

# An Odd Pretty Sort of Thing

## THE BEGGAR'S OPERA

(British Lion-Herbert Wilcox)

IT was (they say) Dean Swift who first suggested to the poet John Gay that a "Newgate pastoral . . . might make an odd pretty sort of thing." Gay took the hint, wrote *The Beggar's Opera*, and made a substantial profit. But Swift never saw it staged, and I wondered, the other evening, how he would have stood up to the impact of film techniques, Technicolor, the selfconscious baritone of Sir Laurence Olivier, and other modern production devices.

Would he have thought that his original prognosis contained a slight derangement of epithets? He might have found the doxies of Newgate (and the text) a trifle prim, but I imagine that, with a little prior acclimatisation he would have enjoyed the show. On the screen, *The Beggar's Opera* is still an odd pretty sort of thing—with the adjectives in their original order. Indeed, I would be pressed to find a phrase which could summarise more succinctly what I felt about it.

It is odd in the sense that it is not the kind of thing one normally encounters "at the pictures," and it has there-

### BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "The Beggar's Opera."  
FAIR TO FINE: "Four in a Jeep."

fore a piquancy which should please the jaegerd palate. The dashing highwayman Captain Macheath, who has a fine seat on a horse but who tends to get off balance whenever he comes within arm's length of a pretty shoulder, is not the usual kind of hero, but his weakness for women produces a type of comedy which is universally comprehensible. His particular sweethearts, Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, and the other amorous doxies of Newgate are, you might say, universally comprehensible, too, but the settings—the squalor of Newgate prison, the low life, the beggars and cutpurses, the cheerfully corrupt jailers and turnkeys—give the piece a flavour of its own.

And it is, on the whole, a pretty piece of work. Colour, costumes and action frequently enchant the eye, the camera is often artfully manipulated, and the frolics and dances of the players are as a rule rhythmic, gay and excellently staged. The piece has style. But (and here I find myself tagging along after one or two overseas reviewers) the quality of Peter Brook's direction is not evenly maintained. This is his first real test as a director, and he has turned his stage experience to good advantage in many sequences, but these serve, too, to underline occasional banalities (Polly's first entry isn't particularly bright, and Sir Laurence is once or twice rather too obviously mounted on the studio rocking-horse). Of the players, only Sir L. and Stanley Holloway (Lockit) attempt to sing. Olivier's voice you might call adequate; Holloway I thought much the more enjoyable of the two. The other songs are dubbed in by six offstage singers (Joan Cross is one), not all of whom give sufficient attention to diction. The words (as in Gilbert and Sullivan) are no less important than the tunes.

But even with these reservations, which are for the most part matters of detail, anyway, *The Beggar's Opera* is good entertainment. You need not necessarily be interested in film style, or the work of a new director, or the determined versatility of Sir Laurence Olivier to enjoy it.



SIR LAURENCE OLIVIER  
Determined versatility

## School Festival

JAMES DOW (right) conducted the girls' choir in the Hutt Valley Technical College Music Festival, excerpts from which were scheduled for broadcast by 2YA at 9.30 p.m. this Wednesday, December 1. The Music Festival is an annual event, held at the Wellington Town Hall, and this week's programme was recorded at the 1954 festival. The performers were a massed choir of 370 voices, a girls' choir of 200, a massed orchestra of 130, a smaller orchestra of 50 players, and a brass band of 30. David Sell, director of music at the College, conducted the massed choir and orchestra, James Dow the girls' choir, and W. Les. Francis the band. Over the years the Hutt Valley Technical College has built up a reputation for its music which places it among the best in the country.



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