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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

## SHAW IN EGYPT

### CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA

(Rank-Pascal)



A THING worth doing is worth doing well, our copy-books used to tell us. Gabriel Pascal, Arthur Rank, and the studios at

Denham have certainly done well by Bernard Shaw and his play, if by "doing well" you mean the expenditure of a million-and-a-quarter pounds sterling, two years on production, and a wartime trip with the cast to Egypt to film the story on the spot (when they got there they built a brand-new sphinx because the native varieties looked "too old"). Yet the question still remains, was the thing really worth doing? After due consideration, my answer is that I doubt if it was.

Not that *Caesar and Cleopatra* will fail to give most filmgoers their money's worth both of Technicoloured spectacle and Shavian wit—always provided they don't expect too much for their 1/6 or 2/3. The trouble is that they very well may. When a film is served up on this lavish scale, backed with this array of talent (including Shaw's) you start by expecting something which may easily not be there. Remembering *Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara*, Pascal's two previous Shavian exercises, you search for profundities and subtleties which in this case don't exist. Recalling the British cinema's triumph in *Henry V*, and against your better judgment, you hope for something comparable in the way of spectacle. And, of course, you don't get it. For as a play, *Caesar and Cleopatra* is only second-grade Shaw; while even as a spectacle it does not make very good cinema. "A gorgeous pageant in the best Hollywood tradition, with an added bonus of fine acting and Shavian wit" is how an American magazine described it. Fair enough for 1/6 or 2/3—but I think most of us who saw the film at a recent preview in Wellington, being incorrigible optimists in spite of the adverse advance reports, were hoping for something more.

BUT on one point at any rate there should be no complaint. The spectacle may get in the way of the Shaw, and sometimes the Shaw obstructs the spectacle, but so far as dialogue and stage directions go, this is—with so few changes that they make no difference—the play as it was first written. It may be unsuitable material for the cinema (I think it is) but at least you are getting exactly what Shaw wanted you to get; and that is something which can be said about the work of few authors and playwrights when transferred to the screen.

You may on seeing the film feel that it fails dismally to create any sort of genuine historical atmosphere and is, in fact, crammed full of anachronisms. But beware: for this, I think, is the very trap that Shaw wants you to fall into. If you are wise you will, before passing this sort of judgment, read or re-read the play and the notes upon it. Having done this last week-end after seeing the film, I am full of virtue and wisdom, and am in a position to remind you that Shaw admits to only one real anachronism: Cleopatra's recommendation of rum as a cure for Caesar's baldness. On the other hand, he produces plenty of ingenious

justifications for the apparently too-modern outlook and actions of his characters—so modern that it is with something of a shock that one hears the Alexandrian mob of 48 B.C. shouting "Egypt for the Egyptians." Not that Shaw in this need be taken too seriously: he was probably pulling our legs as usual when he asserted, for example, that his ancient Briton resembles a contemporary Englishman because both were the product of the English climate; but this illustrates the kind of thing you are up against in criticising Shaw. In the film, Britannus (as played by Cecil Parker with a faithfulness to the stage-directions which includes even the "drooping, hazel-coloured moustache") is undoubtedly the character who seems most amusingly out of place against an ancient Egyptian background; so much so that there are moments when one might be excused for suspecting that Shaw the Irishman wrote his play solely for the pleasure it gave him to create Britannus and to poke fun at the English through him.

THERE is, however, some difference between an anachronism and an historical inaccuracy. Even if you admit Shaw's claim that he has avoided the former, you still don't need to concede that he has been entirely guiltless of the latter. For instance, to suit his dramatic purpose, he would seem to have made Cleopatra several years younger than she actually was when she met Julius Caesar, and to have treated their relationship as a purely platonic and (on Caesar's side) determinedly avuncular one, ended by a chaste kiss on the queenly brow when the Roman galleys sailed from Alexandria—whereas there is another version of the facts which says that Cleopatra lived openly in Rome with Caesar as his mistress, bearing him a son (Caesarion), until Caesar's assassination sent her back to Egypt and, subsequently to the "strong round arms" of Mark Antony. I suppose it's really a question—probably not a very important one—of whether you choose Shaw or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as your authority.

BY far the best and most interesting feature of the film, as of the play, is the treatment of Caesar. It is a most unorthodox interpretation of the ruler of the Western world, presenting him as "greater off the battlefield than on it"—humane, cynical, genial, and highly civilised. Shaw's method of producing an impression of greatness is (so he says) to exhibit his hero, not as mortifying his nature by doing his duty, but as simply doing what he naturally wants to do. This Caesar is not a man whom one could easily love, but at least he is a man whom it would be hard to hate—for the reason that he himself is incapable of hatred. Indeed, once he has beaten his enemies, this conquering soldier is very close to being a pacifist, renowned—and often derided—for his clemency, disliking to be reminded of the occasions when he has departed from it, and doing his best in his "flippant Roman way" not to make more foes than he can help.

There is, in fact, more historical truth than is generally realised in this paradoxical portrait of the great Caesar. To

(continued on next page)

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