

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

Film Reviews

By G.M.



THE PROUD VALLEY

(Capad)

In Director Pen Tennyson, Capad Films have a man whose name is beginning to look interesting in that often wearying rigmarole that precedes the screening of a film. Capad Films are not by some standards a large company—if they were, the story has it that Robeson would not work with them—but they have a few large ideas. In this film Tennyson, with Robeson's help, has put one of them across with great success.

Tennyson handles common people uncommonly well. In the Welsh types he assembled for "The Proud Valley" he found material ready for an expert hand. And his people remain common people on the screen. He treats his story and his cast with a directness and simplicity which is completely refreshing.

The story is the story of a Welsh mining village. There is an accident in the mine. It is closed. Poverty strikes the miners and their families. War comes to Britain and the directors agree to the plea of the men that they shall be

allowed to undertake the possibly dangerous task of opening the sealed shafts. They do the job, but not until lives have been lost in a cave-in of the shaft and during the dramatic escape of the workers.

The singing of the Welsh is all through the picture, and over it all comes the splendid bass of Robeson.

But Robeson is not everything. Tennyson has given him as much of the picture as was due to him, but he is no giant out of place among lesser players. Edward Chapman is the father of the boy (Simon Lack) who is in love with the girl (Janet Johnson). These and all the others of the cast have a ring of truth and sincerity about them. With Tennyson's vigorous direction they fit into a picture that has just about everything but chorus girls' legs; and somehow they don't seem to be missed.

There is nothing more to be said about "The Proud Valley" than that it is a picture which no one should miss who can crawl or be carried to the nearest theatre showing it.

LA CHARRETTE FANTOME

(Columbia)

In the enthusiasm of the moment, after having seen the French production "La Charrette Fantome," I wrote a rhapsody to the effect that it was the best film ever made. Remembering, however, the famous comment of a sub-editor on a reporter's panegyric, "If that's what you write about this, what would you do if you had to write up the Day of Judgment?" I'll content myself with saying that I can't remember a picture which impressed me more.

Much has been written about the art of the cinema—in fact, probably more rubbish has been spouted about it than about any other art form. But if any films are destined to live, this one will be among them. There are, I suppose, faults—but then you will find split infinitives in great literature. What makes the film great is not easy to define. Julien Duvivier, director of "Un Carnet de Bal," and many other famous French films, made it; and critics have told you already what his powers are—a touch as delicate yet direct as a pianissimo passage by Menuhin; an uncanny control of a wide diversity of elements, the gift

of bringing everything out of his players, of working up a scene through infinitely varied shades to a climax like the crescendo in a symphony.

In Duvivier's handling of climax, one scene stands out — the scene which takes place in a Salvation Army hostel, jammed with poor people, drunkards, vagabonds, light-hearted ladies, thieves and beggars, when, under the increasing fervour of a hymn, first one and then another wretch detaches himself from the mob to declare his sins. There are other scenes in drinking shop and cabaret which have such a quality of naturalness and realism that the whole picture almost breaks the confines of the screen and sweeps into the theatre.

The result of all this is that here, one can truly say, is a picture which has captured the image of a people, which throws open a cross-section of French life.

The title gives half the story — it means "The Phantom Waggon." The setting is the poor district of a French provincial town, where the Salvation Army works to help the miserable out-of-works and poor folk. The theme: An old legend, which says that when a person is nearing death, the creaking wheels of a phantom waggon are heard, until the dead one is gently gathered into its ghostly shape. The story is of David Holm, out-of-work and embittered, without either faith or hope; of gentle Sister Edith, who wants so much to help him; and of his final regeneration.

These two extremely difficult roles are taken by Pierre Fresnay and Micheline Francey. With acting that might almost be described as inspired, they portray two people who are externally wholly different, yet actually near to one another. But one should not single out characters, for, as in most French pictures, the director has successfully avoided any concession to a "star" system. The dialogue is in French; but the English sub-titles, while necessarily brief, are excellent and clear.

There! I started this review with the express intention of avoiding a panegyric, and on looking over what I have written, I find that is just what I have not done! Which does at least say a lot for the picture.

—E. de M.

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