

The Practical Saint

MONSIEUR VINCENT

(Robert Kapferer Productions)

MANY things surprised and delighted me in *Monsieur Vincent*, but what delighted me most (though it hardly surprised me) about this French film on the life of St. Vincent de Paul was the contrast it afforded in theme, atmosphere, characterisation and every other respect, with the vulgar emotionalism and perverted sentimentality of many of Hollywood's so-called "religious" productions. *Monsieur Vincent* is a good film, and it would be pleasant to believe that by the force of example it might be the cause of good in others—though one would, I suspect, require the faith of *Monsieur Vincent* himself to believe that. Simple, uncomplicated virtue is not dramatised easily, and the commercial producers will no doubt still find it less exacting to rely upon that trace of original sin in all of us which finds depravity more engrossing than goodness.

It is only fair to point out, however, that *Monsieur Vincent* was not precisely a commercial production. The director-producer (Maurice Cloche) secured the money he needed through the agency of a Catholic organisation—the *Office Familial de Documentation Artistique*—which formed a "Monsieur Vincent Association" to back the production. But with the freedom so obtained he has made a film of uncompromising honesty and deep religious feeling—and that in spite of the almost complete absence from it of the forms and ceremonies of religion. Absent, too, are almost all the conventional devices of drama. Around the central figure the minor characters are for the most part barely sketched in, though in one or two cases (Richelieu, for example) a remarkable vitality has been produced with the most economical treatment. No sub-plot distracts attention from the principal theme or affords momentary relief from it; no personal adversary stands in opposition to the heroic figure of the priest, only the vast anonymous misery of the poor.

Yet from the first scene *Monsieur Vincent* is alive with drama and the sense of conflict, the physical conflict which *Monsieur Vincent* wages unceasingly against poverty, misery, squalor, disease, and hunger among the poor, the equally protracted conflict against social prejudice and indifference, and a more perilous conflict within himself. For this most practical of all the saints was an accomplished man of affairs, a notable figure in the society of his day, the confidant of royalty, one who, in fact, might easily have accomplished much by remote control (for he was an organiser of genius) and avoided too close a contact with the hungry and the diseased. And one who might also have succumbed to the sins of soft living and spiritual pride.

Some critics have condemned an episodic quality in *Monsieur Vincent*, and it is true that the scene shifts swiftly, and frequently, from court to country parish, to castle, to slum, to the galleys, and back to court again. But these changes of scene are not simply introduced for dramatic contrast, though

BAROMETER

FINE: "Monsieur Vincent."
MAINLY FAIR: "Station West."

the contrast is at times shocking enough. Nor are they just changes in direction, as *Monsieur Vincent* moves from one field of service to another. Each is also a time of spiritual crisis and inner struggle.

It was this quality of development in the central character which seemed to me the supreme virtue of the picture. Were I a Frenchman I might hesitate in apportioning the credit for this between the scriptwriter (Jean Anouilh) and the actor (Pierre Fresnay). The English sub-titles are as good as subtitles could be, but not even a completely English dubbing could, I believe, do justice to some passages in the script. But since I was relying on my eye rather than my ear, it was Pierre Fresnay all the way. He was *Monsieur Vincent*; not a gesture or an inflexion was without significance. Other characters may have been two-dimensional; he was not only three-dimensional, he was solidly flesh and blood.

STATION WEST

(RKO-Radio)

LAST time I saw Dick Powell he was a U.S. Army secret service agent searching Saigon for an escaped Nazi war criminal. In this latest act of violence he still has the same job, and though the scene has now become the Wild West in the 1870's the set-up is substantially the same. There are one or two variations in the pattern. One is Agnes Moorehead, who seems to have wandered on to the set by mistake and appears ill at ease in such barbarous company. Another is Jane Greer, Mr. Powell's demon lover, who dies uncomfortably from a gunshot wound in the stomach. But the big scratch-as-scratch-can fist-fight is (as usual) the highlight of the show. There are times when I wish that I could absorb as much punishment as Mr. Powell. This was one of them.



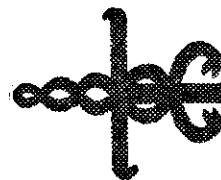
PIERRE FRESNAY
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