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## Film Reviews

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

## THE WOMAN ON THE BEACH

(RKO-Radio)

AS I came away from the theatre I overheard two members of the audience complaining bitterly that they couldn't "get the hang of it at all." Though not everybody need feel so hopelessly flummoxed, I am afraid that the general verdict on this film is likely to be unfavourable; and it would be sheer affectation to pretend that in this case popular opinion is entirely wrong. Yet though *The Woman on the Beach* is not a good film, it is in some ways an extremely interesting one—worth seeing as much for what it tries to do, and fails, as for what it succeeds in doing.

What it succeeds in doing, in fact, is to spin out an unusual triangular melodrama to an unconvincing climax against a sombre background of sea and sandhills. What it attempts, but does not quite bring off, is to suggest, in terms of film, the perverse spiritual conflict and tortuous motives of a very unhappy trio of characters. Since Jean Renoir was the director, it is to be expected that even his failure is by no means without distinction.

The three frightened or frightening people of the story are a U.S. Coast-guardman (Robert Ryan), who has not yet recovered from the psychological shock of an encounter with a mine; a beautiful and enigmatic woman (Joan Bennett) who haunts a sinister wreck on the beach and persuades him, against his will, to fall in love with her; and her equally cryptic husband (Charles Bickford), a once-great painter who has gone blind and who seems at one moment to be encouraging the coast-guard to make a cuckold of him and at the next to be a furiously jealous sadist. There is a fourth character, a nice girl (Nan Leslie) whom the coast-guard was once engaged to marry, but who is so straightforward by comparison with the others that she soon ceases to count in the development of the story, though she comes in useful again for supplying a notably unconvincing "happy ending."

Often and often Jean Renoir produces a sequence of spiritual uneasiness and mental stress far superior to that encountered in the average psychological thriller of these days. There is, for example, an expertly handled passage where the coast-guard, doubting that the painter is really blind, puts his doubt to the test on the edge of a cliff, and another of almost equal tension where the two men quarrel in a small boat in a squally sea. But too often there is an effect of mere artiness; and sometimes the director, straining to be cryptic, manages merely to be ambiguous or confused.

—G.M.

## LES ENFANTS DU PARADIS

(Pathé-Tricolore)

WHEN it was released in Paris just after the Liberation, *Les Enfants du Paradis* aroused an interest more lively than that shown in any French film for a long time; and one has little doubt, after seeing the picture at an Auckland

preview, that—provided sufficient people overcome the current prejudice against foreign films—it will also be widely talked about and enjoyed here.

In France some of the interest was doubtless caused by the length of the film, its long and costly production and spectacular crowd scenes; just as in Britain such facts of production roused interest in, and controversy about, Pascal's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. But by the time the film had crossed the Channel and the Atlantic and now the Pacific, these details had become immaterial and critics were prepared to judge the result. Serious commentators have regarded the film as important. C. A. Lejeune, in the London *Observer*, spoke of it as "the crown of the French cinema" and recommended it to "anyone who relishes fine performance, exact dialogue, magnificent manipulation, and an honest, if fatalistic, groping toward a philosophy." Other critics, both British and American, have been more sparing in their praise, one suggesting that Marcel Carné, the producer, drowned himself beneath the "superabundance of photogenic material, sets, costumes and extras, (and the) waves of dialogue."

THE idea behind the film might well have been suggested by Shakespeare's oft-quoted line "All the world's a stage." The setting is the theatrical quarter of Paris near the Boulevard du Temple something more than a century ago, and the film depicts the interweaving of two dramas—that of real life and that played out on the stage. In a sense these two themes are epitomised in the characters of the actor Frederic Lemaître (Pierre Brasseur), who welcomes a turn in his love affairs which causes him jealousy, for it enables him to play Othello; and the assassin Lacenaire (Marcel Herrand), who finds his drama in real life.

By contrast, in the part of the mime Baptiste Debureau (Jean-Louis Barrault), the intertwining of the two dramas is clearly seen. Baptiste lives out his life to the full and plays his stage character no less completely, but we are shown in remarkable fashion the effect of his off-stage life upon his acting, and, to a lesser extent, that of his acting upon his fortunes in real life.

The miming sequences are among the most memorable of any I have seen in recent years. At the beginning of his stage career, Baptiste explains to Lemaître that he wants to make the audience cry as well as make them laugh, and with the two mimes describing an unsuccessful attempt at suicide and the unsuccessful wooing of a statue (in both of which one sees the influence of real-life drama) this is achieved.

EVEN if there were nothing else of merit in the film it would be worth sitting out the remainder of the two and three-quarter hours for the sake of these sequences. But, of course, there are other points to its credit. The love scenes are such as to make the standard

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