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Film Reviews By G. M.

GOD AND GUNPOWDER



WENDY HILLER
"What price salvation now?"



G. B. SHAW
Fireworks all the way

MAJOR BARBARA

(Pascal—20th Century—Fox)

FROM this film of Shaw's play I came away (as I hope you will, too) with the feeling of having been stimulated and vastly entertained—more* stimulated perhaps than by *Pygmalion* and equally as well entertained. If the little man on the left who expresses our feelings could with propriety stand on his seat to applaud he would do so. But behind this enthusiasm there was a slight, nagging dissatisfaction, a sort of mild intellectual toothache. Brilliant as the film had been, erupting all through with Shavian fireworks, there seemed to be something just a little bit out of balance somewhere. So last week-end I read the original play, in the hope of getting to the root of the trouble. And I think I found it: in the fact that Major Barbara was written in 1905 and that this is 1941 and we are at war. For although Shaw's chief message in the play was, and still is, that poverty is the worst of crimes, Andrew Undershaft was, and still is, the dominating character—and Mr. Undershaft is an armaments-maker of great wealth and power. Now the philosophy of an armaments-maker in 1941 can hardly remain the same as in 1905 (or rather it cannot be expressed with quite the same ruthlessness and callous impartiality). It is surprising perhaps that so much can still be said so freely in the film about the trade in "mutilation and murder"; but the sharp edges of the conflict between God and gunpowder have been blurred over, and whereas the 1905-model Undershaft was preaching, among other things, the overthrow of the existing social order by the common people armed with Undershaft machine-guns, the "true faith of an armourer" in these present times has acquired a strange new respectability and Andrew Undershaft has become a patriotic collaborator with Mr. Ernest Bevin in the drive for munitions. Also, when the ex-Major Barbara of the Salvation Army and her fiancé, the Professor of Greek, are converted from moral to physical re-

armament and link up with the cannon-factory, their justification that they are going to "make war on war" seems even more specious than before. Leaving moral judgments right out of it, there always was this structural weakness in the play, that the main theme of poverty as the worst sin of all was obscured by the more spectacular God-and-Gunpowder theme; and this weakness is emphasised in the film. The times have thrown the dramatic structure even further out of joint, and so the solution of the dilemma remains intellectually unsatisfying.

HOWEVER, I must not make too much of this. It isn't as if some clever Hollywood producer had been trying to improve on Bernard Shaw, for Mr. Shaw not only wrote the scenario and dialogue for this film but also provided 30 new scenes and supervised the direction. So if there is anything wrong, Mr. Shaw must take the blame, as I've no doubt he can. He must also take the credit for one of the greatest treats which intelligent picture-goers have ever had provided for them. It is probable that *Pygmalion* will prove the more popular film at the box-office, for *Pygmalion* was really just a Shavian variation on the local-girl-makes-good motif, which audiences adore, whereas *Major Barbara* contains a good deal more intellectual meat and several pretty deep themes. I am not going to say that one picture has been better acted or produced than the other, for it is fatally easy to forget the virtues of an early success in enthusiasm for those of a new; but I can quite honestly say that *Major Barbara* could hardly have been better acted or produced than it is. Gabriel Pascal, the shrewd little Transylvanian, who won Mr. Shaw's tough old heart and the screen rights to his plays a year or so back, has provided settings in the London slums and the Undershaft munitions-factory, which are both horribly realistic and salutary; but he has also adhered to the Shavian technique of collecting the characters together at intervals for Mr. Shaw to pour out, through the mouth of one of them, his coruscating satire on

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