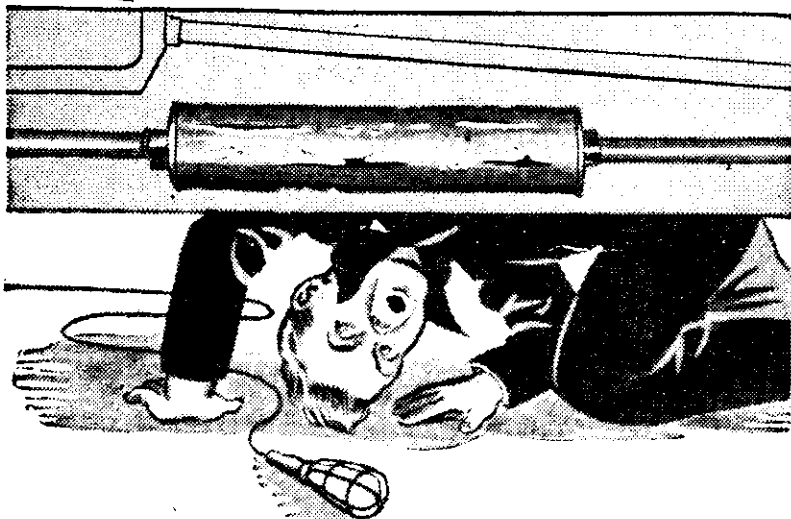


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Film Reviews by G.M.

"GREAT EXPECTATIONS"



(Rank-Cineguild)

THE British film-makers, having overcome Shakespeare and subdued Shaw, are now all set to wrestle in earnest with Dickens.

Screen versions of at least five of his novels are now either completed, under way, or projected. It is a tough assignment, for there is in Dickens a quality which resists translation to a medium normally so literal and realistic as the screen, and I would not like to predict who will have the verdict at the end of the fifth round. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that David Lean and his associates at Cineguild emerge with great credit from their first encounter. *Great Expectations* is not only good entertainment—it is also good Dickens. The only production with which one may properly compare it—and by no means to the disadvantage of the new work—is *David Copperfield*, wherein Hollywood once did an admittedly fine job.

The secret of this new British film's success is its producers' clear recognition of the fact that the essential quality of Dickens lies in his exuberance of imagination, his almost excessive piling-up of fanciful detail, so that his characters often come within an inch of being caricatures and his plots do not escape being sheer melodrama. I think it quite likely that if this story lacked the magic name, and therefore the cachet, of Dickens; if it were possible for it to be presented to us as merely the creation of some enterprising studio script-writer, a good many of us (myself probably included) would think that the author, while spinning a rattling good yarn, was putting far too big a strain on our credulity with his fantastic coincidences, his altogether too neat tying-up of loose ends. If you could look at this film cold-bloodedly, you might well think that the revelation that Estella is the long-lost child of Pip's convict benefactor, coming on top of all the other conveniently-contrived climaxes, is too much to swallow.

BUT the point is, of course, that you can't look at this film cold-bloodedly because, in the first place, Dickens wrote it, and he is a master of improbable tales; and because, in the second place, it has been transferred to the screen with the full, rich flavour of the original. It is a long time since I read *Great Expectations*, and I cannot now

be sure that the film follows the novel to the letter (one or two minor characters seem to have been dropped, and I suspect that a small liberty has been taken with the finale). But the spirit of the whole piece is undeniably and magnificently Dickensian. All the flourishes are there, both of narrative and characterisation; the settings, whether of the marshes, Miss Havisham's putrescent bridal-chamber, Mr. Jaggers's legal offices, or Pip's rooms in London, are florid and sometimes grotesque, yet authentic; the early scenes, particularly Pip's encounter with the escaped convict in the churchyard, are done in the grand manner and carry a genuine thrill; the atmosphere of mystery thereafter is, I think, sustained at least as well as Dickens himself sustained it; and surely nobody else can write dialogue so fruity, quaint, and satisfying.

The producers have, however, done much more than merely abstain from blowing the froth off the brimming tankard. As in almost all of Dickens, the characters of *Great Expectations* are larger than life-size but there is life inside them all the time: exaggeration to the point of eccentricity and even of caricature does not make them foreign to our understanding and appreciation. And this underlying vitality, this full-blooded warmth which gives the characters their validity in far-fetched situations and their durability through the years, has somehow—thank—heavens!—been retained in the acting and transferred to the screen. It is hard to know which of the cast to praise most—whether Anthony Wager and Jean Simmons for their engaging portrayals of the young Pip and Estella (though the former's accent is perhaps too cultured for the part); Francis L. Sullivan for his gargantuan portrait of Jaggers; Finlay Currie for his whole-hearted performance as Magwitch; Bernard Miles as the gentle Joe Gargery; or Martita Hunt as Miss Havisham. Portraying the grown-up Pip and Estella, John Mills and Valerie Hobson do not quite measure up to the standard of their youthful counterparts, but perhaps neither do these characters in the novel: I think it goes without arguing that the early portion of *Great Expectations* is the better.

THIS British film has, of course, its faults; but for the most part these are the faults of the original. If they (continued on next page)