

upon the list of those to whom they "farm out" as it were, the continuity they want done from time to time. These people work in their own homes, coming in to the offices of the company from time to time for consultation and instruction. Eve Unsell, Frances Marion, Charles Maigne, Clara Beranger, John Emerson and Anita Loos, Edith Kennedy, Marion Fairfax, Ouida Bergere, and countless other scenarioists have composed under this system of free lance continuity writers.

Below are the ideas of one of these professional continuity writers, Miss Eve Unsell, now on the Lasky staff in London, expressed in a paper called "The Routine of Film Adaptation," read to the students of photoplay composition at Columbia University. It is interesting as first-hand evidence upon adaptation given by one who has spent so much of her time at the task.

THE "ROUTINE" OF FILM ADAPTATION.

(Read to the Cinema Composers' Club by Eve Unsell, Jan. 24, 1919)

The five-reel feature is here used as an example, since this is the average number of reels required for the "program" feature. Exhibitors and producers are convinced that the public wants a short five-reel feature, which means on the average, 4,500 feet of film, and some 500 feet of titling, and which consists in the script of about 200 scenes. Exhibitors say that the five-reel feature is the most popular with screen audiences, on account of the length of the program, which is usually made up of a "weekly," or news bulletin, an educational film, and a short comedy, the "feature" *topping* the bill. The exhibitor claims that when the feature is longer than five reels the audience

usually becomes restless unless the story is unusually big and absorbing, and that, on the other hand, if the feature were shorter than five reels, the audience would feel that it had not had its money's worth, and that the program would be too short.

On account of this set rule for the feature's length, the art of writer and director is naturally hampered, for the light story must be "padded," and the big story cut down to the required length. It is obviously much easier to tell a feature story of any bigness in a picture that is over five reels, and it often requires wizardry to keep the footage down to the required length. Many a script-writer and director have spent sleepless nights in cudgelling their sorely tried brains to find a way to preserve the excellencies of a story that really demands a six-reel development, but must be confined to the 4,500-foot measurement. Often the Procrustean methods used in the cutting rooms after the film is made result so disastrously to the picture that neither director nor writer recognize the finished product—so completely "finished" it is!

The fine Italian hand of the cutting department is also one of the reasons for the wails of anguish and dismay from the authors of books and plays who see the mangled remains upon the screen of a masterpiece in which the original intent and purpose of the author had been something entirely different to that which the cutter and editor of the "revised version" have made the be-all and end-all of the picture.

Unfortunately, the continuity writer usually receives the total blame for these revisions, from the public, and at the unmerciful hands of the critics of trade-journals and dailies. One would imagine that, after years of writing reviews of the motion picture, a critic would have more than a speaking acquaintance with studio methods, and know that other departments are "implicated" in the crime, besides the script-writer, who is often hardly an "accessory to the fact,"

even, having been in blissful ignorance of the changes until the excoriation of the critic pillories him to the public view as their sole author. You who intend writing for the screen must prepare to receive some thorns among the roses, so begin at once to bury any atom of sensitiveness you may possess, for the sling and arrows of an outrageous fortune are nothing to the stings and arrows of an outraged critic when he finds his favorite book or play changed beyond recognition. His rage is only excelled by that of the original author, who can scarcely be blamed, since his knowledge of studio routine is even less than the critic's.

At present The Authors' League Bulletin is loud in its diatribes against the thievish, slavish, knavish Pariahs of the literary world—those utterly brainless incumbrances of the ground, the *continuity writers*!

The only reason that the continuity writer is able to drag himself about after reading such pitiless exposures of himself and his utter unworthiness, and to continue to breathe the pure air he contaminates, is the fact, known to many scenario departments of the largest studios, that there have been occasions when the great Masters of The Authors' League have themselves come a cropper when essaying the "simple" task of putting their ideas into continuity form for the screen. I have in mind one very clever dramatist, who has had more than one Broadway success to his credit, who some months ago insisted—after the sale of a "big idea" to a certain film company—that he, and he alone, be allowed to scenarioize the story, having seen too many mutilations of the children of his brain.

The President of the Company assented, and the humble effort of the continuity director was shelved, while the Master withdrew to his country home to let "genius burn." Genius burned very slowly, and with starts and spurts, and it was necessary to jog the gentleman at last and remind him gently that a certain very expensive star was eating her

head off in salary at the studio, while the force waited for the masterpiece.

At last, the scenario began to come in, in installments, and when the third part had been sent in, and about six reels had been consumed without the hero having met the heroine, it was decided to call, by stealth, the despised continuity writer, who was bidden to begin to link together the installments as they came in. One night, after eight o'clock, the scenario writer received the last of the lot, and all night slaved to make the great author's big idea producible, not, however, touching the plot, or the author's development, merely arranging and linking together the scenes, accounting for time-lapses, et cetera. Next morning, the director was at last persuaded to try to produce what he termed the most fearful and wonderful *melange* he had ever met in the course of a good many years of good and bad productions. The studio went ahead, and lived up to the author's desire to see his picture as "wrote," and in the last reel, the heroine and hero at last met, clasped hands, and clinched—almost in a breath—and the picture was scanned—and canned—by the critics as viciously as was ever any maudlin effort of any mere, obscure continuity writer.

Later, the celebrated author's original idea, which was really worth while, was artistically developed as a stage drama, but it was a far cry from the original scenario of its author, and the humble continuity writer was highly gratified to note in witnessing the successful stage production, that some of the ideas scorned in the scenario-writer's production, which, you will remember, had been previously shelved at the author's request, had been incorporated in the play. They were probably perfectly obvious ideas, which might have occurred to anyone not enjoying the close perspective of the author, himself, who could not bear to see one jot or tittle of his original idea changed in the scenario. But where the lowly scenarioist had been unable to sway him, the great manager, who had collaborated with the dramatist,

had succeeded, and the result was a colorful and logical emotional drama, uncluttered by superfluous characters, and with the romance developing naturally and beautifully to its climax.

This, and the fact that one of the biggest successes of the year on Broadway was the first stage play from the pen of a busy and well known screen writer, has cheered and encouraged the poor moles of the scenario world to plod on, and put off suicide a day or so longer.

And therefore, you, who are studying to make this craft your profession, must realize from the beginning that your part in the making of the picture is as important—as essential—as that of the famous author, and that you, as an indispensable worker in this fruitful vineyard, are “worthy of your hire,” and entitled to “your place in the sun!”

At least the men who are putting their energies and fortunes into the game, the producers, themselves, have realized this, and know that among the discoveries of the twentieth century is the startling revelation that scenario writing is actually an art! As I have already hinted, many a rashly confident explorer on the high-seas of the new industry has been paralyzed to learn that he has a new technique to master before he can safely launch his bark of enterprise, no matter how smoothly he has sailed his craft of the short story, the newspaper article, the novel, or the play, into the haven of artistic—and financial—success!

And not only his art, but his masterpieces, themselves, must undergo this rare “sea-change” before they are ready to appear upon the screen. The evolution of the scenario in the process of the idea’s transference from the brain of its creator to the shimmering square that conveys its message to the breathless, waiting world is not uninteresting to the layman, from the numerous inquiries that come to staff and free-lance writers as to the paradox of “writing a picture.”

The first thing to determine in the routine of feature

adaptation is whether or not the feature plot is there when the script-writer considers the story that supplies the basis of the picture-to-be. When he has satisfied himself as to that small item, he sketches out a skeleton form, or synopsis, of the drama’s action, from which his five-reel feature is to be elaborated. Experience teaches him that often in the most popular stage plays and “best sellers,” there are complications and situations that are of no screen value, though clever enough in the original version, where drags in action are not so noticeable as in the picture. And when certain portions are condensed, other parts must be expanded, the star’s part built up, new situations added to “liven” up the picture, and motives strengthened, for weaknesses of plot, glossed over in the book and play by wise or witty dialogue, stand out in ghastly fashion when the bony frame-work is brought out unclothed by flesh, in startling vividness by the X-ray of the camera.

Therefore, the writer finds that he must make the action sufficiently clear and striking in itself to “carry” the film over without its explanatory and decorative dialogue. In original stories, naturally the scenario writer is far less hampered than when adapting a “famous” play or book. With his own material he has his own sweet way, often finishing with a different and far stronger story than that with which he started. But the writer of adaptations must have infinite patience, a marvellous sense of the fitness of things, and a fiendish ingenuity in blending his ideas and those of the original author in altering the material to suit the exigencies of the screen, so that his sleight-of-hand work is not offensive to said sensitive creator of the subject-matter in hand. The path of no scenario-writer is a bed of roses, but from personal experience I should say that the *adaptor* has the thorniest way to tread, the hardest, and often the most thankless task of all the rest.

When the “scenario-artist” has combined the old and new into a synopsis that seems satisfactory to his firm and

himself, he proceeds to make a "rough scenario" in which he works out his screen story, scene by scene, and punch by punch. A one line diagram of the action and punch of a feature would be a gradually ascending line, starting from a small bump, which signifies a mild "punch" of action or mystery sufficing to command interest in the story at once, and from here the up-sloping line leads to a slightly larger hillock in the middle, where the dramatic situation or complication lends a fresh interest and suspense forming a stronger "punch" than the first, and then the line climbs on to the mountain punch that forms the climax, the scream of the comedy, the solution of the mystery, or the denouement of a domestic tragedy in which poetic justice is dispensed all around. In his first rough diagram of the scenario's action, the writer suggests where subtitles and spoken titles shall be necessary, and approximately the ideas, though roughly expressed, which are to be stamped in them.

The rough scenario is then submitted to the supervisor in charge of the scenario department, from whom it goes to the director, and sometimes to the producer, at last coming back to the script writer with additions, eliminations and various comments which it has been sure to gather in its expedition. With the round-robin of "O.K.'s" the writer proceeds to make his final scenario, working out the detail of his scenes now, and boiling down his superfluous titling, which he polishes carefully, hoping and praying that they may be left alone by cutter and editor. There are a few writers who do not have to advise with the producer until the scenario is completed, but there are also few writers whose completed product sees the screen without change. There *may* have at some time been written the perfect scenario in which no detail was altered before it was released as a picture, but if so, that script deserves a place in the Museum of *Un-Natural History*! And you who now complacently view a picture, and murmur triumphantly to

yourselves, "Goodness—how much better I could have done it, myself!"—are often quite right, but wait—WAIT!—till *you* view one of your own—*after* it has passed through cutting room, and the re-editing procedure. After that, you may sympathize with many a scenario writer whose pictures you have seen—and scorned!

That is why so few scenario writers can qualify to advertise the Seven Sutherland Sisters, for the hair that does not moult during the incubation of the scenario is frequently torn out by the frenzied scribbler when he sees what has happened to his scenario after that magician, the expert cutter, has finished with the film. Forgive me for dwelling on this point, but it is a sore subject with most script writers, and some day it may be for you, also.

About the method of titling the film, that differs with every company, and in any case, varies often with the character of the story to be told. Despite the learned treatises on the subject, one soon learns that the rule of art is art, old theories are upset every day, and nothing is to be gained by the following of any set rule in titling, save that usually the conventional explanatory title, that makes the action to follow an anti-climax, is to be avoided as Satan, himself. And the spoken title must not be awkward, verbose or ungrammatical—not to mention, too frequent! Yet it is absurd to say that the fewer the titles, the better the picture, for too many of the screen's biggest plays disprove this theory. Some of the most successful features of a certain prominent film company depend greatly on the generous sprinkling of clever titles, which point the humor, clarify the situation, intensify the psychology and emphasize the drama.

A perfect gem of a picture may be developed with no subtitles at all, so well does the material of the story lend itself to action only. On the other hand, a picture of a different type, but no less great, may demand any number of clever titles to bring out its psychology, and should it be

treated as the first play, the method would prove disastrous to photoplay number two! The result of much experimentation, sifted down, shows that some fine plays need little titling, while some, equally fine, demand more titles.

Insist that, whenever possible, you be allowed to work with the director or title-supervisor upon the titles, even if it does take more time from your schedule of other work. The director is usually anxious to work with the adaptor on this matter, but sometimes both are busy on the next production, and again the cutter and reviser work their sweet will upon the picture. Very recently I was horrified to see, at a leading New York picture house, an adaptation of mine bring gales of laughter in the serious and delicate scenes, marring the artistry of the beautiful star, and fine direction of the able director. It was not the acting, not the story, not the directing that brought the irresistible sweep of laughter, but the absurd titles which had nothing to do with the situations, and plainly jarred with the actions of the actors during the scenes in which they were inserted. I can imagine the feelings of the actors when they saw the production, and the words that had been put in their mouths *after* the completion of the picture. Needless to say, the picture was a burlesque on its original self on account of the unintentionally humorous titles. When this was brought to the attention of the producers, who stand for high ideals and artistic excellence in detail, they were horrified, and hastily ordered corrections, but alas, the critics had already seen it, and the story and writer suffered accordingly. Yet even *Hamlet*, with not an iota of the plot altered, with the greatest actors in the world, and a Belasco to direct it, could be turned into burlesque simply by the dialogue, itself. I mention this, not only from the unquenchable impulse to justify myself in this instance, but to show you the vast importance of the title to the film.

As to the value of schools of photoplay technique, it is unquestionably advisable to gain a fundamental knowledge

of studio requirements and script and screen detail in a legitimate school of photoplay construction such as yours, but once in the game, don't be too much a slave to set rules, get your big subject, give it as logical a development and as novel a treatment as you can—then trust to providence—and your *Director!*

To offset the illustration of the loss of hirsute adornment when things go wrong, you must know that in no other profession, art—or industry—whatever you choose to term it—are results of your labors so quickly seen, or emoluments so promptly paid! And in contrast to the gloom cast by a bungled picture, is the glow of happiness that blots out the shadowy mistakes of the past—the glor-ee-ous feeling that one has not lived in vain—that comes from the big successful story, made bigger by a fine director, a feature that is the product of a harmonious co-operation and mutual understanding between script writer and director, each working, as should all the film departments—not for personal aggrandizement, but for the Perfect Picture!