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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE MOON AND SIXPENCE

(United Artists)

WITHOUT wishing to ring any Victory Bells or to be regarded as a Pollyanna, I begin to detect faint signs that the cinema is growing up. I am not referring to prodigy-pictures like *Pygmalion*, *Major Barbara*, *Citizen Kane*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, but when we find *Moonlight*, *Tortilla Flat*, and *The Moon and Sixpence* all screening together in the one week (as they are at present in Wellington), then there is some reason, as Mr. Churchill would put it, for sober confidence.

The Moon and Sixpence is based on the novel by Somerset Maugham, which in turn was obviously based on, or at least suggested by, the life of Gauguin. It may not be an important book; in fact, it may be a rather shallow one; but on the screen it does make absorbing, and above all, adult entertainment. Like Gauguin, Charles Strickland (George Sanders), is a respectable, conventional financier until middle-age when, without scruple or regrets, he suddenly deserts his wife and family because he has the urge to become a painter. He goes to Paris, and starves in the conventional garret, but this is the only conventional thing Charles Strickland does. Having completely ruined a fellow-artist's happiness, again without a trace of remorse, he finally goes to Tahiti, where he marries a native girl. When he dies of leprosy, most of his best paintings are destroyed at his own request. But he is later recognised as a great artist.

Hollywood has been trying to film this story for years. All the major studios have had a shot at it, but each time they started they came up against the apparently insurmountable Hays Office ban on anything that may seem to condone lax behaviour. David Loew, the producer, and Albert Lewin the director, finally solved this problem by taking the revolutionary step of filming the book almost exactly as the author wrote it. Though their technique of story-telling is not without precedent (cf. *Citizen Kane*), their triumph lies in their dispassionate approach. Most screen entertainment depends on the thesis that the audience must identify itself with the characters; must take sides with the "goodies" against the "baddies." But *The Moon and Sixpence* simply says, in effect, "Here is a man called Charles Strickland who led an unusual life. But we do not pass judgment. We think his character is interesting enough in itself."

Actually, from a technical viewpoint, the film uses a very elaborate style of narration, but the impression you get is of "straight" reporting—simple and impartial. The greatest single factor in the success of this method is the performance of Herbert Marshall. Yes, Herbert Marshall, of all people. He is so perfectly in character as the precise, rather stuffy Englishman who is the friend of Strickland's deserted wife, and who tells the story in retrospect. Marshall's voice has always seemed to me his best asset—and it is his voice that is most used. With such a narrator, you cannot do anything but take a detached view of the narrative.

There are other noteworthy aspects. For instance, the thoroughly convincing performance of George Sanders as Strickland. Again, there is the element of conflict between the sexes. At the last, Strickland does self-consciously use the word "love" in a sense other than cynical. Is this a concession to popular demand? Or is it true to character? I don't quite know, but it certainly does represent something of a final victory for woman-kind who, up till then, have been consistently blackguarded. Yet, even this may be rather cold comfort for the feminists, for this victory for her sex is secured, you will notice, not by a civilised woman like Strickland's first wife or his mistress (both of whom he despises), but by a Tahitian girl, who dumbly worships the artist because—well, simply because he is a white man and handsome, and treats her as a chattel!

HOLIDAY INN

(Paramount)

SIT up and clap again for Fred Astaire and Irving Berlin. Sit up and look—Fred's arrived with two new dancing partners. Sit up and listen—Bing Crosby's there with a handful of songs. So don't miss *Holiday Inn*.

Let me say at once that I haven't got over my first love for the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers partnership, and I shall probably never get over it. But having paid tribute to the memory of *Top Hat*, *Follow the Fleet*, and *Shall We Dance?*—can you compete with them?—I'm ready to give a hearty hand-clap to the new partnership of Astaire and Marjorie Reynolds (she sings, too), and a not-so-hearty clap to the new alliance with Virginia Dale. I don't think I'm being unfair to the brunette to say that she doesn't make a great deal of her opportunities; it doesn't seem such a calamitous loss when she walks out on Fred to marry a "millionaire Texan from Texas," and it does seem a pity that she's made a mistake in the word—"he owed millions, not owned them"—and so returns to dance with her knees bent again. But the blonde Miss Reynolds, with the canary voice, does fit the shoes; she seems as light as the desirable thistledown, she seems the right shape to wear the silver suitable to thistledown and she has a very nice way of moving—not permanently bent at the knees.

It is Bing Crosby's big idea to open a country house, call it *Holiday Inn*, and have parties there on the 15 days of the year marked in red on the calendar—the remaining 350 days to be devoted to glorious laziness on the profits. Bing tries to persuade his partners (Astaire and Dale), to throw up the show business and come with him on his year-round holiday. Nosir, not for them. But little Reynolds, flower-shop Cinderella, she's been dying on her feet to get into the show business, so she jumps at the chance to get out and starve to death at *Holiday Inn*. And just when everything is nice and successful, Astaire turns up to have a look around and stays on to steal a new partner for himself—the little Cinderella. And it's interesting the way that works out.



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