

conclusion that absolutely anything can be forgiven a man who dies in battle is a false and even a dangerous one. But this is, in my opinion, almost the only thing which stands in the way of the film's complete success—another example, like *The Seventh Veil*, of a good screen play being slightly marred by its ending (*How Scarlet Street* stands out by contrast in this respect!).

Fortunately, the barrier is not as serious as it might have been in *The Rake's Progress*: one has the impression that this death-of-a-hero act was merely tossed in by the authors as a sentimental concession, and that their own true estimate of the caddish Vivian is more accurately expressed through the mouth of the character who, in describing the deathbed scene, says that "old Viv" made a typical exit, clutching a bottle of champagne for which he had not paid.

INSPIRED by the title and theme of Hogarth's series of prints, *The Rake's Progress* is a searching and often brilliantly caustic study of an English playboy-parasite in the years between the two World Wars. Though only one specimen is put under the microscope, the effects of his environment upon him, and his effect upon his environment, make this film something of a social document as well as an entertainment. It is a Rank production, and watching it I began to wonder (I am happy to admit it) whether some of my former doubts about Mr. Rank's influence on British pictures may not have been rather exaggerated. For one thing, Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, the two young men who made the film, have been permitted to use the sharp weapon of satire to cut away at and expose much that was rotten in the social and economic structure during the 'thirties, when their hero flourished. For instance, the doctrine of scarcity which caused the destruction of foodstuffs in order to keep up prices during the Depression, comes in for some direct jabs.

And for another thing, I can't believe that *The Rake's Progress* is the sort of picture which Mr. Rank would be sponsoring if he were really so keen about pandering to the American market. Compared with the average Hollywood film, it has too much dramatic honesty and logic; and apart from the finale it is too ruthless and unsentimental. It is, indeed, a picture which I can't believe could be made in Hollywood, even if anybody in Hollywood was willing to try—for the simple reason that the script wouldn't be passed under the Hollywood Production Code. *The Rake's Progress* makes plain what an advantage the British film industry has in the fact that there is no equivalent of the Hays Office in England. One result is that love without benefit of marriage can be, and indeed is, quite openly admitted and discussed (you find this also in *The Seventh Veil*). Such behaviour is, of course, not condoned, but a character like Vivian Kenway could not exist in a Hollywood film because his morals could not be made loose enough. You may disapprove of this frankness, but you have to admit that it does enable British pictures to aim at audiences with a good deal higher mental age than 14, the avowed target of the average Hollywood producer. Of course, if this type of film isn't generally successful,

Mr. Rank is in a position to steer the whole British cinema in a completely different direction; and there is clearly a danger there; but in the meantime I think we might hold our fire.

I DON'T want to give the impression that *The Rake's Progress* is a serious film, at least not superficially serious. It is, in fact, a very witty and laughable one, though there does come a point in this modern version of "Eric or Little by Little" when the joke begins to turn a trifle sour. It isn't, after all, a very heinous offence to be sent down from Oxford for affixing a chamber-pot to the top of the Martyr's Memorial (I have seen the same thing done at Canterbury College); and one can scarcely disapprove of Vivian for losing his job with the coffee company in South America after insulting the managing director, because the managing director (who was burning coffee and sacking old employees to keep up dividends) so clearly deserved to be insulted. Vivian's practice of sponging on his relatives, and his insulting references to his wealthy aunt (Marie Lohr) certainly aren't very nice; but then his aunt isn't very nice, either. These are mere peccadilloes, and can be enjoyed as such; but when this cheerful cad seduces the wife of his best friend (in mitigation it has to be said that the seduction isn't one-sided); when he issues dud cheques; when he marries a Jewish girl in Vienna for her money (in return for enabling her to escape the Nazis) and then breaks her heart with his unfaithfulness and drives her to suicide; when he promises to marry another girl who loves him and then walks out on her; and when he kills his father (Godfrey Tearle) in a motor smash because he has drunk too much—when all this happens, it's not so easy to regard *The Rake's Progress* as light-hearted fun, though you may still raise an occasional wry smile, or to accept the excuse which is rather half-heartedly offered that, after all, dear Vivian was a victim of his birth, his cultured environment, and his frustrated generation. As for the final attempt to whitewash him in the war, it just, so to speak, won't wash.

WHAT makes this sentimental finale doubly hard to believe in is that Rex Harrison plays the role of Vivian as if he really meant you to loathe the fellow—loathe him and yet be fascinated by him. It is an extremely skilful and sustained performance, marked by a sure sense of timing, true showmanship, and considerable self-discipline. The women in the story are also very good, especially Lilli Palmer (Harrison's wife in real life), and a newcomer to the screen, Margaret Johnston, who plays secretary to Vivian's M.P. father: they give the film some of its more moving moments. The dialogue, though unnaturally bright, resembles the normal conversation of cultivated human beings far more than is the case in the average film; and there is an outstanding array of minor players, through whom the scenarist gets in some of his shrewdest thrusts at society.

I doubt if you'll be elevated by *The Rake's Progress*, and it may even shock you; but I think you'll find it interesting at the very least.

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