

American MovieMakers

FEATURE

AUDIENCE "BREATHLESS" AS VITAPHONE -- AND "TALKIES" -- MAKE DEBUTS

On August 6, 1926, Warner's Theatre presented the premiere of Warner Bros.'s elaborate silent feature Don Juan, starring John Barrymore, and featuring -- for the first time in history -- a synchronized musical score rather than live orchestral accompaniment. The evening also was highlighted by a series of sound shorts. These included an on-camera appearance by Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, and performances by The New York Philharmonic conducted by Henry Hadley, violinist Mischa Elman, and operatic tenor Giovanni Martinelli, among others.

The development of sound motion pictures was made possible by the Vitaphone process, created by AT&T's Western Electric Company and Bell Telephone Laboratories in the early 1920s.

Below is an observer's description of this moment in sound motion picture history:

Slowly the theatre filled. Every seat was sold, and occupied. It was a curious, speculative audience, there on unfamiliar grounds, uncertain what it was about to see, or how it should be received. It was prepared more to see a scientific marvel than to be entertained.

The four men (the Warners) were prepared -- for anything.

Eight-thirty arrived. The lights dimmed; babble of voices hushed. A white beam shot overhead and splashed upon the screen -- the beam from the movie projector. But it fell first on the draped curtains on the stage, revealing a subtitle. The curtains parted on a conventional cinema screen. The title gave way, familiarly, to a photograph...a man...Will H. Hays. He advanced to the foreground and there was a little sound. It penetrated through people's minds that they had "heard" him clear his throat.

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Then, suddenly, the picture began to speak!

The audience hung on its every word, half expecting something to happen...that the machinery would break down. In the first trials of every machine there is a good chance that it will break. One lacks confidence in it.

The phenomenon was like watching a man flying without wings....No wonder a scientist next day called it: "The nearest thing to a resurrection!"

As the picture disappeared a buzz of talk ran through the theatre. Then silence again as the second number appeared: the Philharmonic Orchestra playing the "Tannhauser" overture.

....As the movie image of Henry Hadley turned to his auditors after the last note, he "faced" a theatre full of people applauding spontaneously -- yet he wasn't there!

The ice had been broken: the talking picture had now an audience for the first time in three decades.

Throughout the rest of the first half of the program the audience sat breathlessly drinking the novelty in. It found that it liked film that talked. It found it possible to judge such a film; it liked some of the numbers better than others. It found itself fascinated by the intimacy with which the artist was revealed; found itself watching Elman's fingering, Martinelli's tone formation; found itself brought closer to those artists than ever before; even found itself, presently, gaining an illusion that the artists themselves were present!

When the lights went up for intermission the audience cheered, then gave way to a concentrated buzz of excitement. History was being made and they were there to see the event, was the way everyone felt.

--Excerpted from The Film Finds Its Tongue by Fitzhugh Green, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1929.

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