearers are to be at all a criterion, Sunday school never was like this.

Now *Nedda* appears in the miniature theater, dainty in her white and green frock, with its pink roses, and Caruso promptly deserts his class, to take to stage-managing. Armed with a huge stiletto, which he flourishes recklessly, he has a lovely time; grouping them all perfectly, however, in a few minutes. *Tonio's* gala costume completes the demoralization of the chorus, but a word from Caruso, who is in earnest now, stops all that. "Now!" he calls out.

Again, "Camera!"

Nedda is stabbed. Rushes forward *Silvio*. A lunge from Caruso, and about 170 pounds of lover decorate the stage floor. Everybody giggles, including the flinty-hearted murderer. But the cry of "*Camera!*" comes this time to stop mirth. The orchestra plays the opening bars. Again the stabbing of the woman; the rush forward of the man to meet his death, and the frozen horror of Caruso's face is almost too realistic. Next minute, he is calmly powdering again, to prepare for another picture, this time a tableau.

Silvio carefully lies down to "play dead," then comes to life again to look for the knife with which he has been killed and put it in its proper place on the floor. "All hold still, if you please!" Everybody registers horror and dismay. Caruso's look of agonized remorse once more contorts his features with its drawn

misery; and *that's* over. Then comes a group of *Canio*, *Nedda*, *Silvio*, *Tonio*, the dresser holding the mirror toward the tenor; a chorus of "Hold still; *un moment*; all right, *shoot!*" and—

"That finishes the chorus," says the director, "but not the principals. Keep your seats, please, ladies and gentlemen of the audience!"

The stage is empty now. Caruso, "made up" yet again (did anybody ever do it so fast before?) is now happily scuffing the heels off his pumps on the stage floor as he promenades up and down, hands behind him. This proceeding appears to afford him infinite relief from the boredom of delay, especially when he recognizes some friends who have just joined the audience.

"All right. *Camera!*" The music gives him his cue. He staggers across the stage and in half-voice sings for us the "Ridi, Pagliacci." There is no amusement on the faces of the audience now. Never did the great tenor hold the horse-shoe more spellbound. With the extraordinary power that this man has of throwing himself into the moment's mood, whether of fooling or of agony, he gives the song wonderfully. A flood of French from the director, to the effect that the tenor will now be so intensely kind as to go through the motions of taking a curtain call; a nod from him; some more things done to his complexion, and then—

"Applaud, everybody! Please remember to applaud!" moans the manager through his megaphone. As if they could forget it! And Caruso bows, seriously, gravely, wearily, again and again. "Could you stand for an encore?" the director implores.

The tenor intimates that the true artist can stand for any amount of encores, even with the perspiration dropping on his ruff.

"All right then. Applause! *Camera!*" and this time the Caruso waves that gay wave of his that the Metropolitan audiences so often see, then retires to the steps of the little theater for a cigarette.

Then a curious thing. The makeup on again, the cigarette hastily discarded, the "Ridi" song is pantomimed. Anything more comically, ghastly impressive can hardly be imagined than the great singer, dead white as to face, dead silent as to voice, mouthing madly before the camera, amid the dead silence of the spectators.

The Audience Arrives

And now the genial director turns his attention to the sham audience in the parquet. They are sorted out carefully. Here, two; there, three; four here; the rest to the back of the house for the scene of "the audience arriving."

"You with the light blue, young lady, please come to the front row!"

Light blue advances, with the look of one who sees in her mind's eye Mary Pickford relegated to oblivion, and Theda Bara teaching school. Correspondingly, gloom effaces the girl who, being without a wedding garment (in other words, in street costume) is sent to the back, out of the picture. A gorgeous being in an opera frock such as never was seen on sea or land, with a fur decoration that one would think must surely to-day send her to Bellevue, advances, beaming with smiles. Bona fide Metropolitan Opera House programs are distributed, after the ladies have been carefully seated by their cavaliers (and pictured so doing). The girl with the fur is brought even further front, first, so is an exquisite little being in the daintiest of frocks, who, alas for her ensemble impression! is vigorously chewing gum.

"I have no objection, ladies and gentlemen," says the director, mildly, "to the ladies fanning in moderation, but I do object to the gentlemen fanning themselves with the programs. It isn't done. Now, altogether, ladies and gentlemen, all talking and looking at your programs. Talk! Talk!! Talk!!!"

Caruso on the stage beams reassuringly on his friends.

"Now, all looking at the stage during the great song of Mr. Caruso." (Everybody looks at Caruso, who is placidly smoking by this time). "Don't fan too much. Everybody with a delighted face, if you please!"

"Now everybody, with a delighted face, gets up to go out." (He is quite too busy to see how funny that is!) "We have enjoyed the opera so much. All applauding. Keep it up, please. Now, we all go out. Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen."

La Commedia e finita!

MME. ELVIRA

LEVERONI

Contralto

Formerly of Boston, and Covent Garden Opera Cos.
Address: 120 Boylston St., Room 1011, BOSTON

Mme. MARIE DELANO

Teacher of Tone Production—Mental Diction

Residence: 232 Bay State Road

BOSTON

(Guest Recitals)

Studio: 312 Pierce Building

HELEN ALLEN HUNT CONTRALTO SOLOIST AND TEACHER

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