

# Four Cheers for Dr. Terwilliker

THE 5000 FINGERS OF DR. T.

(Stanley Kramer-Columbia)

**A**GEING film-reviewers, their sacroiliacs numbed by interminable seances in tip-up seats, are often occupationally caloused at the other extremity as well. They cheer seldom, and then generally in subdued tones—usually one cheer, but sometimes two. In the best critical circles, of course, three cheers are considered gross extravagance (if not downright exhibitionism). This week, however, from my relatively obscure place in a lower echelon, I'm calling for four of the best for *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T.* Only the best of Ealing's comedies have made me laugh more, and as well as being funny, this Stanley Kramer production is bright and beautiful to look at. It's crammed with good things—something of the magic of *Peter Pan*, echoes of the more uproarious moments of Gilbert and Sullivan, and the pantomime fantasies of *Ali Baba* or *Chu Chin Chow*. It's family fun—the kind of picture that parents and children (and the children can be eight or 18, it makes no difference) should see together. It will keep

## BAROMETER

FINE: "The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T."  
FAIR TO FINE: "The Member of the Wedding."

parents in a constant chuckle, and the children will yelp with laughter. But unless the four cheers called for are repeated in a louder voice than mine (and this is why one was added to the conventional three) there is apparently some danger of *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T.* going into the deep freeze. After a quiet week in Wellington, the distributors reported no further bookings in the meantime.

Because they haven't given this show the promotion it deserves I don't suggest that exhibitors don't know their job. They have fixed checks for determining a film's potential box-office, and a formula for forecasting profits. These tests work well so long as they are applied to "formula" pictures—if they didn't, exhibitors would soon be out of business. But the system breaks down when the unusual off-beat film turns up. It fits into no category, no one knows quite what to do with it—and too often no one does anything.



HANS CONRIED  
The piano is his forte

Yet *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T.* is as good as pantomime—and pantomime is for all ages. If the advertisements had told me that nothing quite like it had come out of Hollywood since *The Wizard of Oz*, I would not have contested the claim, except to add that it seemed a good deal funnier than Judy Garland's fairy-tale. The author this time is Dr. Seuss, who created *Gerald*

*McBoing-Boing*, and who has a stack of outrageously funny children's books to his credit (if you haven't read *Horton the Elephant*, borrow it from your junior library). His hero is a small boy (Tommy Rettig), whose nose is kept firmly to the piano keyboard by his music-master Dr. Terwilliker, a tyrant who carries his baton in a scabbard, and who has apparently hypnotised Tommy's mother into taking the same firm line about music-practice.

Nodding over the piano, Tommy falls asleep and dreams of the Terwilliker Happy Finger Institute, a fantastic castle with a monstrous double-decked piano a quarter of a mile long, and 500 cells for the accommodation of small boys. "Think of it," chortles Terwilliker, whose piano is his forte. "Five thousand little fingers practising 24 hours a day, 365 days a year!" In the dungeons of the institute ("Going Down! First floor, small chains, big chains, gyves, thumb-screws . . .") languish the unfortunates who have played instruments of which Dr. T. disapproves—that is, instruments other than the piano. But down below, too, Tommy finds his only friend, Mr. Zabladowsky, the plumber from back home. Mr. Z. proves an unexpected ally. He has to instal 500 washbasins before the small boys can be incarcerated. Can Tommy hold up the job? He appeals to Zabladowsky's good nature. Dr. T. bribes the plumber with cigars and vintage pickle-juice, and the battle is joined.

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