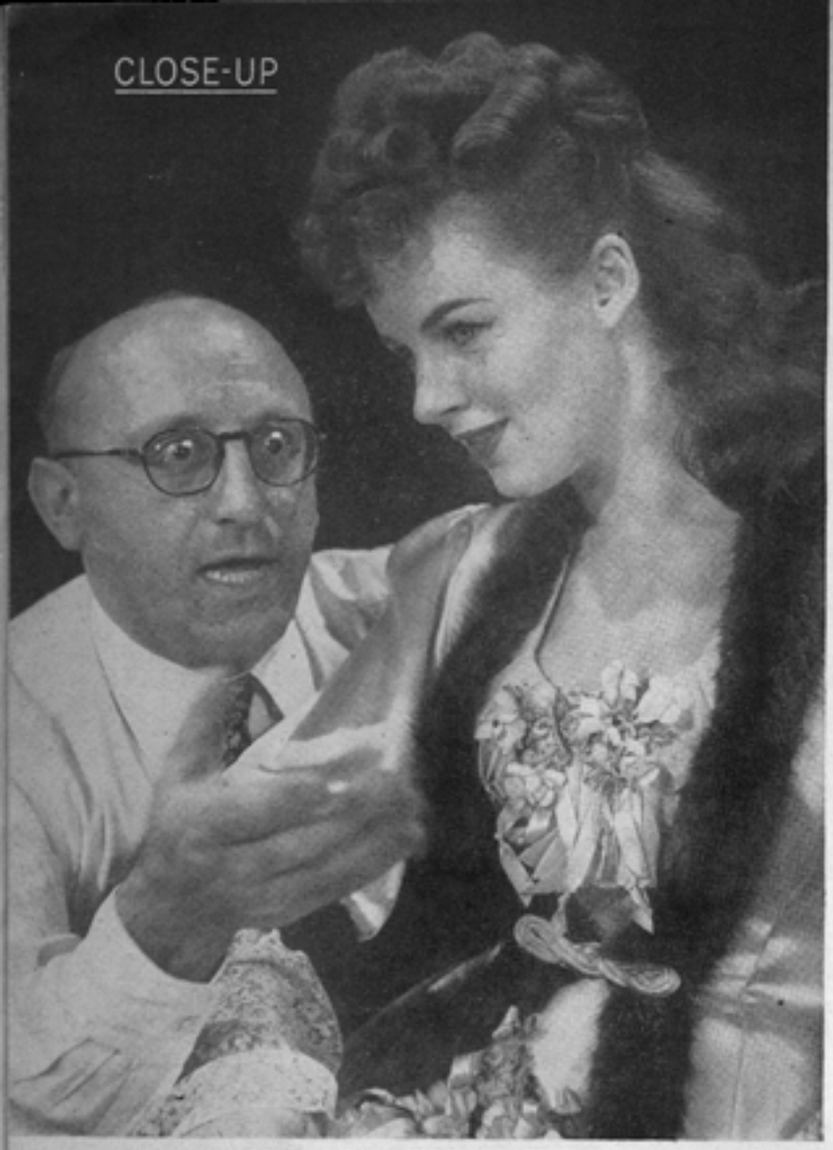


ROBERT SIODMAK DIRECTS HELENA CARTER IN HER SCREEN TEST

HE SNEERS AT HER ACTING IN A SCENE FROM "TIME OUT OF MIND"

MISTER "SEE'-ODD-MACK"

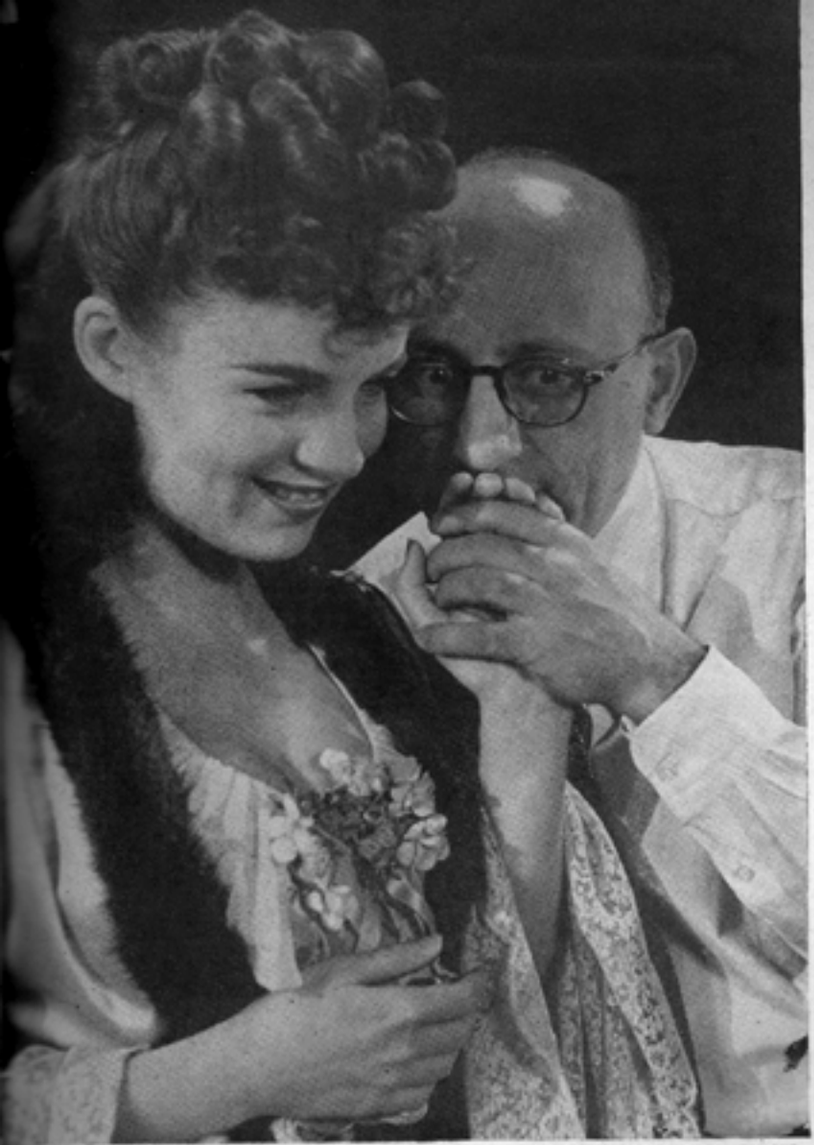
A bald Tennessean with a Katzenjammer accent is the newest top-flight director in Hollywood

by DONALD MARSHMAN

HOLLYWOOD is a town where monumental indifference can change almost overnight into glutinous admiration. For Humphrey Bogart, as an example, the change came with a movie called *High Sierra*. Before appearing in it he occupied a modest stall in the Warner Brothers stable of gangster types; afterward, within a year, he was a full-fledged star who soon cast a deep shade over such veteran artisans of the sawed-off shotgun as Edward G. Robinson and George Raft. Recently a similar sudden metamorphosis has pushed a jolly, bald, German-accented director named Robert Siodmak, who has been in Hollywood for more than seven years and in the movie business for nearly 20, over the threshold that, figuratively, separates rags from riches.

Whoever went to the movies with any regularity during 1946 was caught in the midst of

REHEARSING A SCENE, SIODMAK INSTRUCTS ACTORS BY INDULGING IN HALF-SERIOUS MUGGING AS HE REACTS TO THEIR PERFORMANCES



BEFORE CONTINUING THE TEST, HE GALLANTLY WISHES HER LUCK

AND AFTERWARD GLOWS ALL OVER. MISS CARTER GOT THE PART

Hollywood's profound postwar affection for morbid drama. From January through December deep shadows, clutching hands, exploding revolvers, sadistic villains and heroines tormented with deeply rooted diseases of the mind flashed across the screen in a panting display of psychoneurosis, unsublimated sex and murder most foul. Apparently delighted to pay good money for having their pants scared off, moviegoers flocked in record numbers to these spectacles. They found that the best of them were *The Spiral Staircase* (in which a mute maidservant is pursued by a killer who slaughters only the physically defective), *The Killers* (a first-rate gangster story with a high corpse content) and *The Dark Mirror* (twins, one a nice girl, one a walking composite of festering psychopathy). Mr. Siodmak (pronounced see'-odd-mack) directed all three films.

The most important people concerned with making a movie are the writers, the actors, the producer and the director. Each claims that his function is primary. Writers pitifully quote the Bible, insisting that "In the beginning was the Word." Actors reply that a dramatic invention without interpretation is no more useful than a foundation without a house on it. Producers say that artistic creation without editorial supervision is hodgepodge. And so on into prodigies of self-assertion.

The correct judgment, of course, is that they are all wrong. Movie-making is a cooperative effort which can add up to nothing if one of the four principals muffs his assignment. In a sense, however, the director is the key man on the job, for his function is peculiar to movies. The director personifies the only gadget which makes motion pictures a more glittering and fascinating and understandable form of entertainment and (sometimes) of art than any other. This is the camera, an instrument so fluid that it can believably transport an audience from a moldy temple at Angkor Wat to Grand Central Station in a single dissolve. The woods around Beverly Hills are full of actors from Broadway and radio, playwrights, journalists, novelists and countless other professionals who have been able to utilize skill and experience picked up in other fields for the benefit of the movie industry. This is not the case with directors. Movie-directing is a specialized art, far removed even from something apparently so closely related as directing a play.

The few moviegoers who think of the director at all think of him as the man who tells Clark Gable it will be more effective if he articulates his

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HIS FACE MIRRORS CONCENTRATION, EXHORTATION, APPROBATION, DOUBT, DISGUST, FRENZY, DESPERATION AND COMPLETE HOPELESSNESS

line "I love *you*" instead of "I *love* you," or as an inert figure in a camp chair who periodically summons up enough life to yell, "Cut!" Actually these are small parts of his job. The director is the one man charged with blending the raw elements of a movie—script, actors, settings—into something fit for the screen. If his assignment is a comedy, he must invent funny bits of business for the actors. If suspense is to be created, he must arrange the shadows, catch the horror on the heroine's face and, generally, make impending disaster seem so frightening that palms begin to sweat all over Loew's Orpheum. He must make spectacle seem believable and not staged. He is responsible for that mysterious quality called "pace," which cannot be identified except to say that, if one is suddenly overcome with ennui in a darkened mezzanine, then the picture on the screen lacks it. Above all the director must use his camera to adorn even the gabbiest drawing-room comedy with the only unique quality the movies have—movement. A clever director may be saddled with ham actors and a bad script and still come up with a very presentable result. A bad director can ruin a potentially good picture. Good movies are sometimes made by indifferent directors, but no great movie was ever less than superbly directed.

A good director seldom misses, and in his career Robert Siodmak has made few fumbles. He entered the German movie industry in 1927 when he was 27 years old. For a while he was a film editor, or cutter, and ultimately worked his way up to director. His first picture, *People on Sunday*, is still remembered by connoisseurs of the cinema. It was a silent film about a group of young men and women who met early one Sunday, paired off as lovers and tragically parted the same evening, never to meet again. *People on Sunday* was photographed almost entirely in the public parks of Berlin, partly to obtain authentic backgrounds but mostly to save money. Unfortunately the parks were never sufficiently crowded except on Sundays, so Siodmak took six months to make the picture, shooting only one day a week.

He eludes Hitler but not Bertha Odenheimer

THIS first effort was successful enough to get Siodmak a good contract at Ufa, the German film trust, whose greatest star was Emil Jannings, the enormous, bull-necked tragedian who later came to Hollywood, made his fortune and returned home to become a loyal Nazi. Siodmak considers Jannings the greatest actor he has ever seen ("Such a face; it was like a thousand words of dialog every time he changed his expression").

For about five years Siodmak had a very pleasant and successful time working for Ufa. His friends were mostly the overintellectual young men who decayed as a class along with the Weimar Republic. All of them laughed at Hitler, and Siodmak also laughed, except that since he was a Jew his laughter was tempered by fear. Early in 1933 he encountered a couple of his cronies, newly clad in Nazi party uniforms. They explained cynically that National Socialism was the coming thing and that they were simply climbing aboard the bandwagon. Realizing that Hitler was no longer a joke, Siodmak immediately left Germany for France. The Nazis came to power the next day and movie-industry Jews soon were shipped off to concentration camps.

In Paris, Siodmak's sorrow at leaving Germany was somewhat assuaged by the arrival of Bertha Odenheimer, a Berlin lady who came to France to marry him. She had been the wife of Dr. Max Seymon, a Berlin physician, when Siodmak met her and, as he tells it, proposed in the happy knowledge that she was tied down. When Mrs. Seymon got a divorce and ran her intended to earth in Paris, there was nothing for Siodmak to do but dash out for the license. "Like all men," he says, "I was trapped. I proposed when I knew she couldn't accept, and then she betrayed me."

In spite of Siodmak's cynical interpretation of his courtship, the marriage has been very successful. Mrs. Siodmak is a handsome woman with enough chic (her gray hair is tinted a light blue) for 10 movie stars. She has a sympathy for human frailty that has made her the confidante of a good many lovelorn Hollywood ladies. Robert calls her "Babs," a name no more suitable for the distinguished lady than "Snooky" might be for the Duchess of Windsor. "She loves Hollywood," Siodmak says. "The main reason she divorced Seymon and married me is that she thought I would someday go there." This is one of his favorite jokes, for the spurned Dr. Seymon actually got to Hollywood two years in advance of his ex-wife and her husband and set up a lucrative practice. Today, with his second wife, he lives less than two minutes from the Siodmaks, is their family doctor and often comes for dinner. "Max is a very nice guy," says Siodmak, "and my wife likes him almost as much as I do."

Once established as a family man, Siodmak resumed his career

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THE SIODMAKS have been married 14 years. They live in a rambling brick house with Mrs. Siodmak's mother, a Japanese couple and two languid cats.

MR. SIODMAK CONTINUED

as a director. The French movie industry has never been noted for its firm financial foundations, and necessity for economy forced Siodmak to develop in himself a quality which some of Hollywood's greatest directors have never acquired—decisiveness. In this country such talented men as William Wyler and Frank Capra habitually photograph each scene over and over again from a number of angles and then select the most effective footage for the final print. These luxuries were out of the question in France. Siodmak learned to decide quickly which camera angle would be most effective for the scene in question, put his actors through their paces three or four times and order a new camera setup only for a new scene.

Siodmak soon became eminent enough in Paris to direct leading French stars like Harry Baur and Maurice Chevalier, but he also felt restless. As all Mohammedans long to visit Mecca, so all movie directors look on Hollywood as their goal. Siodmak was no exception, but he was not able to establish contact until 1936. In that year Harry M. Warner, the president of Warner Brothers, and Mervyn LeRoy, Warners' best director, were in Paris together. They went to see *The Last Refrain*, a Siodmak picture starring Fernand Gravet. Warner and LeRoy were most enthusiastic about it and asked to meet the director. "It's a great picture," they told him. "You are a great man. You must come to Hollywood." When he heard this, Siodmak purred with satisfaction. For several days he showed Paris to the visiting Americans—buying them dinners, standing them drinks and otherwise currying favor. At the end of their stay Warner and LeRoy thanked him very much, signed Fernand Gravet to a Hollywood contract and left for home.

In 1939 Siodmak began to sense the approach of war. Not wishing to risk being picked up by the Nazis, who had him on a black list, he prepared once again to invade a new country. Although warned that going to Hollywood without a contract was a through route to the breadline, he decided to risk it even though he barely had passage money. The Siodmaks sailed for America on the S. S. *Champlain* of the French Line the day before World War II broke out. Just as in Germany six years before, he had crossed the border one day in advance of disaster. "My friends have a saying," he muses. " 'Watch Siodmak. When he goes, the jig is really up.' "

Hollywood tingled with indifference

ANY man of talent can get a job in Hollywood if he arrives there with a limousine, a personal press agent and plenty of money to spend in the right places. Otherwise it's hard. The new arrivals found Hollywood's atmosphere almost tingling with indifference to them. Hardly anyone had heard of Siodmak's rather substantial European career, and those who had heard appeared not to care. His few old acquaintances who could exert a little influence somehow never got around to doing so, probably because they didn't wish to encourage potential competition. With great determination Siodmak operated out of a small apartment by telephone and bus to the major studios. In a year's time he was either asked to leave or was forcibly ejected from every studio capable of producing a two-reel comedy. The Siodmaks were also broke, for they h.d

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regularly sent money to Mrs. Siodmak's parents in Germany in addition to supporting themselves.

Not until one Saturday in the spring of 1941 did Siodmak get a break. He was promised that a job at Paramount would materialize for him on Monday morning. But when he arrived, bustling with anticipation, his benefactor, 23 years a company big shot, looked like a man recently in the hands of embalmers. "I'm terribly sorry," Siodmak heard him say, "but I can't hire you. I'm out of a job myself." That was the day when B. G. De Sylva took over Paramount's production reins from William Le Baron and began a shake-up of studio personnel. In the face of this catastrophe Siodmak could only laugh. He realized, however, that in times of great change a clever interloper can often find himself a chair before the music stops. Immediately he sought out Preston Sturges, the writer-director-producer who was then one of Paramount's fair-haired boys, and began to talk fast. Sturges was amused by the gnomelike man with the German accent who confronted him. He listened to Siodmak's rapturous descriptions of movies that he, Sturges, had never heard of and then telephoned Henry Ginsberg, De Sylva's studio manager. "Henry," said Sturges, "I've got a great European director here. Warners' and Metro are hot on his trail, but if you act fast I think you can grab him." Ginsberg asked if Sturges was willing to recommend him. Sturges said glibly that he had known Siodmak for 15 years, had sat spellbound at every movie he had even touched and several other nice things. Within an hour Siodmak had signed a contract.

It is symbolic of the idiocy which occasionally afflicts Hollywood that Siodmak, an immigrant from Germany who had specialized in directing heavy drama, was first put to work on an elephantinely comic Paramount B-picture called *West Point Widow*. He was turning out a fairly presentable movie when his producer arrived on the set one day and told him he could not shoot a certain scene in the way he planned. Siodmak asked why not. The producer refused to explain but registered surprise when Siodmak submissively rearranged his camera. "You're about the only imported genius I've ever met who does what he's told!" boomed the producer. "You'll do all right here." "I don't argue," said the genius, "because I don't care. This picture isn't good enough to be known as a Siodmak picture. It will only be known as a Paramount picture."

Siodmak was ultimately dropped by Paramount, went to 20th Century-Fox, was dropped there and ended up at Universal, where Joan Harrison, once Alfred Hitchcock's chief assistant, had become a producer. She knew his European reputation and got him to direct her first venture, *Phantom Lady*, a low-budget thriller with Franchot Tone and Ella Raines, which made a hit with the critics and quite a bit of money as well. Climbing steadily upward, Siodmak directed Charles Laughton in *The Suspect*, another Harrison picture called *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* and then was loaned to RKO to make *The Spiral Staircase*.

He prefers to be imperfect

A GOOD director is a man who makes good pictures. Siodmak has made so many in quick succession that he is currently called "one of the hottest men in the business," and his studio, Universal-International, is disposed to give him a very free hand in what he does. Siodmak's technique runs heavily to speed. He works very carefully with writers before starting to shoot a picture and then photographs the script, with only a few changes arising from situations unforeseeable in advance. In this he differs from a good director like Gregory La Cava, who has the script written as he goes along, a maddening and expensive habit. Most directors prefer to photograph the story as much in continuity as possible, but Siodmak prefers not to. He generally begins with a few scattered scenes from the middle of the picture and explains why this way: "The most important parts of any movie are the beginning and the end. In the opening moments an audience must get an absolutely correct impression of the characters, and in the closing moments they receive the impression that they will tell their friends about. I do not think it is safe to shoot either part until the actors and the director are thoroughly acquainted with each other and with the script. Only then, in two or three weeks, do we all know exactly what each particular character is like and are safely able to photograph these two vital moments. An incorrect interpretation in the middle of the picture does not matter much, however."

Siodmak also tries to preserve on film the common errors and imperfections of everyday life—realism, in other words. "The trouble with David Selznick," he says, "is that his pictures are always perfect. In *Rebecca* or *Since You Went Away* a character will reach blindly behind him for a cigaret box and his hand goes to it

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without hesitation. Such things do not happen to you and me." In *The Killers* Siodmak shot the whole payroll-robbery scene from an elevated vantage point in strict continuity. It lasted three minutes without a single cut, which is uncommon on the screen. Siodmak made three takes which were identical except that in the first one of the actors paused distractedly for a moment before making his getaway because he could not recognize the car he was to escape in. In the second and third takes he naturally knew which car was the right one and went to it directly. Siodmak used the first take, claiming that an excited robber would be likely to become confused and that his very pausing gave this take a verisimilitude which the other two lacked.

Siodmak saves money by "camera-cutting" his films. This means that he seldom overshoots a scene and that each scene dovetails very closely with the next when the picture is finally assembled. As a former film cutter he does this competently but also drives producers mad because camera-cutting does not allow them very much leeway in assembling the final print. Mark Hellinger, who produced *The Killers*, did not object much to this constriction and freely gives Siodmak 85% of the credit for the movie's success.

"THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE," in which Dorothy McGuire played a mute, won Siodmak first public praise.

After *The Dark Mirror*, which followed *The Killers*, Siodmak had his first Hollywood failure. Moviegoers looking for a current example of his work will have to content themselves with an item called *Time Out of Mind* which Universal-International asked Siodmak to direct late last summer. U.-I. bought Rachel Field's novel about 10 years ago and subsequently invested so much money in scripts that the company felt constrained to make the picture. Phyllis Calvert, the English star, agreed to be in it and she asked for Siodmak to direct her. Siodmak read the final script and fled to New York to escape from it. Then Nate Blumberg, the big boss of U.-I., ordered him to make the picture. Miss Calvert's employer, J. Arthur Rank, came through with a transatlantic pep talk from London. "If I had refused for one more day," said Siodmak, "Attlee would have denounced me in the House of Commons." He returned to Hollywood, put on his disreputable brown hat and went to work. The expected happened and the movie turned out badly. "This is what it's about," Siodmak says. "This boy has a great deal of money and women love him. But he wants to compose music and can only compose in New England. How can you make a movie about that?" In fairness to him it should be said that he made a good try; no scene in the movie is individually bad. When asked about the picture Siodmak says curtly that it will appeal to women and changes the subject. *Time Out of Mind* was not an unmitigated failure, however, for by agreeing to do it Siodmak wangled from his bosses several valuable promises of less interference with future pictures and also got a raise in pay. He will not tell how much he makes, but $100,000 a year is probably a conservative guess.

Oddly enough, for all his German accent and the remnants of Germanic grammar in his speech ("I have been in Hollywood since seven years." "She has already twice been married."), Siodmak is an American. "I was born in Shelby County, Tenn.," he says, sounding like one of the Katzenjammer Kids, "How you-all?" His father was in the fur business here but returned to his native Leipzig in 1902 when Robert was 2 years old. The boy was given a good, upper-middle-class education but did not respond to it. "I hated school," he says. "All German schools are torture chambers. I think the reason Germany starts so many wars is that her people are trying to revenge themselves on someone for what they went through in the classroom."

At 16, Siodmak decided to become an actor, and his father told him never to darken the family door again. He landed several jobs, always playing old men. Siodmak admits he is no beauty now that he is bald but says he was indescribably uglier when he had hair. During a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* he suddenly realized that at 18 he was playing Shylock and would be playing the same part at 68. This seemed like a barren future, so he quit acting and his happy father got him a job in a bank in Dresden. There

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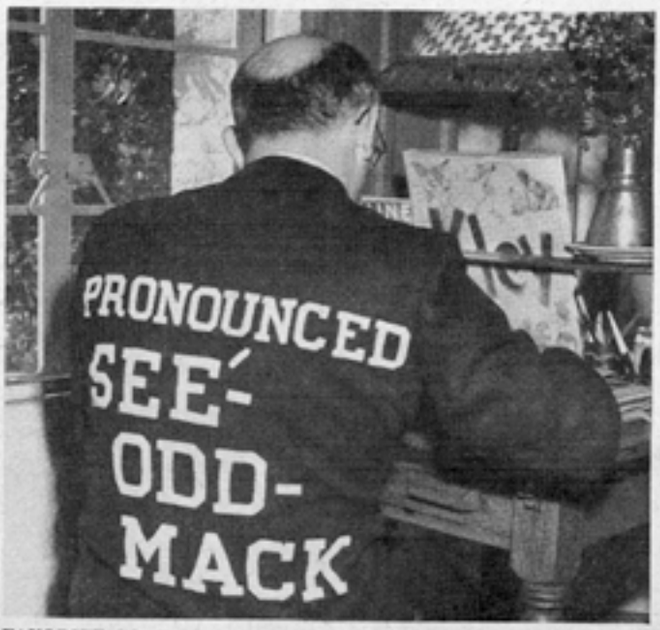
Siodmak prospered and was successful enough in financial dealings to become known as a small-time boy plunger. As the German inflation of 1922 increased, he made an enormous amount of money on the theory that the mark would always be worth less tomorrow than it was today. This worked out fine until the government finally got around to stabilizing the currency, at which point Siodmak was wiped out. Then he started a humorous magazine, succinctly called *Das Magazin*. It got to be very popular, but Siodmak, unfortunately, sold out before he knew what a gold mine he had, and the movie career followed.

Now that he is 47 and at last enjoying a success commensurate with his talents, Siodmak should, by all the rules of irony, be very unhappy. He is not. The Siodmaks live in a handsome, sprawling, white-painted brick house in the back country of Beverly Hills. He bought it from Boris Karloff and has poured a good deal of money into furnishing it with good antiques and into revitalizing the garden. Siodmak's brother Curt also lives in Hollywood and is an expert at writing horror movies (*Donovan's Brain*, etc.). Like Curt most of Siodmak's friends are survivors of the good old days in Berlin. They are generously entertained at the well-stocked bar where the host indulges his fancy for inventing new recipes for drinks. His own favorite combination is composed half of cognac and half of Fernet Branca and tastes like medicine. His most cherished possession is a large, green Cadillac which Mark Hellinger gave him after *The Killers*. Siodmak is a gadget fancier who likes to explain to everyone just how all the attachments work. When he is through, he will say happily, "A wonderful car! It cost me $1,800 gift tax."

At present Siodmak is just moving into the front rank of his profession. The main flaw in his record is that every good Siodmak movie made in America has been a mystery, and mysteries, by general consent, are the easiest kind of movie to make well. "When you dim down the lights and bring on a clutching hand," says one observer, "it's not hard to keep an audience interested." This is true, of course, but *The Killers* was a mystery which was handled so well that it became first-class drama. Siodmak is now engaged in broadening his field. He is trying to get a script written for a comedy of infidelity he has had in his head for 15 years.

Siodmak is now hard at work in England, where he will soon begin directing Robert Donat and Ann Todd in a movie version of Mary Webb's novel, *Precious Bane*. There as in Hollywood he will clown around the set, barking unnecessary orders and generally keeping his staff on its toes. On days when he feels particularly good, he will probably put on a blue blazer which announces in white letters printed on the back: "PRONOUNCED SEE'-ODD-MACK." The first day he wore this garment, Siodmak's set was visited by one of Universal's stuffier producers. "My God, Robert," said the big shot, "you shouldn't wear that thing around the studio. It's not dignified." Siodmak looked up at him and smiled. "You go ahead and make pictures with dignity," he said. "I will try to make good pictures."



FAVORITE COAT was a present to save Siodmak the trouble of explaining pronunciation of his surname, which means "seven" in Polish. Siodmak considers his name an asset. "Who is interested in anyone named Smith?" he says.