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Film Reviews, by P.J.W.

Not Quite a Masterpiece

THE PASSIONATE FRIENDS

(Rank—Eagle-Lion)

A TEAR or two has been shed in Britain because this film, which was made by one of the most brilliant teams that could be assembled in the country, did not turn out the masterpiece it might have been. It was directed by David Lean, who has made some of the best British films in recent years (including *Great Expectations* and *Brief Encounter*), scripted by Eric Ambler (*The Mask of Dimitrios*, etc.), with music composed by Richard Addinsell and played by the Philharmonia Orchestra under Muir Mathieson, and acted by Trevor Howard, Ann Todd, and Claude Rains. The film is based on H. G. Wells's novel, and no expense seems to have been spared to make it a top-notch production.

It is a good film, exciting, romantic, and richly composed, but judged by its own high standards it is a little disappointing. The fault is largely David Lean's, and an interesting parallel can be drawn between this picture and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*. Both directors were so obsessed with the way they were telling their story that they let the story itself slip momentarily out of their grasp. In terms of pure cinema some of the scenes in *The Passionate Friends* are brilliantly conceived—notably in the skilful intercutting that heightens the suspense while Claude Rains is watching the lake through his binoculars, unaware that the lovers are there in a speedboat, or the scene where he gazes at the two empty seats in the theatre while the sound-track blares forth the noisy inanities of the picture they were supposed to be seeing. Or there is the climactic scene where she goes down into the deserted underground station to throw herself under a train, or the earlier quarrel among the three of them. Individually these are superb scenes, but somehow they do not add up to a completely triumphant whole.

Technique has become an obsession with Lean in this film and at times it is



ANN TODD

From the Alps to the Underground

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "The Passionate Friends."
DULL: "The Great Gatsby."

rather hackneyed technique at that. Thus the shots of telephone lines while operators talk in foreign tongues is a trick unworthy of the film, and another weakness is the needlessly confusing flashback technique used during the first few reels.

Yet the occasional stilted effect shouldn't blind one to the film's real qualities. The photography is consistently good, with effective use of spot-lighted close-ups of Ann Todd. There are impressive settings too, especially in the Swiss Alps, where the lovers go up by funicular almost to the roof of the world.

This incident is the crux of the film. When the two passionate friends—they had been lovers before she married Rains, and had also had a brief *affaire* ten years ago when her husband was away on a diplomatic mission—spend an innocent day in the mountains talking over old times, Rains mistakenly sues for divorce, and from there things move rapidly to the climax. It is inevitable that *The Passionate Friends* will be compared with *Brief Encounter*, because of the strong similarity in plot, because it has the same director, and because Trevor Howard appears in an almost identical role. But whereas *Brief Encounter* was told with directness and restraint, the glossy romanticism of *The Passionate Friends* doesn't make up for the qualities of simplicity and grace which it has nonchalantly thrown overboard.

THE GREAT GATSBY

(Paramount)

A SOMEWHAT pathetic production, *The Great Gatsby* manages to be almost wholly bad because it naively purports to be what it is not—a faithful transcript of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. The Alan Ladd fans who rolled up to see their hero in another gangster role must have been pretty puzzled by his going all soft on that dame Daisy (Betty Field), while any Fitzgerald fans who misguidedly came along can have endured it only if they were great enthusiasts. For the spirit giveth life, but the letter killeth.

NATIONAL FILM UNIT

WEEKLY Review No. 433, issued by the National Film Unit for the week beginning December 23, features the following: "Model Steam Engines," filmed in Dunedin at the Otago Model Engineering Society's ground, where on a multi-gauge track perfect model railway engines run, with adults and children riding behind; "Ice Cream Manufacture," which takes the audience through an ice cream factory; "Lupin Cutter," a demonstration of a machine that makes short work of the lupin pest; and "Vacuum Cleaners," which shows the intricate work that goes into making a useful household article.