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Film Reviews by G.M.

TWO STEINBECKS

TORTILLA FLAT

(M-G-M)

LAST week I had the unusual opportunity of seeing two stories by John Steinbeck in film form. One was the four-year-old John Ford (Fox) production of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was privately re-screened, the other was the new Victor Fleming (M-G-M) version of *Tortilla Flat*, which has just been released in Wellington. As books, these two stories show marked differences in their author's style and outlook—and Hollywood has widened the gap. Along with *The Cup of Gold*, a story about Morgan the Buccaneer, *Tortilla Flat* belongs to Steinbeck's earlier, more romantic and immature period, before he had become the grim socially-conscious realist of *The Grapes of Wrath* (and, in a rather different way, *Of Mice and Men*). It was, in fact, only the success of the two latter books that drew attention to *Tortilla Flat*. Without that success, the script of this film would probably still be collecting dust on a shelf in the Paramount Studios, to whom the hard-up Steinbeck sold it some years ago for a mere £800 after having hawked it all round Hollywood. George Raft refused to play the role of Danny on the ground that it would "hurt his career," whereupon Paramount agreed that the story was "objectionable" and shelved it. Then came the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, and Steinbeck's sun was up. He would then have paid £2,500 to regain possession of *Tortilla Flat* because he was afraid of what Hollywood might do with his story, but M-G-M (who by this time had somehow managed to acquire it from Paramount for £15,000) were deaf to his artistic entreaties. They promptly put the story on the screen, and there is this to be said for them: although *Tortilla Flat* is by no means exactly what Steinbeck wrote, the producers have given him less reason to complain than the average author whose work is "adapted" by Hollywood.

TORTILLA Flat is not, and never could have been, another *Grapes of Wrath*. A film like that can only happen about once in two decades—in fact, it is still a miracle to me that it ever happened at all. It can, in the first place, only happen when Hollywood Big Business is caught napping long enough for the "boys in the back room" to slip past its defences with a direct attack on the existing economic system. And it can only happen when the technical brilliance and artistic integrity of a pioneering director like John Ford coalesce with the white-hot anger of a social crusader like John Steinbeck, and when a top-notch cast give all that is in them because acting has become more than just a job to them.

SEEING *Grapes of Wrath* again, I realised this all so clearly that I suppose I was in an unnaturally critical mood for *Tortilla Flat*. A film like *Tortilla Flat* does not, of course, happen often, either. It is in many ways a most unusual and provocative film, and one that I would not for a moment wish to deter you from seeing. But it is, at the

same time, conventional in the Hollywood way. It should entertain you greatly but it will not, like the other Steinbeck, shock and disturb you as well—unless you are likely to be shocked by the pleasantly subversive philosophy that idling in the sun is the only good life and that the possession of private property (which includes wives) is the root of all evil. And even this philosophy is not entirely new on the screen, for it was expounded, less enjoyably, in the Lughton film *The Turtles of Tahiti*.

Since they stepped out of Steinbeck's pages, the mixed-breed *paisanos* of Monterey have mended a good many of their ways. Headed by Spencer Tracy (Pilon) and John Garfield (Danny) they are still feckless, lazy, dirty, ignorant, good-hearted, and disarmingly likable fellows; they will do almost anything to get wine (except work), and they steal their neighbours' fowls without scruple; when one of their number inherits two houses and they accidentally burn them down, they are only interested in watching the blaze ("Anyway it's a good thing: Danny hasn't been the same since he became a property-owner"). Yet although they drink endlessly they seldom get very drunk; although they regard Danny's intention to get a job and marry a "Portugee" girl (Hedy Lamaar) as an unparalleled disaster for him, their own relations with women remain spotless compared with what Steinbeck envisaged. And they are capable of conversion and a Hollywood happy ending. Danny's change of heart is real enough and his passion is pure enough for him to recover from a bad accident and marry the girl (whereas in the book he dies of a surfeit of good living). Pilon's conversion doesn't survive to the final scene, but it is strong enough while it lasts to make him get a job and keep him working hard in order to buy a handsome wedding-gift with which to bless his friend's union. In brief, *Tortilla Flat* is something you could take your grandmother or your small daughter to see without qualms, though I would hesitate to recommend the book to either.

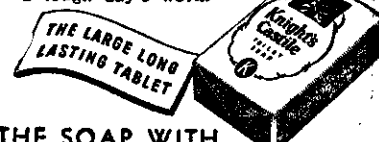
IN that last paragraph, I suspect that I have been, almost unconsciously, comparing the romanticism of Steinbeck and of Hollywood as revealed in *Tortilla Flat* with the realism of the same author and the photographic honesty of the director in *The Grapes of Wrath*. While this may be interesting it is, I admit, hardly a fair test and I do not suggest that you need to apply it. You should find plenty in this new film that is worth enjoying in its own right—in particular perhaps the way in which Frank Morgan out-acts all the other good actors with his character study of the Pirate, a disreputable, hairy old hermit whose life is guided by the fact that St. Francis of Assisi once appeared to him in a vision and said, "Be kind to dogs, you dirty man." Hollywood can't resist the temptation to exaggerate the size of the trees and the mystic light, but that scene where the Pirate takes his five mongrel dogs into the forest, lines them up, and tells them about St. Francis, is—well, you won't forget it.

As you can see, our little man was quite eager to stand up and applaud *Tortilla Flat*. By the same token, he would, of course, be turning cartwheels for *The Grapes of Wrath*.



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