There's New Hope for Hollywood
In Dore Schary of 'Crossfire'

By SEYMOUR PECK

It was near, it was daring, it was, you might even say, unheard of. The hard-headed, money-minded directors and producers who attend RKO's annual sales convention were listening to a speech of rare idealism, coming not from some dreamy politician involved down to give a little "tone" to the meeting, but from their own boss--RKO's new executive vice president in charge of production, Dore Schary.

"We believe the best films are made when you take a chance, when you lead with your chin," Schary was telling these men who were used to the utterest conservativeness in film thought. "When you play safe in the making of motion pictures, watch out. When you deal with terms like 'this will kill them,' it's a cinch you're in trouble. You're getting lazy.

"We want our pictures to tell good stories and have points; to be about a decent kind of life and a decent way of living." Schary went on. "Stories of violence should be stories against violent people . . . We want our pictures to reflect the kind of life we wish to live. We want to make respectable pictures about a very respectable world."

The men at the sales meeting had never heard anything like it, certainly not at an RKO meeting. The man who preceded Schary, the late Charles Koriner, was unwaveringly devoted to "playing it safe," he tossed experiments down, and Pare Lorentz off the lot.

But Schary was not merely making pretty speeches for the salesmen. He had just completed Crossfire, a powerful melodrama about the murder of a Jew by a hate-filled, early anti-Semitic.

Moreover, Crossfire would stand as a rebuke to every Hollywood producer who has ever said, "Sure, we'd like to do a picture with a real idea, but we'd lose our shirts on it." For Crossfire promises to be one of the biggest moneymakers in RKO's history. First because it's a dramatic merit makes it a cinch to bring packed houses; second because it was turned out for the amazingly low cost of $600,000. Today, any film that considers itself self-respecting, costs upwards of $1,500,000 and takes at least three months to make.

Here is how Schary did it: having once been a screen writer, he knew the importance of having John Pxton's screenplay for Crossfire all set when the film went into production. Thus there was no time lost for rewriting, no remakes of scenes that turned out to be weak. Director Edward Dmytryk filmed that script in just 53 days.

"The script was so carefully prepared," Schary told the sales meeting, "that from the first assembly to the final cutting we lost only 150 feet of film. The men working on Crossfire were consumed with an ideal. What appeared to be a gamble is a sure bet because they made the picture economically."

The appeal of a story like Crossfire to a man like Schary became apparent in a glimpse of his childhood. Schary was born in Newark, N. J., in 1905, the son of Herman and Belle Schary, careers.

"I grew up in an atmosphere of violence," he once told an interviewer, "I saw a lot of things I hoped might be corrected some day. I saw men slugged for petty reasons. There were youthful gang fights almost daily between Irish and Italians, Polaks and Jews, Irish and Jews.

"There were irrational acts born of the heat of the moment and I felt that if someone could do anything to educate people's minds to their responsibility in society, it would stop all that."

There is a link between what Schary says and what Detective Finlay (Robert Young) says in Crossfire:

"Hating is always the same, always senseless. One day it kills Irish Catholics, the next day Jews, the next day Protestants, the next day Quakers. It's hard to understand some men can end up killing men who wear striped neckties, or people from Tennessee."

Crossfire is the not the only major film that has come from Schary. He produced Till the End of Time, The Spiral Staircase, The Farmer's Daughter and The Bachelor and the Bobby Soxer, all for RKO. It was his success with these four films that won him the job of executive V. P. in charge of production at RKO. He was appointed last January.

Schary is regarded by many as the most important new influence in film production in many years. He and his pictures may well give new directions and hope to an industry that has been bordering hopelessly since the end of the war.

"Tell them," is the way he himself sees it, "the screen isn't a pulpit, but you can still do something that is important and constructive in people's lives and make it entertaining that will sell at the box office."

Courtesy Dore Schary Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.