



Harry Golden's "Only In America"

OSCAR LEVANT

America would be a qualitatively finer country if as many men were ashamed of their mediocrity as Oscar Levant is ashamed of his genius. That's right; that's the only word for Oscar, genius.

I am proud to say I always recognized Oscar Levant's genius, though I have never met him. I can see genius past the patina of hypochondria, the taking of pills, eye drops, nose drops, ear drops, and what not.

On the average, the public can spot celebrities. But the public rarely understands the celebrity who is also a genius. Few men today know half as much about composition, orchestration, and the piano as Oscar Levant. At the piano Oscar Levant is nothing less than perfect.

Perfection is the weight that pulled him down, as Cardinal Woolsey said of Anne Boleyn. Levant was usually so perfect at the piano that the only happiness he knew was when an occasional discordant note intruded upon his concert.

He had the honor once of performing one of his own compositions for one of the world's great conductors. When Levant sat down, he played, "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

But Oscar never play-acted with the music of George Gershwin. He is the most inconsistent of men but about Gershwin music he was always consistent: he recognized its greatness. Indeed, he deserves credit for having appreciated that greatness long before Toscanini, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and the other great conductors recognized it. It is not that Levant sought self-esteem in Gershwin's shadow; Oscar Levant has been fighting against self-esteem all his life. But with Gershwin, he couldn't help himself.

How right Levant was to recognize "Porgy and Bess" as the Great American Opera While I'm no musician or musicologist, the voices and sounds I heard all my life still perambulate through my head. Much of Gershwin's music I heard in the Jewish ghetto of New York City.

There were beggars on the Lower East Side of New York in the days of mass migration

from the pogroms in Europe. There was one special beggar who stood on the corner of Stanton and Orchard streets every Friday. Before the Sabbath, people sought him out to drop a coin in his hand. After all, they needed him more than he needed them. Charity on the eve of the Sabbath is a good deed recorded in heaven. This elderly beggar repeated a phrase over and over in a sing-song voice: "Shenkts a nidduvah yiddishe kinder" (Be charitable to me, ye children of Israel!) That phrase became eventually the first two bars of "Summertime."

Mr. Levant has just published his biography, "The Memoirs of an Amnesiac" (Putnam's, New York, \$5.95). Oscar tells us all about his profession and records a few hundred insights into the lives of the men and women who work in Carnegie Hall, Tin Pan Alley, and Hollywood, and of his addiction to dermitol and its consequences of horror in psychiatric hospital wards. Levant tries to be nonchalant in these frantic chapters, but it doesn't work. I know I make an enemy for life but I must say it: I feel a great pity for Oscar Levant. But I do not begrudge Oscar his 20 to 30 pills a day. And let him even continue to slam the door in the faces of all his good friends, but let us hope he's around but let us hope he's around for a long, long time.

ROSH HA SHANAH

(continued from page 2) urge to strive upward, to climb higher, to achieve more, and become better. These are the elements of Teshuva.

In short, Jewish theology has faith in man, for the command to repent, to change, to practice Teshuva, means that man has the ability to effect these changes. Let no one shortchange his own supply of faith in himself, in his family, his friends and his community such that he cannot bring himself to Teshuva.

Rosh Hashana, therefore, being the beginning of a new Jewish year, is the time to examine this ancient value concept passed down to us by our fathers, and by assimilating its true meaning into our lives, begin to live a life marked by the high standards of Jewish values.

Barney Glazer's Glazed Bits



HOLLYWOOD, (TCNS)-

Nehemiah Persoff and Ed Ed Spiegel own the film rights for Henry Roth's intriguing book, "Call It Sleep", a best seller two years ago although only a moderate success when originally published three decades previously... At this date, Persoff and Spiegel stand poles apart on the choice of film format but Persoff hopes to win over his partner with a revolutionary idea. He wants to shoot practically the entire picture in Yiddish dialogue with English subtitles.

Persoff explained his ambitious program. "This story concerns a Jewish family of approximately 1910 told from a young boy's viewpoint. If related on the screen with English dialogue it would completely lose its flavor, or as we say in Yiddish its ta'am. I prefer to uphold its dignity by having our characters speak in their own language."

He recalled the movie, "A Bell for Adano", in which John Hodiak portrayed the American major acting as liaison officer. "The producer made one horrible mistake," said Nehemiah with a dark frown. "He had the local mayor plead the town's cause in English with a disenchanting accent while Hodiak, speaking perfect English, came off beautifully. As a result, Hodiak sounded like an intellect but the Mayor, undoubtedly a man of excellent background and education, sounded like a complete idiot."

"Had the Mayor spoken eloquently in his own language, he would have properly reflected his true intelligence and culture. Hodiak should have communicated with broken Italian."

This illustration, according to Persoff, exactly mirrors the Jewish immigrant, a man of culture in his native land who can't express himself intelligently here with his limited grasp of English. To the American born, this intellect from a strange country shapes up

as an ignorant interloper, a greenhorn with a jarring accent. To his family and cronies within his home or environment, he invites respect and maintains his intellectual image by speaking his native tongue with eloquence.

Persoff feels that a sizeable portion of the world's population still speaks and understands Yiddish. The remainder may easily follow the story line with subtitles in the language of their particular country.

He emphasized, "This is not a holy film. Although the special story deals with a special group of people, its success does not depend on a Jewish audience majority. We intend to hold to its spirit instead of watering down its magnificence just to cater to a wide audience of unintelligent ticket buyers. Its universal theme should

Friday, August 27, 1965 attract enough intelligent people who will recognize its qualities."

Would he play the leading role of the father? Regrettably, Persoff said, "I would love to portray this beautiful part but my Yiddish can't handle it. My accent is heavily Litvak which I picked up from my grandmother while living in Jerusalem. My native tongue was Hebrew. So we'll have to hire someone who speaks much better Yiddish than I do---Yiddish, that's geshmack."

Asked where he expected to find the proper Jewish locale, inasmuch as New York's old ghettos no longer exist, Persoff said, "Admittedly it isn't simple to find our 1910 Jewish immigrant atmosphere in New York. Even if we were lucky enough to locate today a reasonable facsimile, it would prove highly expensive."

"A heavy money backer would pay for such costliness but, with vast audiences in mind, he would insist on damaging story compromises. With our low budget, we can afford the luxury of retaining the original story



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