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Film Reviews, by Jno.

## NAPOLEON BRANDO

### DESIRÉE

(20th Century-Fox)

AS Mark Antony might have put it, *Facilis descensus Averno*. Perhaps it is a little steep to suggest that *Désirée* gets as close as that to rock-bottom, but the intelligent filmgoer would probably agree that for Mr. Brando it represents a long toboggan-ride from the dramatic heights of *Julius Caesar*.

Yet *Désirée*, the fuglemen of the film industry informed me, had all the flesh and fire of Annemarie Selinke's internationally-acclaimed best-seller and was, forby, the Most Passionately Told Story Cinema-Scope had Ever Embraced. What with one thing and another, I felt I couldn't afford to miss it. It's true that I hadn't even heard of Miss Selinke, far less read her

best-seller (which just shows you the kind of cultural cul-de-sac I inhabit), but if anyone aims a passionately-told love-story at me, I'm a sitting duck. Behold me, then ensconced in the ci-devant two-and-threepennies, a bag of jujubes clutched in my hot little hand and all prepared to sweat it out.

It was a protracted business. I don't know exactly how long the film was (projectionists will persist in showing the Censor's certificate on the screen curtains), but we had our vanilla tubs at eight-thirty. Ahead of us lay revolutionary France, from the Directoire to the fall of the Empire, the marching and counter-marching across Europe—Austerlitz, Jena, Moscow, Leipzig, Waterloo. So far as *Désirée* went, they're still ahead. We got a whiff of Tchaikovsky around about 1812, and a glimpse of Tricouleurs (in de Luxe colour) waving bravely eastward, then a moment later the



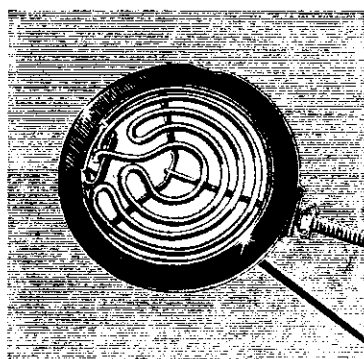
MARLON BRANDO  
"A long toboggan-ride"

**BAROMETER**  
OVERCAST: "*Désirée*."  
MAINLY FAIR: "*Men of the Fighting Lady*."

boom of offstage cannon, the suggestion of snowflakes and the same ensigns (somewhat battle-soiled) drooping westward. But that's as much as we saw of the Napoleonic wars. As the ad-men were at pains to imply, *Désirée* is concerned with the Daughters of the French Revolution rather than with the sons, and the campaigns it records are those of the salon and the boudoir. *Désirée* (Jean Simmons), though a Marseillaise, is not quite a foundation member of the D.F.R., but she gets in on the ground-floor with the Bonapartists. Joseph Bonaparte marries her sister; and *Désirée* meets Napoleon Brando himself when he is no more than a three-star general. She falls in love with him (he reciprocates); she pursues him to Paris (she is young, impulsive, candid—she also keeps a Diary). Amid scorching scenes of High-Life she catches him courting Josephine at Malmaison, and on the rebound marries Marshal Bernadotte. "You're the second man I've ever kissed," she murmurs, chucking up the sponge, "do it again." And, of course, there's loads more in the same vein. . .

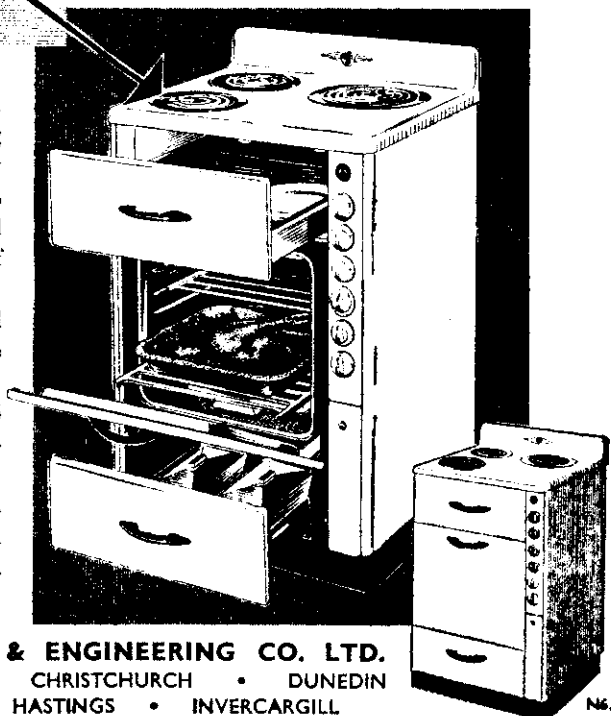
It's not that I object to the drama of intrigue, *per se*. I've no doubt that this movie does at some points coincide with history; that at some more widely separated points it held the seeds of drama. Michael Rennie's Bernadotte is a fairly good performance, Brando manages to make the most of his entrances and exits (the last excepted), and he gives us the face, the figure and the carriage of Napoleon—so far as we can judge these from contemporary portraits. The photography is scarcely inspiring, but on the other hand the settings are lavish (the crowning of Josephine, for example, is a faithful reproduction of David's painting in the Louvre). I have no doubt, too, that there was a broad streak of vulgarity in the Napoleonic court, with its upstart dukes and princes, and this manages to seep through, though it doesn't quite sound as it ought. In fact, very little *sounds* right in the film. Indeed, I sat through it all without once suffering the illusion that I was present at the turbulent beginning of the 19th Century.

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### MEN OF THE FIGHTING LADY

(M.G.M.)

THERE is a good deal that is banal in this piece about U.S. naval airmen operating against the Communists in the Korean war, but the quality of the colour photography, the matter-of-fact portrayal of the routine hazards of carrier-borne air operations, and the occasional glimpses into a man's mind (sometimes it is the mind of James Michener, who wrote the stories on which the film is based) keep the banalities in the background for a good deal of the time. Americans love mechanical detail, and they photograph it well. If you want to know how to get a squadron of jets airborne from a carrier, this film will show you just how the intricate manoeuvre is carried out—and how they get them back on board again. It will also show you what an unsuccessful deck landing looks like, what low-level jet-bomber attack means, and how impersonal one must be about it to keep sane. Learning these things is not necessarily a comfortable experience, but it has its uses.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 4, 1955.