

RED LETTERS AND WHITE STONES

WITH the publication of the last issue of *The Listener*, the caretaker administration in this department completed its first twelve months of office and, by all the precedents and conventions which govern the business of film-reviewing, the time has now come for the auditing of the annual accounts.

For a number of reasons I am glad of the excuse to pause and take stock. Having sat through 109 films in 52 weeks, I would be glad simply to pause, but the year has been a pretty good one—there have, I think, been rather more red letters and white stones than usual—and since a number of the better films are still going the rounds a brief survey now may help some listeners to plan their holiday entertainment to greater advantage.

Of course, the extent of that advantage will depend upon the degree of coincidence which exists between our tastes, but I imagine that anyone who has bothered to read this page at all consistently will by now be familiar enough with my idiosyncracies to make any necessary corrections.

ONE point I would like to stress before passing to an examination of the more outstanding films of the year is that in some cases (a few only) I have been sufficiently impressed by the intent of a film-theme, by its moral value if you like, to grade it higher than would have been justified on technical or artistic grounds alone. Conversely in one or two instances I have dealt more harshly, some might think, with a film which was technically or artistically satisfying but which I felt lacked substance.

Those who are interested in films solely as an art form will condemn me (and with some justice) for importing into the business of criticism considerations superfluous, if not downright antipathetic, to aesthetic judgment. But I am not solely interested in films as an art form. It has been said with some justice that in New Zealand film-going comes second only to tea-drinking as a social activity. It is equally true that a majority of New Zealanders absorb films as automatically and uncritically as they absorb tea, and in these circumstances the discussion of films on aesthetic grounds alone would in these unsettled times imply a reprehensible lack of social responsibility.

A recent example of a film which was recommended for its good intentions rather than for its quality was *Gentlemen's Agreement*. In this case, I was not greatly impressed by the acting, and still less by the treatment of the theme, but I felt (and still feel) that the mere statement of the Jewish problem was something worthwhile. In the dust and din coming from the trouble in Palestine there was a danger that we might forget one of the original causes of that unrest. *Gentlemen's Agreement*, however slick and superficial it was in other respects, did get us back to a basic and unpalatable truth.

Of the converse process, the only example I can recall offhand was that of *Children of the Sea*, Cocteau's modern version of the Tristan legend, directed by Jean Delannoy. Though this picture was beautifully photographed and in some scenes superbly acted, the story—with its half-baked Nietzschean philosophy—was as solemn a piece of humbug as ever came out of Hollywood.

NO such moral considerations, however, affected the placing of the best films of the year. Out of the total of 109, 13 were graded as fine, i.e., first-class. Of these, two (*Kameradschaft* and *Nanook of the North*) were reissues of old films which I saw under Film Society auspices and which have not been released commercially, though I did hear that the Flaherty film might be released for general exhibition. The other eleven are listed below, with the dates on which they were reviewed. Having graded them all A1 I do not propose to screen them still further, but it's a free country, and those readers who don't want to vote the full ticket can get to work with their ballot-pencils.

The Stranger (19.12.47).
Odd Man Out (16.1.48).
The Best Years of Our Lives (13.2.48).
An Ideal Husband (11.6.48).
The Baker's Wife (25.6.48).
Monsieur Verdoux (2.7.48).
The Well-digger's Daughter (9.7.48).
Pastoral Symphony (27.8.48).
Hamlet (17.9.48).
Open City (24.9.48).
Oliver Twist (10.12.48).

I WOULD like to recall some of the individual excellences of these films; I would like even more to discuss the significance of the European element, in the year's entertainment, but space is short and any discussion along these lines must be deferred at least for the time being. Besides, I want to expand the record to include those films which I classed as above average, though falling short of excellence. There were 18 of these—add them to the 13 first-class films and the aggregate represents nearly 30 per cent. of the grand total. And that is not a bad return whatever way you look at it. Here are the 18—all were graded fair-to-fine:

The Man Within (19.12.47); *School for Secrets* (26.12.47); *Theirs is the Glory* (5.3.48); *Captain Boycott* (12.3.48); *Life with Father* (9.4.48); *The Upturned Glass* (16.4.48); *Call Northside 777* (30.4.48); *Sitting Pretty* (14.5.48); *Bush Christmas* (21.5.48); *Temptation Harbour* (28.5.48); *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (4.6.48); *The End of the River* (9.7.48); *Cage of Nightingales* (23.7.48); *Naked City* (20.8.48); *Mine Own Executioner* (10.9.48); *Lady from Shanghai* (8.10.48); *The Paradise Case* (29.10.48); *Gentlemen's Agreement* (12.11.48).

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