

Little Miss Monster

THE BAD SEED

(Warner Bros.) R: 16 and over only

EITHER psychiatry lies about us in our infancy, or Hollywood does, and those parents who totter home from screenings of *The Bad Seed* to look at Junior with a wild surmise should be comforted to know that the psychology and/or genetics of this melodrama are fundamentally unsound. Because Dad has habitually filled in his tax-returns with a certain old-fashioned modesty, there is no reason—the experts reassure us—to suppose that Junior is destined for a life of confidence trickery, any more than little Rhoda Penmark (*The Bad Seed*) was fore-ordained to a career in homicide because grandmother had a lethal streak.

But by the same token—or a not dissimilar one—bad psychology need not beget bad drama, and when I first read William March's novel the impact was sufficient, as that other William might have put it, to make my knotted and combined locks to part, and each particular hair to stand on end, like quills upon the fretful porpoentine. Admittedly, any porpoentine so ill-provided with quills would have already had good reason to be fretful, but no doubt you see what I mean. Mr March is a fine writer and he wrings the ultimate bead of cold sweat from the reader.

And from the novel Maxwell Anderson devised a successful stage drama. I have not read it, far less seen it, but it was a hit and must therefore have held the attention of audiences at a point well above the threshold of disbelief. But speaking for myself, I can't say that the film—based on the play and seemingly following it closely in style—maintains a commensurate measure of authentic chill.

The fault is not to be found in the players—several are excellent and all are more than competent—but in a filmed stage play something must be added to compensate for the absence of the immediate human impact. The camera must join the cast, and the soundtrack must abet the playwright. In *The Bad Seed* the soundtrack is fairly good (it will be some time before I can hear *Au Clair de la Lune* without some mild retrospective disturbance) but I don't think either the director (Mervyn LeRoy) or his director of photography (Hal Rosson) has consistently given the film strong enough visual imagery. There are some telling close-ups, but not enough of them, and



PATTY MCCORMACK

BAROMETER
FAIR: "The Bad Seed."
MAINLY FAIR: "Under the Southern Cross."
OVERCAST: "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

in general the film is (like *Tea and Sympathy*) too much a photographed stage presentation.

But it was a novel experience to meet little Patty McCormack in the part of Rhoda, a child with the face of a cherub and the moral sense of a praying mantis; for Miss McCormack is a smart little actress, who nearly makes Rhoda credible. Rhoda, at eight, is an expert in the fine art of murder but it is her mother's slow realisation of this horror, her mother's frantic efforts to cope with the developing crisis, rather than the crisis itself, that make the drama. And with better than average acting it is possible to suspend one's disbelief by a slight effort of will. But not quite to the end. The final curtain (which trades the book's superbly ironic climax for a grotesque touch of Victorian melodrama) sent me stamping up the aisle.

UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

(Rank-Ealing)

G Cert.

ARMAND AND MICHAELA DENIS UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

(to give this full-length travelogue its full-length title) won't tell you much about the wild animals and birds of Australia that isn't known already to every Crosbie Morrison fan, but it does give one a picture—though a rather general and hasty one—of the brilliant colour, the oddity, and the teeming variety of the Commonwealth's wild life. When one remembers such outstanding nature films as *The Living Desert* and *The Great Adventure*, however, and the immense expenditures of time and patience which they palpably represented, the Denis safari from Adelaide to the Cape York Peninsula seems a hurried affair. One doesn't really get a long enough look at anything, and frequently the photography (by Des Bartlett) isn't equal to the subject. One of the more amazing of the shots shows a rock python engulfing its dinner, but it's not much more than a shot. Disney's men would have made a sequence of it.

Mr Bartlett is more successful in his photographs of aborigines, and the few days which the Denis caravanserai spent among these cheerful people provided easily the best of this film. There's the inevitable comic capital made of the natives' dietary (witchetty grubs, honey ants like mechanised lollies, wallaby grilled *in situ*, and so forth), but there are also many passages which show genuine understanding and appreciation of native life and custom.

THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

(Rank-Jarfid)

Y. Cert.

ON paper this looked as if it might be good. Jean (*Symphonie Pastorale*) Delannoy directed, the score was by Auric, Prevost had a hand in the script, Anthony Quinn as Quasimodo seemed promising—and after all, it was made in France. There should be an authentic atmosphere about it. On film it was all rather disappointing. Pictorially it was uneven—some of the CinemaScope frames might have been composed by Pieter Breughel, others looked just like disorganised bands of film extras. Lath and plaster seemed to lurk beneath most of the background, Alain Cuny's Frolo was restrained to the point of woodenness, and though Quinn worked hard he was not memorable. The one satisfying portrait was a miniature of Louis XI contributed by Jean Tissier.



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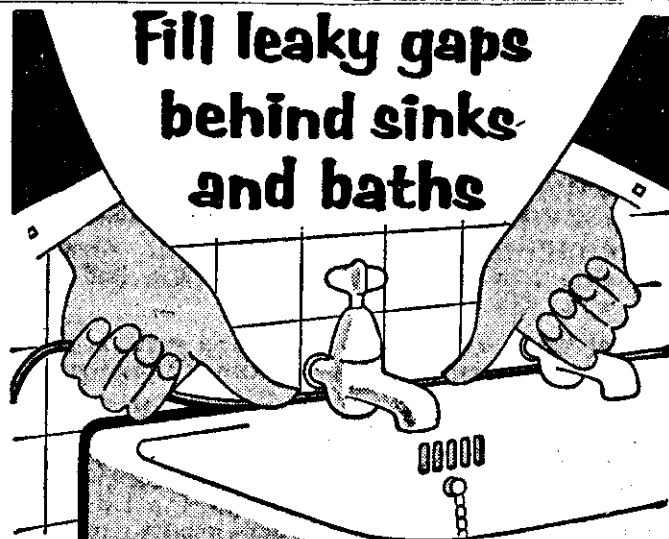
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