

THE DIVINE OSCAR

AN IDEAL HUSBAND

(Korda-London Films)

TECHNICOLOUR photography used with dignity and good taste, sumptuous settings, inspired work in the wardrobe department by Cecil Beaton, polished acting, and the wit of Oscar Wilde himself combine to make *An Ideal Husband* as satisfying to the eye and ear as any motion picture I have seen since the year began. That it is not so satisfying to the intellect is Oscar Wilde's fault, if it is anyone's—and he would repudiate with scorn the suggestion that realism or didactic purpose are any concern of the artist.

Indeed, for anyone embarking on the review of a Wilde play it must be a circumstance of some comfort that Mr. Wilde himself is no longer here to answer criticism with the public evisceration of its author. But those philistines who, thus fortified against their own pusillanimity, find grounds for complaint in the artificiality of the plot (it almost dislocates the long arm of coincidence) and unreality of the characters, have already been answered. As Wilde wrote of another group of his characters, "If they existed they would not be worth writing about. The function of the artist is to invent, not to chronicle. There are no such people. If there were I would not write about them. Life by its realism is always spoiling the subject-matter of art. The supreme pleasure in literature is to realise the non-existent."

That was reason enough for Oscar Wilde. For most film-goers, however, the supreme pleasure of *An Ideal Husband* will be the wit of its more inconsequential passages. There is no escaping the fact that the realism of life undoubtedly spoils the more melodramatic moments, with their emotional artificiality and dated sentiments, and that Sir Robert Chiltern—the ideal husband whose honour is rooted in dishonour—is thereby a personage of considerably less interest than the sophisticated dandy, Lord Goring. Even in the original play, Goring is favoured by Wilde's best lines, and in adapting the text for the screen a slight change in the sequence of scenes and some wholesome sub-editing of the heavier passages give him an added prominence which is all to the good.

In most departments, though, the film follows closely the detail of the play. It makes a tentative move out of doors—to Hyde Park corner and Rotten Row—but speedily retreats to its proper environment indoors, and sticks fairly closely thereafter to the original stage-directions. So far as I could judge, the settings—which are luxurious to a degree rarely seen on the screen—have been devised to conform both to the general style of the period (1895) and to the specific direction of the author, even to the placing of tapestries and chandeliers, but I gained the impression that Mr. Beaton, giving rein perhaps to a personal foible, had gowned the women in Edwardian rather than Victorian fashions. Whatever they are,

BAROMETER

FINE: "An Ideal Husband."
DULL: "The Two Mrs. Carrolls."

however, they will not fail to delight most women who see them—for their voluminous and unrationed opulence, if for nothing else.

Indeed, I feel that the choice of Miss Goddard for the part is more than justified by her performance. She has just the necessary air of difference to contrast effectively with the patrician dignity of Diana Wynyard, while an individuality of accent and a slight exaggeration in dress combine to bear out Wilde's rather shavian description of her as "a work of art, but showing the influence of too many schools."

Of the other players, Michael Wilding and Glynis Johns are outstanding. The former, as Lord Goring, has, of course, the advantage of a preponderance of good lines and it is only when he is being serious that he is in danger of being dull. That, in all fairness, is not entirely his fault. Glynis Johns, as Mabel Chiltern, has no such disadvantage to incommode her and her performance is, I think, as good as it could be. But the mention of these two is not intended to suggest that the other members of the cast fail to reach a high standard. The acting is almost all that could be desired, but it is properly subordinated to the communication of the dialogue, for however excellent the players, and however luxuriously Mr. Beaton has clothed them, it is the dialogue that counts.

THE TWO MRS. CARROLLS

(Warner Bros.)

PARANOIA rears its tired head once again in this melodramatic tale of a uxorious painter (Humphrey Bogart) who has formed the distressing habit of poisoning his wives (by lacing their bedtime glass of milk with a jigger of arsenic) once he has drained them of all artistic inspiration. The film makes strenuous attempts to suggest that it is Mr. Bogart's genius which has driven him to this particular form of homicidal lunacy—that if Van Gogh could cut off his ear Mr. Bogart is simply carrying the process a logical step forward in cutting off his wives. Personally, I got the impression that it was the strain of trying to act like an artist which really drove Mr. Bogart crackers. Besides driving him to kill his wives, Mr. Bogart's particular neurosis also leads him to paint their portraits, once the arsenic is working properly, and title them *The Angel of Death*. It is the second Mrs. Carroll's discovery of *Angel of Death* Mark II. which touches off the grand climax of the film. I won't deny that the climax may be exciting enough for some filmgoers, but those who read the *New Yorker*, and who notice the unfortunate resemblance which the portrait bears to the Vampire Woman of the Chas. Addams jokes, will find the climax somewhat bathetic, if not downright funny. I just laughed and laughed.

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