

BEAUTY AND TRUTH

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

(Arne Sucksdorff-Films de France)

G Cert.

THOUGH I won't be so Hibernian as to suggest that producers and directors tend to lose sight of the visual element in films, it is, I think, a fair criticism of contemporary trends in film-making to say that quantity tends to take the place of quality. Screens are wider, films are longer, the dramatic content (see below) more violent.

The Great Adventure, which won the International Grand Prix at Cannes in 1954, falls into none of these errors. It is just short of 7000 feet in length, the screen is the old four-to-three ratio, the mood is pastoral, the script, photography, editing and direction are by one man—Arne Sucksdorff—and in each of these departments he shows himself the complete master of his material. To see *The Great Adventure* is to enjoy one of the cinema's finest hours.

It is the photography which makes the first telling impact. The eye of the camera opens on a tracery of reeds, caught against the veils of early morning mist; a fragile vision as delicately evocative as an old Chinese print, and beautiful enough to make one catch one's breath. A bead of dew trembles and falls from a stem of grass, one catches the glimmer of a white farmhouse through trees still insubstantial as smoke in the half light. Then the first level beam of summer sun is caught and refracted in a thousand tiny prisms on twig and stem and cobweb. One's other senses begin to catch up, and one is aware of the stir of birds, of frogs croaking by the lakeside. Suddenly, from the farmhouse, comes the crow of a cock.

The Great Adventure is a story of the changing year, as seen through the eyes of two small boys in the lakeland of central Sweden, a story of growth, of seedtime and harvest, of birth and death in the thickets and hedgerows and in the cathedral aisles of the forest. The dramatis personae, besides the boys and the adults of the neighbourhood, are the fox-cubs adventuring from their earth, the vixen plundering the fowlyard, the hare throbbling in the wheat-stubble, the lynx striking down the roe deer, the comical otter rescued and kept in pampered secrecy in the attic. Sucksdorff's wild-life photography is incredibly fine—the product not only of infinite patience, but of superlative camera skill. Nor does he make the mistake of sentimentalising life, for he is concerned as much with truth as with beauty. The most he allows himself is a muted elegiac note, a small lament for the transience of childhood and innocence.

THE SEARCHERS

(C. V. Whitney-Warner Bros.) G Cert.

"WHAT makes a man to wander?" sing the bass voices in the background as the screen widens from the timbered slot of a ranch-house window to a VistaVision panorama of the John Ford country—empty save for the inevitable solitary horseman. And what does make a man to wander? *The Searchers*, which keeps John Wayne and Jeffrey Hunter wandering for an unconscionable amount of footage (and for most of the time in circles, if the scenery is any guide) doesn't provide very pleasant answers.

Hatred and a lust for vengeance send Ethan Edwards in search of his small

BAROMETER

FINE: "The Great Adventure."

FAIR: "The Searchers."

MAINLY FAIR: "Tribute to a Bad-man."

niece, kidnapped when the rest of her family were massacred by Comanches. An anguished affection sends her foster-brother (Jeffrey Hunter) along too, and, as one might hope, it is affection which prevails in the end—but not before there has been a good deal of unpleasantness en route. Indeed, so far as the story treatment goes, the finer feelings are the minor feelings. Wayne, as the implacable, inexorable Injun-hater, is the heroic figure, the apocalyptic horseman—larger than life and twice as ruthless.

In other respects, *The Searchers* is very much Model T Ford. The faces (Ward Bond, Harry Carey and Co.) are as familiar as the rock buttresses of Monument Valley, and almost as time-worn; and the redskins fall from their cayuses in droves to bite dust churned powder-fine by the passage of earlier Ford vehicles. The photography, technically fine (with the usual accent on the long shot), offers us few new angles on the old terrain, though it still induces something of the old magic, a magic frequently reinforced by plaintive Western tunes rising behind the jingle of harness and the squeak of saddle-leather. I would have enjoyed *The Searchers*, for its familiarity rather than in spite of it, had it not seemed to celebrate (or at least sympathise with) attitudes and emotions which have invariably bred anguish and bitterness. I have no doubt that the pioneering West was cruel to a degree that none of the old-time Westerns suggested, and there is evidence that the cult of the strong arm is still popular as far West as Hollywood, but I'm afraid I'm too old now to have my own attitudes and emotions re-occidented.

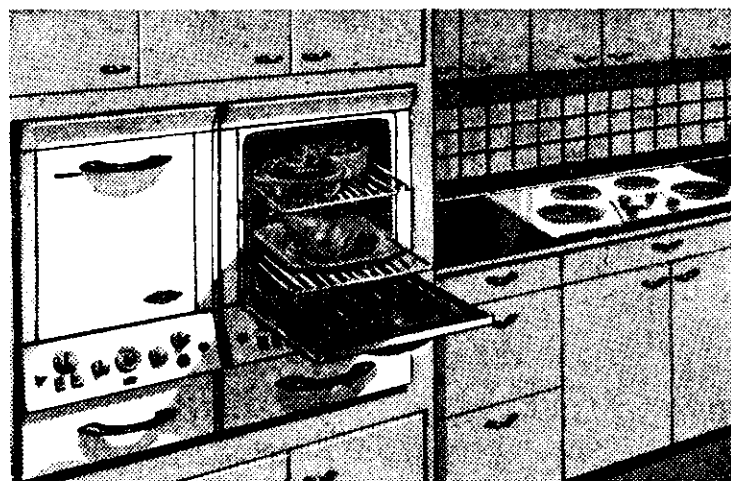
TRIBUTE TO A BADMAN

(M.G.M.)

A Cert.

LIKE *The Searchers*, this James Cagney Western celebrates violence and vendetta, though a little more bluntly—as the title suggests. On the credit side the film offers sweeping vistas of mountain and prairie, forest and savannah land, which are just as picturesque as, and a good deal less stereotyped than the Arizona stamping-ground of John Ford. Cagney's range is given over to horses instead of beef-cattle, and there are times when the wide screen is full of the grace of mares and foals frolicking in upland pastures. The film also introduces Irene Papas, as a sloe-eyed cheroot-smoking lass who stays at the ranch-house and enjoys some unspecified symbiotic relationship with its owner. Miss Papas, too, is a graceful filly and quite easy to look at, but it is Mr Cagney who occupies most of the foreground—he's almost broader than he's tall, a proper CinemaScope type, you might say. As in *The Searchers*, the common decencies of civilised man prevail in the end, but rather more time and attention is given to the questionable methods used by the old ranch boss (a self-confessed dirty fighter, with an urge to hang rustlers) to protect his own property, equine and otherwise.

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