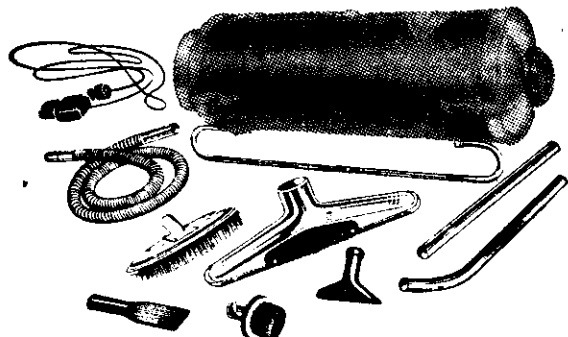


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Film Reviews, by Jno.

SHOCK TREATMENT

THE SET-UP

(RKO-Radio)

MOST film reviewers are occasionally troubled by the thought (which no doubt pesters literary and theatrical critics as well) that any forthright condemnation of what is artistically meretricious and morally rotten tends to defeat its own object. The converse experience is a good deal rarer, but there were times during the screening of *The Set-Up* when I wondered (rather dazedly) if the emotional turbulence it aroused did not partake largely of the brutality and sadism which the film implicitly condemns. The feeling had passed before the film ended (its moral literally hammered home), but as I walked out with the rest of a rather subdued audience I felt in thorough agreement with the Censor—this is a film which *should* be recommended to adults, but it is a good deal too strong for immature minds.

But though it does hammer home a moral, and though it is a film which employs violent means to condemn violence, it is by no means unsubtle. I do not recall a single waste line of dialogue, and there was hardly a shot in the whole 6620 feet of it which lacked inner meaning and significance. Even the length of the film appeared to have been planned as part of the dramatic pattern. The first frames which appear on the screen include a clock-face showing the time as 9.5 p.m. and in the final fadeout the clock appears again, showing 10.25 on the same evening—the same interval as has elapsed since the picture began.

Each of the eighty minutes between those two points in time is as inextricably part of the dramatic pattern as the clock-faces are. Superficially the film is the story of the last fight of Stoker McDonald, an ageing professional who is still struggling for the title-bout which has so far eluded him. But without benefit of flashback or recapitulation of any sort one learns, as well, just about everything there is to learn of Stoker and his

BAROMETER

FINE: "The Set-Up."

DULL: "The Bad Lord Byron."

kind in the particular environment which prize-fighting has created in the United States. Yet even this is not the main theme of the film. Robert Wise, whose direction seemed to me superb in every respect, has reserved his bitterest comment for the prizefight audience. *The Set-Up* is essentially a study of mob hysteria and perverted emotion. Stoker McDonald and his opponent slug and stagger their way through four of the most shockingly savage rounds I have seen on the screen, but the real brutality is outside the ring, not within it. The animal howl of the crowd is an almost continuous background to the film and the sudden glimpses of screeching women and shouting men as the camera turned from the ring and probed round the banked seats of the Paradise City Athletic Club produced a reaction in the film audience which could be both heard and felt. No doubt it was good for our souls—disgust, I suppose, can purge them as effectively as pity or terror—but it was shock treatment.

But even in the act of recoil one could not help admiring the astuteness of the direction and the first-class quality of the photography (handled by Milton Krasner). In modifying the unity-of-time convention to make the duration of the action coincide precisely with the duration of the edited film, the director has achieved a formidable realism which more than balances a certain conventionality in the drawing of several of the minor characters. Working to the clock, too, has produced dramatic variations in the pace and rhythm of the picture which would have been difficult to achieve by other means. But all the credit does not belong to the executive branch. As Stoker McDonald, Robert Ryan should win golden opinions even if the big purses have eluded him; in the part of his faithful wife, Audrey Totter, is an admirable foil; and of a covey of interesting minor players George Tobias rates a mention for his portrayal of Stoker's shifty manager. *The Set-Up* is no doubt regarded by the Trade as a B-grade show (it lasted a week in Wellington), but Academy Awards have been given for less.

THE BAD LORD BYRON

(Rank-Sydney Box)

I have no doubt that Byron was by some standards bad (think of what he wrote about Scots reviewers), but surely not bad enough to deserve this sorry exhumation. It spares him nothing—the old flashback routine, the celestial courtroom, the gaffer quotations and the inevitable fatuities—they are all there. The cast contains good names (Mai Zetterling, Joan Greenwood, Sonia Holm, Dennis Price, Denis O'Dea), but I have seldom seen competent players more woefully misused.



ROBERT RYAN

"The real brutality is outside the ring"