

Murder as a Fine Art

ROPE

(Warner)

SO successful was the advance publicity about *Rope*'s technical virtuosity that it appears a little disappointing in the screening, although anyone with an interest in the technical side of film-making should make a point of seeing it, to study the effects of Alfred Hitchcock's celebrated "ten-minute take." The 80-minute screen play is photographed in eight reels of continuous action—that is to say, there is not a single cut in the whole thing, apart from where one reel joins on to the next. This is unusual, but not a revolutionary device. Hitchcock has discarded the conventional method in which numbers of short fragmentary shots are fused together in the cutting-room into scenes and sequences to form one complete piece of narrative. Instead, the camera follows the actors continuously around the room in which most of the action takes place, rather like a silent witness at an absorbing though somewhat gruesome melodrama.

This makes for a total effect less artificial than in a normally-produced film. There are none of the close-ups, flashbacks, or montages that are used in orthodox direction to heighten the visual intensity of the drama. Consequently dramatic sharpness has to be obtained in other ways—by more sustained acting by the players, more deliberate planning of each word or gesture's significance beforehand, and more subtle use of the camera itself. It glides rapidly about the set, following now one performer and now another, or watching the unusual behaviour of one while it listens to the conversation of others just outside the range of vision.

The plot will be familiar to those who have read Patrick Hamilton's play. Two precocious undergraduates decide to kill a friend, principally (in the film) to prove their superiority to him. They pop the strangled body in a large coffin-like chest, and as a final touch ("the signature of the artist," the chief murderer calls it) serve supper off it to the boy's father, fiancée, and friends. Brandon, the youth who conceives this exquisite piece of devilry, is played with just the right touch of smug depravity

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "*Rope*."
FAIR: "*Little Women*."

by John Dall. His companion Philip (played by Farley Granger), a less hardened aesthete who goes to pieces under James Stewart's questioning, is not so well portrayed.

Stewart himself is the former house-master at whose academic door the whole business must eventually be laid, since it was the influence of his Nietzschean theorising that led the egotistical Brandon to carry out his little scheme. "Murder is, or should be," the latter says, "an art. The power to kill can be just as satisfying as the power to create." The murder is thus made to appear not so much an experiment in effete sensation as a masterpiece of depraved artistry—a masterpiece that doesn't come off. Stewart is unfortunate in that he had such rabid pupils, but their act is not his responsibility, as he realises when he fires the shots which summon society to mete out their due punishment. In an intense but over-declamatory denunciation he states that there must have been something already rotten about the characters of the two young men which led them to translate his theories into such morbid practice, a course which no normal person would dream of taking. (A friend of mine basely suggested that the film would have been more psychologically interesting if he had fallen in with their plans, although the plot would then have been much more difficult to resolve.)

Rope is undoubtedly a technical tour de force, although I found the transitions from one reel to the next disconcertingly abrupt (this may have been a fault in the projection room) and the opening shot, showing the murder actually being committed, seemed a dramatic flaw. The obvious conclusion is that the devices used here are suited only to a very special type of screen play, and are unlikely to be repeated by other directors. Incidentally, it may be worth mentioning to those interested in these things that the bizarre little melody played by Philip on the piano is the first of Francis Poulenc's *Trois Mouvements Perpetuels*.

LITTLE WOMEN

(M.G.M.)

LOUISA M. ALCOTT'S romantic tale of domestic morals and manners in mid-19th Century America has again been filmed, this time with June Allyson as the hoydenish Jo, Elizabeth Taylor as Amy, Margaret O'Brien as Beth, Janet Leigh as Meg, and Mary Astor as Marmee. There is nothing much in it of course, apart from its warm tenderness, soft laughter, and a good cry in just about every reel. Most of the matronly bodies in my row seemed to have a spare handkerchief ready for the occasion (perhaps it was their second or third sitting) and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. This sort of picture would seem to provide a much needed catharsis for the harassed housewife in these days of tribulation and films (like *Rope*) produced for more robust sensibilities. The Technicolor is rather good too.



JOHN DALL

"Just the right touch of smug depravity"

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