

# PENTHOUSE PIECE

## THE BLACK WIDOW

(20th Century-Fox-CinemaScope)

SINCE those productions which I have myself seen represent only a fragment of the CinemaScope corpus (I hope the studios don't mind the term), I can't be too absolute in my statements about *The Black Widow*. I don't think I want to be, anyway. It is a routine sort of whodunit with a plausible plot, a competent cast, pretty smooth direction by Nunnally Johnson (who was also scriptwriter and producer), and pleasant colour. But it did strike me as the most relaxed piece of CinemaScope I had encountered, and I think that represents some sort of advance, if not technically then emotionally.

Until now (or so it has seemed) producers and directors have been fascinated, perhaps numbed, possibly even a little frightened by the amount of screen space at their disposal, and by the problem of rearranging the traditional material to fit it. The tendency has been to place the emphasis on action rather than acting, to fill up the available space with movement from left to right and back again—and so we have had King Arthur and his jolly jousting knights, and a number of other costume pieces in which most of the drama has been horizontal (and sometimes even flat). There has not been what the ad-men might call an intelligent use of blank space—or unpopulated space.

The background of *The Black Widow*, however, fits fairly precisely into the frame of the CinemaScope screen. The setting is, for a substantial part of the time, an opulent New York penthouse apartment—wide, handsome, but not too high—and with that detail settled Mr. Johnson appears to have felt himself free to concentrate on the cast. Occasionally he nods, and then you get the Wimbledon Effect, as two characters engage in a bout of conversational pat-ball from opposite sides of the screen, like the end-men in a Christy Minstrel show. But in general the camera follows the players and allows us to concentrate on the acting. It's on the whole smoother and more competent acting than I've noticed in the spectacular CinemaScope productions. Van Heflin appears as a Broadway producer who foolishly (but quite without ulterior motive) allows a young wench the freedom of his apartment while his wife is absent; then finds himself caught in a web of circumstantial evidence when the wench (Peggy Ann Garner) is found hanging among the sponge-bags in the bathroom. The evidence, however, is so strong against him that no self-respecting sleuth could take it seriously, so one or two other suspects are rung in, to keep things simmering until the final show-down.

One of the pleasing things about the show, beyond an unobtrusive competence, is the neat way in which tension is built up to the climax. The director has devised a pair of adroit flashback passages in which image and narration overlap one another and these are effectively used to lead into the dénouement. What the dénouement is you may not guess—unless you saw the trailer the week before.

### BAROMETER

FAIR: "The Black Widow."  
OVERCAST: "The Rainbow Jacket."  
OVERCAST: "Prisoner of War."

## THE RAINBOW JACKET

(Rank-Ealing)

WHEN it comes to picking the weekend movie, most filmgoers chance their money on a star. A few shrewd citizens follow their favourite producer or director, and the Submerged Tenth simply use a pin. I doubt if one half of one per cent pay any attention to the scriptwriter, unless it happens to be W. Shakespeare or George B. Shaw, and now that I've seen *The Rainbow Jacket* I'm prepared to rejoin the other 99.5 per cent if someone will kindly move over and make room.

It was the name of T. E. B. Clarke, Ealing's top scriptwriter, on the credit-list that persuaded me to hazard half a wheel and a spare evening on *The Rainbow Jacket*—and speaking strictly for myself I would have been just as happy at home. To enjoy it (and the script is by no means spectacular) you must be capable of a dewy-eyed sentimentality about racing which it is quite outside my capacity to simulate. The hero is a small boy whose one ambition is to be a jockey. One or two of his elders threaten to spank some sense into him but, regrettably, no one does so and before he has achieved his ambition he has fallen into the clutches of crooked bookies, has thrown a race, and involved his widowed Mum (Kay Walsh) in a slight case of embezzlement. No one, fortunately, gets caught and all ends happily in a soft shower of folding money and a complete absence of moral sense. In my view (which may well be jaundiced) this is a sub-standard for Ealing. The photography often has an unfinished look, some of the studio mock-ups are grossly palpable fakes, and even Robert Morley fails to infuse any genuine liveliness into the show.

## PRISONER OF WAR

(M.G.M.)

IN its way this film is quite a notable contribution to the maintenance of international tension. It purports to give us a behind-the-scenes view of the treatment meted out to American prisoners of war in North Korea before hostilities concluded, and very little seems to have been omitted from its sorry catalogue of sadism, brutality and torture. There is, in fact, so much brutality in it that I doubt if the film can be other than brutalising in its effect. The most startling aspect of the production, however, is its outright assertion that Soviet officers supervised the torture of U.N. prisoners. You must condition their reflexes, says Comrade Colonel Oscar Homolka to his North Korean colleagues, citing Pavlov and his dogs; but before long I was wondering whose reflexes were being conditioned by whom. Fifty years ago this kind of thing would have provoked an international incident, and possibly a breach of diplomatic relations. That such a film can be shown today, apparently without exciting comment, could indicate that we are, on the whole, more stable and sensible than our fathers. I would just like to be sure that stable and sensible are the right words.

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