

(Continued from previous page)

and delicate thing; treated as it is here, it is immeasurably more profound and moving than the relationship involved in the average boy-meets-girl episode on the screen. The two who give authenticity and emotional vigour to this purely intellectual relationship in *The Corn is Green* are Bette Davis, as Miss Moffat, and John Dall, as Morgan Evans — one a veteran of a hundred roles, the new First Lady of the Screen; the other a complete newcomer. This is, I think, Miss Davis's best performance for some time. She is, perhaps, a little First-Ladyish in her mannerisms, rather too conscious of her art and her own high place in it, acting too much with her head and not enough with her heart. But her Miss Moffat is, nevertheless, a real woman, a three-dimensional character.

As for John Dall, the measure of his achievement is that he holds his own in this company, behaving throughout with notable intelligence and restraint. It is an admirable interpretation of a subtle and difficult part. He is not the only newcomer who catches our attention in this film; another is Joan Lorring, who spectacularly handles the role of the Cockney girl, Bessie. There is, perhaps, a trace of over-acting here, even a false note of farce; on the other hand, it is a part which demands a vivid portrayal. Some of the other members of the supporting cast are veterans of the New York stage production: in particular I suggest you watch for Rosalind Ivan's fruity rendering of Mrs. Watty, the housekeeper who couldn't keep out of trouble until she was converted and joined the "Corpse."

THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE

(RKO Radio)

WE have in our time met plenty of movie heroines who were dumb. It is, indeed and unfortunately, almost their natural state. But to meet one who is literally dumb in the old-fashioned sense of the word—that is to say, who cannot speak—is unusual enough to call for comment. She is the heroine of *The Spiral*

Staircase, a modest young maidservant who has been bereft of the power of speech since she suffered a shock in her childhood, but who regains her voice after a series of other shocks sustained during one exciting night in an eerie old mansion. Even so she utters only nine words during the whole film—a record in taciturnity which I commend to the notice of some others of her sex. Dorothy McGuire (of *Claudia*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and *The Enchanted Cottage*) plays this role and is clearly by no means as dumb as she acts: her performance is, in fact, a brilliant piece of pantomime, since she is called on to express, speechlessly, all kinds of emotions—and particularly terror. This terror is occasioned by the knowledge that she is marked down for killing by an unknown but highly efficient maniac who makes a speciality of strangling young women with physical defects.

We moviegoers are now right on the crest of the cinema's crime-with-psychology wave. Everywhere we turn we see diseased minds. And in *The Spiral Staircase*, Director Robert Siodmak gives us just about the whole works, not tossing the shocks at us crudely, however, but building them up neatly and with infinite patience and resource. It is very old stuff really, of course: a large, grim New England mansion at the turn of the century, gaslight and candles, flickering shadows on the walls, twisting staircases, the huge cellar, a violent storm raging outside, and the hapless victim imprisoned within, waiting for the terror to strike. But Siodmak gets the most out of these time-honoured ingredients, thanks to expert photography, good timing, and a sure knowledge of how to make an audience enjoy being frightened. His cast gives him every help.

There is, come to think of it, not a major character in *The Spiral Staircase* who could rightly be described as normal, Miss McGuire's dumb performance being paralleled by Ethel Barrymore's paralysed portrayal of the aged bed-ridden mistress of the household, who knows what is about to happen but cannot apparently stir hand or foot to prevent it. Miss McGuire must express emotion without speech: Miss Barrymore must do it almost without movement. It is, I feel, just as well the afflictions were not reversed, for Miss Barrymore (who has appeared in talking-pictures only twice before) has a voice which it would be a pity to miss.

This, then, is a jolly good film of its kind. The only thing is that we have lately been having altogether too many of the kind.

A GHOST IS LAID.

WE are grateful to several readers who, in response to an inquiry on this page two weeks ago, have written in to say that the composition played by Elizabeth's "ghost" in the film *A Place of One's Own* was Chopin's Prelude in E Minor, Op. 28, No. 4.

NATIONAL FILM UNIT

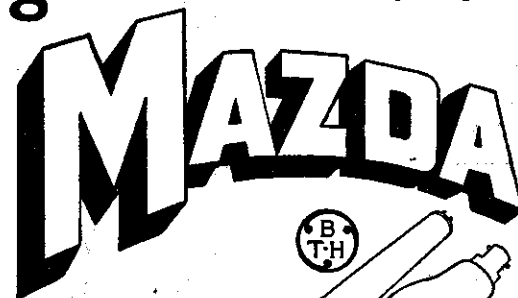
WEEKLY Review No. 264 from the National Film Unit, released throughout the Dominion on September 20, contains the following items: "Limestone Industry at Oamaru" (where thousands of tons of limestone are mined for agricultural uses); "Maori Carving" (showing a Wellington Maori artist at work on some traditional carving designs); "Wanganui River Mouth" (where there has been trouble recently in the break-through of the sea); and "Flame Thrower" (illustrating the use of a former instrument of war in gorse clearing).

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