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No Bizet Like Show Bizet

CARMEN JONES

(20th Century-Fox)

THIS week, with so much written about Carmen Jones in *Another Place*, it seemed to me that it would be appropriate—a pleasing coalescence of equity and personal inclination—to lead off in this department with a few well-chosen words about *Sabrina* and the latest gen. on Little Audrey.

Good resolutions, however, are not broken only on January 1. Having exposed myself to the full blast of *Carmen Jones*, I find that she is not the kind of character (whatever one may think of her) to be relegated even to a nominal second place. I like Miss Hepburn—indeed I warm to her with each succeeding performance. But a gentle warmth is scarcely to be compared with a second-degree burn.

This CinemaScope *Carmen*—Hollywood's version of the Broadway musical adaptation of Bizet's operatic variations on Mérimée's novel—is, as the Americans themselves would quaintly put it, "a long ways from home." There is, in fact, no Bizet like this show Bizet and it seems certain beyond peradventure that the simon-pure opera enthusiast will see the glorious De Luxe colour of the production only through the red veils of near-apoplexy.

He will have my sympathy. I can't claim to be a connoisseur, or even a lover, of opera—Grand or otherwise—but one doesn't need to be a Neville Cardus or an Eric Blom to perceive that the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau were scarcely more ill-sorted than the music and manner of this production, that the lyrics often limp, and that the effort to keep events more or less in step with the Bizet libretto at times produces an effect of caricature which does less than justice to the talents of the players and singers.

But one can say all those things and scarcely dent the production, for its drama springs from sources some distance below speech-level. I can't regard a prize-fight as more exciting (or more picturesque) than a bull-fight, but Spanish fire and even gypsy passion would seem pallid things alongside the uninhibited vitality of the Negro. *Carmen Jones* crackles with authentic life and vigour—not life breathed into it by a scripwriter, or a composer, or a director, but the life of the players and singers themselves.

On the score of total effort (and total is the word to use for it) Pearl Bailey is the outstanding member of the cast. She both acts and sings, and the set-piece in the night-club where she gives out with "Beat Out Dat Rhythm on a Drum" is the highwater mark of the film. The best singing, on the other hand, was (I thought) that of Le Vern Hutcherson who sang Joe's songs for Harry Belafonte. The dubbing was skilfully done for all three principals (nowhere more impressively than in the last scene of all), but the singing and speaking voices of Husky the prize-fighter were not matched altogether satisfactorily.

Of the non-singing players, Dorothy Dandridge is easily the most impressive,

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Carmen Jones."
FAIR: "Sabrina."

having not only explosive vitality and physical grace but brains and acting capacity as well. Both she and Belafonte have played in films before, and it is now possibly not too much to hope that they may be seen again. As a film, *Carmen Jones* is good—despite its incidental and probably inevitable imperfections. It may be even better as a portent.

SABRINA

(Paramount)

[F I were Katherine Hepburn (which is perhaps a rather bizarre postulate, even for the sake of argument) I'm sure I'd feel a little irked at the effortless progress of Miss Audrey Hepburn—particularly since it seemed likely to cause some confusion and divided loyalty in the ranks of the fan-clubs. However, as things are, I can't enjoy little Audrey without any inhibitions of that sort. I find her altogether delightful to watch, and I can't blame Hollywood for casting her in innocuous, inconsequential fairytales. This time she's a Cinderella type, a chauffeur's daughter who falls in love with the boss's son (William Holden) and thereby threatens the success of a big business merger. To stave off the threat, an ageing elder son (Humphrey Bogart) takes Sabrina in hand, with disastrous consequences to his peace of mind.

Sabrina is a mild little spoof, which pokes fun at big business but is careful not to commit any sacrilege. The dialogue (part-written by Billy Wilder, who produced and directed), is both smooth and witty, in a stylised sophisticated vein; Audrey is as pretty as a picture, and Bogart turns in as neat a piece of frozen-faced comedy as I've seen since Buster Keaton was around. A thoroughly cheerful evening's entertainment.



HEPBURN, HOLDEN

"As pretty as a picture"

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 18, 1955.