


VIVE LA FRANCE!

LA KERMESSE HEROIQUE

(Films-Sonores Tobis)

 MOST New Zealanders who take more than a perfunctory interest in the cinema will have heard the claim advanced from time to time that it is the French who make the best, and if not the best, certainly the most individual, films in the world. It is, unfortunately, a claim that has seldom been put to the test in this country. But see *La Kermesse Héroïque* if you can possibly get the chance (it is here at last and about to be released), and I think you may be willing to concede the point, or at any rate to agree that the claim is not idly made. One French swallow does not make a movie summer; but by comparison, with even the better-class Hollywood product, *La Kermesse Héroïque* is like a fine piece of hand made pottery alongside a mass-produced factory article.

One requirement of a work of art is that it should be able to stand the test of time. *La Kermesse Héroïque*, directed by Jacques Feyder in 1936 (when it

won the Grand Prix award of the French cinema), has stood the test of 11 years without showing any of the expected scars. One superficial reason why the film seems not in the least out-of-date is that it is not a modern story with modern fashions, but a so-called "costume piece"—the setting is the Netherlands under Spanish rule in the early 17th century—and a ruff or a plumed hat or an embroidered stomacher therefore looks as fresh and appropriate now as it did 11 years ago or will 11 years hence. But a deeper reason is that the film's theme is ageless and universal; for the sake of safety (as Graham Greene once pointed out) such a film may present life in fancy-dress and with a good deal of the satiric exaggeration which is a characteristic of the French cinema, but basically it is presenting life as it is.

LEST this may make *La Kermesse Héroïque* sound solemn, let me hasten to say that nothing could be further from the truth. Here is not only film-making at its finest—a clarity of style to delight the connoisseur, subtlety

of acting, beauty of settings—but here also (unless I am very much mistaken) is popular entertainment and certainly very rich fun. Indeed, I can think of nothing more honestly bawdy that has come my way on the screen: one is reminded more than once of Balzac and his *Contes Drolatiques*. Fortunately perhaps for the Censor's peace of mind, the sound-track is in French; and the sub-titles in English, though they enable you to follow the thread of the story easily, don't give very much away. But what goes on is quite plain enough for intelligent adults to see.

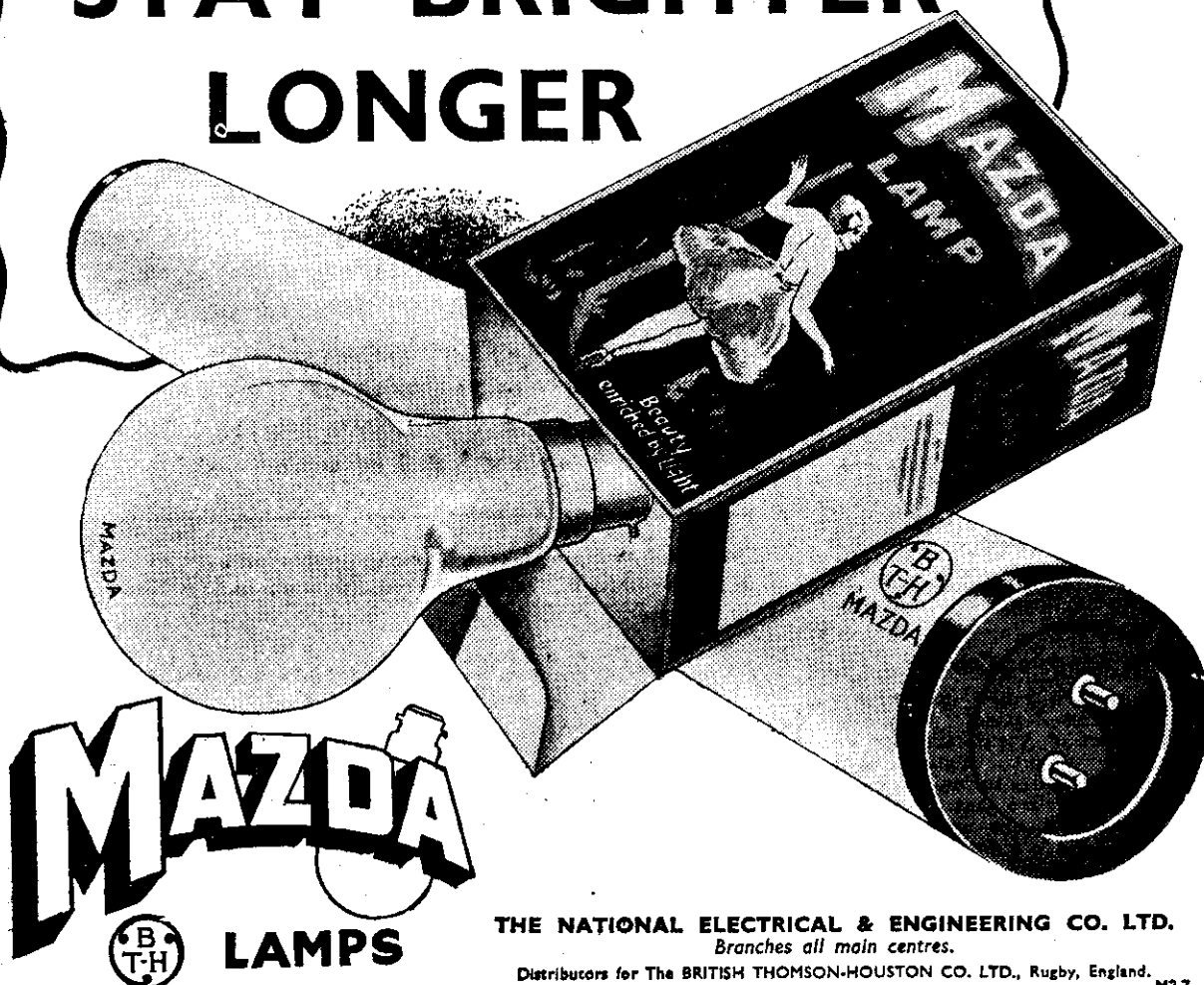
What does go on, in fact, is briefly this: Word comes to a Flemish town, which so far has escaped the terrors of Spanish invasion, that a high Spanish dignitary and his retinue of soldiers are advancing to spend the night there. The Mayor and his council and the rest of the burghers are thrown into a state of blue funk; the gallant home guard, full of fire-eating patriotism when no danger threatens, hide their weapons; and almost without exception the men of the town, remembering tales of murder, rape, and pillage, scuttle for safety and take to their beds. So later, as one might put it, do the women. But not till later. The Mayor's wife gathers the women together, tells them that since their men have deserted them they must protect themselves and their town by using feminine wiles and making a virtue of necessity. Therefore, when

the dreaded Spaniards approach, the women go out to the gates to greet them, with wine and flowers and tender glances, offering the invaders the warmest of possible welcomes. It is enough to add that passive resistance can never have succeeded better.

THIS thoroughly adult theme has been treated by Jacques Feyder with great subtlety of humour and at the same time with the most disarming frankness—a combination which, to my mind at least, rids it of offensiveness. Yet if this were nothing more than a spicy Gallic comedy I would not go out of my way, as I am possibly doing, to recommend it. There is, however, a great deal more to *La Kermesse Héroïque* than a story of women who turn the tables on men by being women. There are, for example, the performances, all of them good but outstanding in the case of Francoise Rosay, as the Mayor's wife; there is the hint of poignancy which underlies her cuckolding of her pompous, craven husband; there is even a theme of tender young romance, very innocent and charming in the midst of all the libertine conduct, between the Mayor's daughter and a youthful painter. And then there is the exquisite photography, the rich period detail of costumes and settings (many of them based on the old Flemish paintings).

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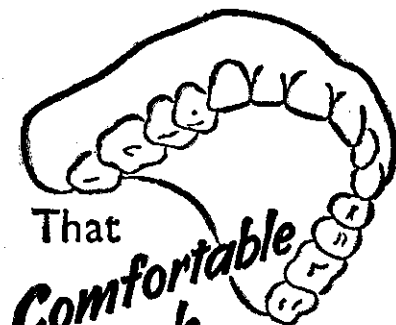
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