

SHEARS FOR THE LADIES

How the Omnipotent Cutters (Who Tend To Be Feminine) Do Their Work

HOLLYWOOD.

FOLLOWING the main titles on every picture is a credit card, giving the names of those associated with the venture. Generally the last listing but one—and in very small type—reads "Film Editor" and gives the name of the man or woman who took 100,000 feet of celluloid, much of it bad, and resolved it into 8,000 feet of drama which had to be good.

Known not at all to the public and only to a very few of the more serious students of film technique, the editor is one of the wizards of Hollywood. Never the object of publicity and known only within his own ranks, at \$150 a week he makes it possible for producers to be known as geniuses and draw \$100,000 a year or better. He can make a million-dollar picture an epic or just plain trash; if it is the former, everybody except himself takes the bows; if it is the latter, all the others deny responsibility and he gets fired.

Film editing is one of the few important functions in a studio in which women play a substantial part. Possibly this is because in the early days cutting was a mechanical rather than a dramatic job. Women were cheaper than men and so they grew into it. Now they edit the most pretentious productions and ask no odds from their male competitors.

These film cutters are the true story-tellers of the screen. A writer concocts a plot, a director guides it and actors portray it, but what the customers like or dislike on the screen is the work of the cutter. Except when under orders from the production office to throw every possible scene to the star, they are a cruel and ruthless lot. A face is just so much footage to them. They can cut a character out of a picture and end a career with the cold equanimity of an editor blue-penciling copy. No matter what the flights of the director, if they have power enough they can hold the picture to the story at hand.

* * *

There is no school and no training ground for them except in the tiny fireproof cubicles in which they do their work. Some are raised to rank of director, but studios are reluctant to advance the good ones because competent film editors are hard to get. Looking at those of one studio, Metro, their background indicates that this is one branch of the cinema where only experience and ability will provide an opening.

Margaret Booth, who edited "Romeo and Juliet," was a secretary years ago with the old L. B. Mayer studios. She got a chance as an assistant cutter and has some of Metro's most successful pictures to her credit. "Mutiny on the Bounty" is but one.

Blanche Sewell came to Hollywood to be an actress. This didn't work out the way she dreamed and she became a negative cutter in the laboratory (a purely mechanical function) and later got into the editing side. Recently she has handled "Small Town Girl," "Gorgeous Hussy" and "Rose-Marie."

A Russian baron, Basil Wrangell, fled from Moscow during the revolution and got a job with the "Ben Hur" company which was on location in Rome. From odd jobs handling film he became a cutter. He has "The Good Earth" as his responsibility today.

Conrad Nervig was a photographer in the navy and took up film work when he was discharged. Frank Sullivan was an accountant in charge of the cutting rooms and was one of those fellows who thought that other jobs were better than his own. Ben Lewis was an assistant camera man. Tommy Held started to study medicine, became acquainted with a cutter and abandoned the scalpel for the scissors.

* * *

Provided with a script, they take the film as it is shot and attempt to assemble it in rough fashion as the picture progresses. Each scene or sequence is placed in a tiny can, each mentally indexed, and as the filming of a picture nears completion, they begin assembling it so that it may be looked at with some understanding.

The sound track is on one film and the action on another. The editors must keep the two synchronized, match lip movement from long-shot to medium to close-up and never allow the voice to change or slip in any way. If a scene ends with a man going through a door with his hand on the knob, they must start the next scene on the other side of the door with his hand in a continuing position. Or perhaps the medium shot shows an arm partly raised. The following close-up must carry on from the point at which it was interrupted and the sound track must be perfect.

They are responsible for the tempo of a picture. That is determined to some extent in the action, but it is perpetuated without the audience's knowledge by the speed with which cuts are made from one scene to another. They must cut a scene on the precise dramatic moment at which it should be ended, for, if it is too short, it may lack conviction; if too long, it may drag and spoil the effect. Considering that twenty-four frames, or individual pictures, pass in front of a projection lens each second, the drama in which the cutters deal becomes a mathematical problem involving split seconds.

Nowadays editors are limited in altering or rearranging scenes. Dialogue reveals the continuity of ac-

tion and generally makes switching scenes impossible. In the silent days it was a common thing to completely reconstruct a story after it was filmed. Harry Chandler, now a story editor in Hollywood, had a thriving business in New York taking bad pictures from the Coast and re-editing them. He would lift a scene from the end of the film and inject it into the first reel, add a title and change the dramatic structure.

One of the duties of the cutter is to curb long-winded directors and correct a rambling narrative into a compact, fast-moving drama. Sometimes they have to build up suspense when not enough footage has been devoted to it on the set. They will cut to other scenes and prolong the agony of the characters as well as of the audience.

* * *

Most studios leave editing to the cutters, while the directors and supervisors act in an advisory capacity. Generally, though, the foremost directors take an active hand in the cutting, even though they leave the physical labor to the editors.

Actors always are complaining that theirs are the faces on the cutting room floor; generally they are pretty bitter about it. A player may work for weeks in a picture and build his hopes of future jobs on the one appearance, because from the number of scenes and lines of dialogue he knows he has a meaty part. When the picture is previewed he gets as many friends as possible to attend and he takes his agent. Here, he says, is the rôle that is to make him famous and place him in demand on all lots. The plot nears the sequences in which he worked. He grabs his agent's arm. A scene flashes on and he sees himself in the long shot. From then on the cutter has eliminated him because he has edited the picture to medium and close shots.

It was Robert Montgomery who, speaking somewhat irreverently of all cutters, said: "There is so much footage of me on the cutting room floor that I'm getting fan letters

from mice."

D. W. C.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1936/08/02/archives/shears-for-the-ladies-how-the-omnipotent-cutters-who-tend-to-be.html>