

# ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

## BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

(Robert Kapferer-André Paulvé) Y Cert.

WHEN I wrote about the English version of *Les Parents Terribles* a fortnight ago I didn't expect to be back so soon in Cocteau country, this time with a film by the master himself. *Beauty and the Beast* was bound to be exciting, and it is; and if I say I found it also just a little disappointing I'm being strictly relative. Cocteau's *Orphée*—seen in New Zealand, alas, only by film societies—was for me one of the most exciting films ever. I suppose I looked for another *Orphée*.

In his diary about *Beauty and the Beast*, Cocteau said he didn't aim at poetry—that must come of its own accord; and in the event the film is only part fantastic. The first shot of Beauty's face reflected in the floor she is polishing is like the first faint breath of magic, but generally the early scenes at the merchant's house have a beautiful and almost rustic simplicity. Cocteau's remarkable hand with the fantastic shows itself when, lost in the forest, the merchant, his great shadow preceding him, comes to the Beast's palace. Here we're in a world of wonderful invention: living arms hold candles which light themselves as he walks along the corridors, eyes turn to watch in the carved faces under the mantel, and so on. The Beast's first appearance startles: it isn't just a man in a mask—Jean Marais uses eyes and voice to create a fantastic yet credible and even moving figure. To the part of Avenant also, a friend of Beauty's brother, he brings a fine intensity. As for Beauty, Josette Day makes her all that she should be. Elsewhere—in costume, decor and so on—Cocteau has been well served; his own eye for the telling detail is as good as you'd expect; and crammed with striking images and compositions, the film has been beautifully photographed by Alekan.

Why was I disappointed? First, I suppose, because the story hasn't the same interest for me as the story of *Orpheus* and *Eurydice*. I admired, I suspended disbelief, but this time I was not completely carried away. More important, for me the ending doesn't quite come off. With so much that's strange and wonderful happening at the Beast's palace, where Avenant and Beauty's brother have broken into Diana's Temple to steal the Beast's treasures, the Beast's sudden transformation, Prince Charming's charm, is almost anti-climax to all the preceding intensity. Presently there's another big moment when the Prince and Beauty fly up into the air—but even this is carried too far. Anywhere else in the film these flaws would have been absorbed in the rich surrounding texture. As it is they are no doubt little enough to complain about in a film that's otherwise so satisfying.

## THE ROAD TO HOPE

(Lux Film)

G Cert.

THE story of an attempt by a group of Sicilian miners to find their way to work and a new home in France, *The Road to Hope* is something like the sort of film I hoped Pietro Germi would make, or had made, when I reviewed his

## BAROMETER

FINE: "*Beauty and the Beast*."

FINE: "*The Road to Hope*."

FAIR TO FINE: "*Friendly Persuasion*."

*Lost Youth*. Looking for the flaws that marred his earlier films, I still find signs of a weakness for over-dramatic plot devices; but this is nevertheless a fine, moving piece about ordinary people facing the most fundamental of human problems. And if we seem to have made that journey through the alps before—well, it has again been well done.

The journey, however, is a small part of the film, which spends much more time with the dwindling group as it meets this difficulty and that on its journey north through Italy; and (to tell the story backwards) most starkly impressive of all are the scenes and incidents in the Sicilian village where the film begins. Here the camera (Leonida Barboni) has caught as well as anything of the kind I have seen the statuesque figures of the women waiting for their men to end a sit-down strike in the mine, the faces of the men (most of them, I gather, non-professional actors) as they sit in the wine shop, and the white-walled, sun-drenched village. These and later scenes when the group finds it has been used to help break a strike are a frightening reminder of the meaning of poverty—it recalled for me the depression years. Yet this isn't in the end a gloomy film. Its journey is a journey towards hope; and it illuminates the best as well as the worst in our common human nature.

## FRIENDLY PERSUASION

(M.G.M.-Allied Artists)

G Cert.

PROBLEMS of conscience in wartime, one of the themes in *Battle Hymn* (reviewed a fortnight ago), are better handled in *Friendly Persuasion*, the story of a Quaker family caught up in the American Civil War. Perhaps it works out a complex situation a little too tidily, but it's beautifully made (by William Wyler) and well played. At first disappointing, Anthony Perkins, a newcomer, plays an earnest, troubled character very well once he really gets into the part of the son who feels he must join the home guard when the rebels threaten his own home. Outstanding, however, is Gary Cooper as the father, and he is well supported by Dorothy McGuire as his extremely puritanical wife, and Robert Middleton as a neighbour and friendly rival—an almost Dickensian character.

*Friendly Persuasion* is a little inclined to make fun of the Quakers' silent meeting and of the bearded elders; but, trying hard to be fair to everyone, it demonstrates in the end that while even the most peaceable are inclined to compromise in the face of violence which threatens them, retaliation isn't the only answer. Even the small boy's taming of a troublesome goose makes its point. This is a very long film which could easily have done without a longish interlude about some man-eating women. Even so, it never becomes tedious, and I shall be surprised, even a little disappointed, if it doesn't do well at the box office.



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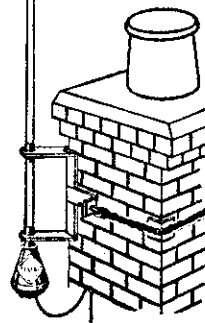
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