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Speaking Candidly by G.M.

BLESSED SILENCE

THE big event of the past few months in the cinema has been, for me, not the mass slaughter of *The Big Sleep* nor the more individual homicide of *Mildred Pierce*, not the pleasant but stagey humour of the apparently unending *Quiet Week-End*, not even *The Body Snatcher*, *My Darling Clementine*, or the return of the Marx Brothers, but a 20-year-old silent French comedy: René Clair's *The Italian Straw Hat*, which the Wellington Film Society put on in the Concert Chamber the other evening. Such a choice is, I admit, rightly suspect, and must be justified; it is easy to pretend to an unbounded enthusiasm for these old foreign classics just because they are old, foreign, and have the reputation of being classics, and also because not everybody has the chance to see them and it is nice to be able to feel superior. Let's be honest and concede that not absolutely everything about M. Clair's "masterpiece" stands the test of time as successfully as a "masterpiece" should: you have to make allowances with an old film that you don't have to make with an old book, for the reason that a film puts everything down permanently in more than black and white, and interpretation and appreciation therefore depend much less on the exercise of the individual's imagination than is the case when reading a novel. Manners and gestures as well as fashions—all of which can change radically in a short time—are frozen in celluloid and may easily appear ludicrously out-of-date when viewed again. In the case of a comedy like *The Italian Straw Hat* this does not matter so much; it may even be all part of the fun; but in the case of drama or tragedy it may well prove almost fatal. At the very least you then have to make a deliberate effort not to be amused by the archaic posturing of the players.

EVEN so I would still rate this 1927 production as a more entertaining experience than anything offered recently by Messrs. Zanuck, Mayer, Warner and Co., of Hollywood, or by the Rank and file of British pictures. For two special reasons. It is years since I have felt the tears run down my cheeks with the effort of hearty and prolonged laughter at a film screening. But that happened to me—and I guarantee to dozens of others in the audience—at that sequence in *The Italian Straw Hat* where the Mayor makes his interminable speech to the fidgeting bridal party. There are many other moments of rich fun in the story, when Clair piles up the satire at the expense of the French *petite bourgeoisie*, but nothing quite so devastatingly hilarious as this apparently simple sequence. Laughter on such a scale is cathartic in its emotional effect; one of the greatest boons the screen has to offer. It does not happen often: I can recall a few occasions with Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, several with Charlie Chaplin, one or two with the early Marx Brothers when they relied principally on pantomime.

It will be noted that all such moments in the cinema, when the spectator is helpless with laughter, have one feature



RENE CLAIR
He knew the secret

in common: they are, even in the case of the Marx Brothers, silent or at least non-talking sequences. And this brings me to the other reason, a related one, why I rate *The Italian Straw Hat* so highly. This film brings the blessing of silence as well as the gift of tonic laughter. There is, of course, an unhappy corollary to all this: such a film reminds us of what we have sacrificed for the sake of dialogue. Quite obviously, nobody can abandon himself utterly to laughter for minutes on end if he has to listen to and think about what the characters are saying. No matter how good the timing of the laughs, much will be lost, there will be considerable restraint. The talkies may have given us, more than before, the chuckle, the snigger, the witty innuendo, and the wisecrack; but they have lost us the roaring, cumulative gusto of the belly-laugh.

YET there is still more to a film like *The Italian Straw Hat* than being able to laugh with the brakes off. There is, for a change, the positive pleasure of not having to hear the human voice. I am not making the clearly absurd and futile plea that we should return to the pre-talkie era; that would be to lose much more than would be gained. I am merely suggesting that our film producers, particularly our comedy producers, should remember occasionally that the appeal of the cinema is primarily a visual one and that the screen's greatest moments, especially in the field of comedy, have never depended on dialogue. (I stress dialogue: there is almost always a place for the imaginative use of natural sound or for a musical background such as the Wellington Film Society provided for its screening of *The Italian Straw Hat*, though an old-time piano accompaniment might in this case have been still better, and the film

(continued on next page)

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