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Film Review by G.M.

DISNEY'S "FANTASIA"

THE other day my wife and I were recalling the Russian ballet and we agreed (unanimously) that, although it had seemed wanton extravagance at the time, we had reason to be grateful now that we had gone to every programme of the ballet during its New Zealand tour because, as things (i.e. the war) had turned out, we would probably never have the chance again. As Noel Coward might have put it, "No, no, they can't take that away from us." I have something of the same feeling, though in a modified form, about Disney's *Fantasia*. For the special purpose (well, partly) of seeing this much-heralded film, I made a trip at Labour Day week-end to Christchurch, where for some reason it has had its Dominion premiere. Just as it would have been better to have seen the original Russian ballet in Moscow instead of on an inadequate Wellington stage, so it would, of course, have been better to have seen *Fantasia* at its original American release, with all the benefit of that elaborate extra equipment of transmitters and amplifiers which worked, so I am assured by one who *did* see it then, a miracle of sound reproduction. But we make the best of what we can get, and in the present case I have as little reason to regret my pilgrimage to Christchurch on an overcrowded ferry last week as I have to regret those extravagant nights at the ballet some years back.

THE comparison with the ballet extends even further, to the picture itself. For my theory is that Disney (with Leopold Stokowski as sorcerer's apprentice) is here trying to evolve a form of cinematic ballet for the masses. Whether the masses want it is, of course, another matter; but Disney's pitiless burlesque of orthodox choreography in the "Dance of the Hours" episode seems to bear out my theory. It is said that many people walk out of *Fantasia* before the end and I've no doubt they do, though on the evening I was there the only persons whom I noticed leaving the theatre were a soldier and his girl, from the row in front who obviously hadn't gone there for the primary purpose of seeing any picture, let alone *Fantasia*. Apart from such amorists, and musical highbrows like the man who confessed that on seeing *Fantasia* he felt a little like those who prefer a book without illustrations — apart from such semi-legitimate deserters, I imagine that the only people likely to leave before the end are those with trams to catch (the film takes nearly two and a-half hours to run) and those who would be likely to walk out of a ballet performance. Only in the latter instance they would probably not bother to go to ballet in the first place, knowing something of what to expect, whereas with *Fantasia* they might be excused for not expecting what they get.

In other words, don't go to *Fantasia* expecting to see a movie, as you know movies. Go expecting surprises and anticlimaxes, delights and annoyances, beauty and ugliness, uprushes of sheer genius and swift descents into banality. You must take out the balance-sheet for yourself, because seldom has individual

taste come so much into a picture. No two persons seem to agree exactly about anything in it: on the one hand we have David Low comparing Disney's significance with that of Leonardo; on the other we have Dorothy Thompson, straying far from world affairs, describing *Fantasia* as "a remarkable nightmare", "a supreme insult", and "the perverted betrayal of our best instincts."

DISNEY has taken eight compositions by widely-different composers, and with Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra providing the music, has "illustrated" them (the word is inadequate, but the only one available). In his experiments with "visual sound", he is perhaps most successful — though least original — when he uses the impressionistic technique of pure colour, form, and movement to illustrate Bach's D Minor Toccata and Fugue. I say "least original" because I remember a short film some years ago (made by the New Zealander, Len Lye, I think) in which Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 was treated with similar abstract forms and patterns in colour. Then comes a large part of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. Sometimes the drawing is slightly out of character with the music, but not always. The style of this sequence is reminiscent of the "Silly Symphonies", but Disney's draughtsmanship has probably never been more ingenious nor his imagination richer, and it is here, I think, that he reveals himself most clearly as the impresario of the New Ballet. The artist's pen achieves a mechanical perfection of line and movement beyond the capacity of a Nijinsky or a Pavlova; the colour camera produces settings beyond Diaghilev's wildest dreams; but is this enough? Can mechanical perfection and super-natural beauty compensate for lack of the human element? At the moment these are rhetorical questions: only experience will answer them.

After a comparatively formal but amusing treatment of Dukas's "Sorcerer's Apprentice" (featuring Mickey Mouse) we get Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring", which Disney visualises in terms of cosmic birth, geologic cataclysms, and prehistoric monsters. A schoolmaster whose opinion I respect says that this is a documentary masterpiece which will teach people more about the beginnings of the world than hours of lectures and text-book reading, but no section of the film has caused more controversy among the critics, especially the music critics. Some (including "Marsyas") have castigated Disney for studiously avoiding Stravinsky's own intentions. But how on earth, I would ask, could Stravinsky's own intentions of orgiastic ritual dances have been respected on the screen? When Nijinsky tried to respect them in ballet they were too much even for a Paris audience. Music suggests many different things to many different people — I never hear "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" without visualising a great loom weaving intricate patterns, and for some reason the Rondo Allegro from Beethoven's Violin Concerto always makes me think of Laurel and Hardy! As for Stravinsky's music, it might conjure up all manner of curious mental images, but if a tribal

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