



The MOVIE MUSICALS face REFORM

By Paul Harrison

SOMETHING had to happen to movie musicals, for they had been growing beyond all reasonable physical and financial limits.

The spectacle-specialists were running shy on super-colossal ideas. Chorus directors were running out of girls. Blurb-writers were running out of adjectives. And the customers, weary of seeing the same old stories presented by the same people in different costumes, were running out of patience.

So the tune-and-tap shows are undergoing alterations. For one thing, they're readapting themselves to the limitations of the standard-sized screen. Producers are realizing that a dozen cavorting cuties, in close-up, are more interesting to the fans than 250 girls in a long-shot which no human eye—even an agile, roving eye—can encompass.

There are some who believe that musicals will turn for variety to the style of the intimate stage revue. Meanwhile they're borrowing heavily from the better night clubs and what is left of vaudeville.

But the most decided trend is that musicals are going musical. That's right. Call it operatic; call it symphonic; call it highbrow. Call it baloney, but it's still auditory nourishment. From now on, whether they notice it or not, the fans are going to hear some pretty fine music in their neighborhood flicker palaces, and its effect won't be lessened by the show of too many legs or the vast spread of stage props.

Most of the nation's foremost composers are working in Hollywood, or for it. Even more important is the

caliber of the musical technicians—the arrangers, and the choral and symphonic directors—who are transposing good music to celluloid.

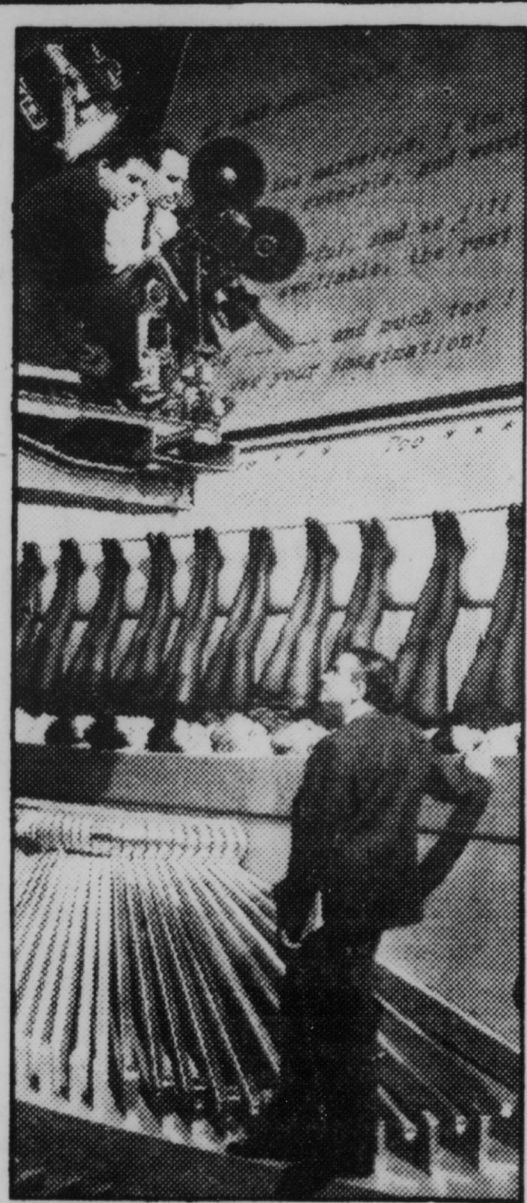
A GOOD example of the transition from musicals of sheer size to musicals of near-operatic characteristics is "Top of the Town." This Universal production has plenty of magnitude; in fact, some of the shots in the latter part of the picture are the longest ever taken on a movie sound stage.

Virtually every square foot of the big building is utilized for the working set. It is called the Moonbeam Room and is a Hollywood glorification of the Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center in Manhattan.

But this is like nothing that even the Rockefellers ever dreamed of. All very *moderne*, with mounting tiers and terraces filled with diners and choirs and bands. The walls are covered with shimmering blue cellophane, acres of it, and through it glimmer more stars than can be seen with a telescope.

Poking about the room is a 50-foot camera crane of marvelous mobility. Perched on the end, its camera picks up a group of dancers here, a singer there, a group of merrymakers on a balcony. When it rears back against one wall and its camera soars near the 70-foot ceiling for a full-length shot of the room, Hollywood film musicals have reached their final dimension—the limits of the modern camera.

"There was only one way for the musical to grow," said Louis Brock, producer of "Top of the Town" and of many another musical since "Flying Down to Rio." "That way is musically,



Revue specialty numbers are tending to displace the chorus line. Here's an item from "Ready, Willing and Able," with Dance Expert Bobby Connolly in the foreground.

"The last six reels of 'Top of the Town' are continuously musical except for one breathing space for the story. Development of the story makes this possible. It isn't opera, but it is operatic in form while lacking the deliberate tread of the classical subject. It's pretty far from classical, because the picture ends with 600 people in this big night club joining in a grand jam-session. But it's good music."

BROCK sees the doom of the old-fashioned kicking chorus spectacles or "line numbers." His show has chorus girls, but only 24 of them, and they really dance.

The producer doesn't believe that

Here's the biggest of all musical sets. When the camera crane comes back to the position of the man who took this picture, it gets the longest, interior shot ever made: 250 feet. It's in "Top of the Town."

stars are the making of musicals, but he has seen many a star made by a musical. Fred Astaire was one.

Warner Brothers and M-G-M had him under contract and let him go. Brock begged for his services in "Flying Down to Rio," and then shot half the picture without letting him dance. RKO executives nearly had apoplexy when they saw the rushes. You're trying to make an actor out of that bald-headed, homely galoot!" they screamed. "If he's anything at all, he's a dancer!"

He was a dancer, too, before the picture was over. But it was his introduction as an actor that won him the attention of millions of fans.

Brock hails pictures of the type of "Sing, Baby Sing" and "Pigskin Parade," which are comedies with tunes thrown in, as an exclusive development of the movies which is both popular and profitable.

"Specialty numbers, added to outstanding stories, make excellent entertainment," he said. "In the same way, several of the recent big musicals have been saved by their novelty acts. 'Born to Dance' was pretty awful as a story, but the specialties covered the flaws."

Busby Berkeley, who is said to be incapable of counting people in numbers smaller than even hundreds, started the extravaganza competition when he whipped up the elaborate dance concoctions in the early Cantor pictures, such as "Whoopie" and "The Kid From Spain." Then he started anew at Warners with "42nd Street."

The rivalry continued until M-G-M decided to make a musical that would dwarf all other musicals, and spent \$250,000 on the mechanistic and feminine flash in "Ziegfeld." That specialty ran 10 minutes and cost, if you like your figures broken down to understandable terms, \$416 per second, a prodigious sum even in these days of extravagant movie-making.

A few months ago there was a shortage of chorus girls in Hollywood. Now every studio reports that it is using fewer girls, smaller choruses. And with this reduction in numbers there is a new standard of beauty and ability. The competition is tougher.