

## BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Compulsion."  
OVERCAST: "The Story of Esther Costello."  
MAINLY FAIR: "The Thirty-nine Steps."

inadequate realisation of the relationship of the two principal characters—compounded by the uncertain direction of Richard Fleischer, have to a noticeable extent inhibited that evocation of horror which should have been dominant in the early phase of the action. For this, in intent and to a degree in performance, is a film with a marked ebb and flow of emotion, and the impact of the drama (and its purgative quality) depend on a nice balance between strophe and antistrophe.

*Compulsion* is the story of Judd Steiner and Artie Strauss (Dean Stockwell, Bradford Dillman), two college boys of high intelligence, psychopathic, ostensibly (but not persuasively) homosexual; one a sad mixture of intellectual arrogance and emotional masochism, the other domineering and vicious. These self-styled supermen, having resolved to savour all available experience, murder a child for the thrill of it. The half-baked Nietzschean philosophising before the deed (which occurs offstage), and the querulous squabbling afterwards, as police find one elementary clue after another, unfortunately do not at any point transfix us with the enormity of the offence—in spite of Stockwell's impressive attempt at the complex character of Steiner and Dillman's rather flashy and mannered playing of Strauss. Interest rather fastens on the representatives of the law—it is at least the State Attorney (excellently played by E. G. Marshall, one of the *Twelve Angry Men*) who tends to dominate the scene increasingly until the second phase develops. And it is in one's attitude to the Attorney rather than to the accused that the emotional change of the second phase of the story is most evident.

This second phase is completely dominated by Orson Welles, as a great liberal lawyer who conducts the defence of the two accused. Welles has some of the finest writing in the script and being (one suspects) above and beyond direction draws all the drama on himself. His address to the judge (the plea is guilty) is a long and passionate denunciation of capital punishment which by itself is enough to justify the production as a serious contribution to the social cinema. The part is not as difficult as some Welles has set himself, and it could be

argued that the speech is too long, but there is no denying the power of the peroration.

## THE STORY OF ESTHER COSTELLO

(*Romulus-Columbia*)

A Cert.

THIS story of a blind deaf-mute—you may find in it superficial resemblances to *Johnny Belinda* or *Mandy*—is on the whole a noticeably inferior production. But it has one or two redeeming features which go a little way to counterbalance the more blatant crudities of the script. Most redeeming is the performance of Heather Sears who, as an orphan under the tutelage of a philanthropic American (Joan Crawford), touchingly gropes her way back to life from an almost animal existence

in a squalid Irish village. It is perhaps indicative of this young actress's capacity that she draws from the coldly elegant Miss Crawford a warmer and more convincing response—at least in the earlier sequences—than I would have believed possible.

Regrettably, this doesn't last, but by the time Miss C. has hardened into her customarily brittle format the film begins to take a new direction and develop as a satire on the charity fund-raising racket. The agreeable bite of this middle section, however, is in turn lost in a final wave of melodrama and downright bad taste, which left me at least with the feeling that whatever was sweet and pleasant had been pretty effectively polluted. David Miller directed and Robert Krasker (who appears to have been forced into some untypical banalities) was responsible for the photography.

## THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS

(*Rank-Betty Box*)

G Cert.

I DIDN'T see the Hitchcock-Donat-Madeleine Carroll version of this Buchan thriller, so I can't, alas, compare the two, but the presence of Madeleine Carroll then indicated several additional steps away from the book. This latest version is so far removed that it is difficult to recognise even the skeleton of the original plot, and the thirty-nine steps of the title don't figure in the story at all, other than as a catch-phrase. Even ignoring Taina Elg (and I admit that requires the stoicism of a Border Covenanter), Kenneth More seems to me the last person to impersonate the sober Hannay. In fact, Barry Jones (whom I hadn't seen since the atom was a boy) was the only soul in sight who momentarily conveyed the old, original and incomparable flavour.



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