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Film Reviews, by P.J.W.

DEATH and the MAIDEN

PORTRAIT OF JENNIE

(Selznick-B.E.F.)

JENNIE was the daughter of trapeze artists who performed death-defying feats on the high wire. One day tragedy struck; a wire broke and her parents were killed. An aunt sent Jennie to a convent, and after that she had a trip to Europe, went to College, and eventually graduated. But Jennie was a strange lonely creature who felt nobody loved her, and one day she went sailing off Cape Cod, and was drowned in a hurricane. There was a deserted lighthouse near by, and if she could have reached it she would have been saved. Many years later Jennie's portrait was painted by a poor painter who lived in New York. The portrait was a masterpiece and made him famous, for he loved her deeply, and she loved him. Yet he had never known her when she was alive.

Portrait of Jennie is the story of a love affair between a man and a ghost, adapted from Robert Nathan's novel, a tale of purest fantasy that has been partially (and not very successfully) overlaid with a varnish of metaphysical suggestion, and dressed up in some rather too artistic camera work. Yet because of the novelty and simplicity of the original idea, and a sort of dumbly mulish performance by Joseph Cotten in the principal role, it is, on the whole, one of Hollywood's more satisfying ventures into the supernatural.

Cotten is an artist starving in a garret, painting perfect but lifeless landscapes that no one will buy. One day, after a visit to an art dealer during which he realises he is a failure, he meets a little girl (Jennifer Jones) in the snow-covered park. Because they are both lonely, they are attracted to each other and after she has gone he does a brilliant sketch of her. They meet again several times. At first he believes she is a real person, but by skilful gradations, as he talks to various people who knew her—an old stage hand, an ancient negro servant, a teacher at the convent where she stayed—he becomes convinced of what he had suspected, that she is a spirit returned to earth especially to visit him. Yet she is undoubtedly flesh and blood, and at each successive appearance has aged several years, so that she becomes in a few weeks a beautiful young woman. But their love cannot be consummated, and fate inexorably drags her from his arms in a recapitulation of the original hurricane in which she was drowned.

The significance of the story is that the inspiration she gave his painting remains with him, and she leaves a silk scarf behind to stop him from ever doubting the reality of her appearance. The film therefore deliberately accepts the supernatural: Jennie is certainly dead but the scarf, we are persuaded, shows that she just as certainly returned to earth in corporeal form. Its weakness is that it tries to make this point too definitely and too pretentiously. Where restraint and under-statement would have been most convincing, we are treated to a quotation from Euripides and an unseen narrator's dissertation on the theme of time, life, and space.

This might have been all right, but there is an artificial slickness about the

BAROMETER

FAIR: "Portrait of Jennie."
OVERCAST: "Prince of Foxes."

production on the technical side which belies any apparently serious intent. The hurricane at the end is the least convincing part. The awe-inspiring shots of whirling, massed cloud formations and enormous waves, and the greenish tinge in which this part is photographed, did not produce in me the desired suggestion of supernatural grings-on. The atmosphere that Director William Dieterle creates in the early part is much better, where the loneliness of the painter's existence is brought out by numerous small touches. The few minor roles are all well played — Cecil Kellaway and Ethel Barrymore as the art dealers, and David Wayne and Felix Brassart as Cotten's poor friends.

PRINCE OF FOXES

(20th Century-Fox)

IT is a reflection upon Orson Welles whom one at least suspects of intelligence and good taste that he should have permitted, in a film in which he has a hand, such solecisms as Tyrone Power (in the role of a 16th Century Italian diplomat) exclaiming, "So the duke said to me, and I quote . . ." The amazing thing is that so much care was taken to make the film a faithful portrait, externally, of the period during which it occurred. It was all made in Italy, many of the internal scenes being photographed (by Leon Shamroy) inside the actual old buildings and chapels of Italy, decorated with the frescoes and madonnas of the old masters. The screenplay itself is a sinister piece of sadism in parts, with little to recommend it. A swashbuckling tale of cloak and dagger, as it might have been in less sophisticated hands, would have been better than this unhappy attempt to create with Machiavellian "realism" the evil deeds and times of the Borgias.

Apart from the improbable plot and dialogue, and the meretricious Shellabargian atmosphere, the film is faintly worth seeing for its rich settings, and for the virtuoso performance of Orson Welles as the power-mad Cesar Borgia. I liked the way he nonchalantly stole scene after scene from Tyrone Power, infusing a world of imperious egoism into the merest lift of an eyebrow or a smug twitch of those blubbery lips. Felix Aylmer also gave Tyrone Power a lesson in acting in his Polonius-like portrayal of the wise old Duke who opposes the Borgias.

Yet I felt that the fairly obvious influence of Welles on the director Henry King, who once knew how to make a very good film, was to no good purpose, especially in the horrible torture scenes and close-ups of boiling oil being poured from the battlements. Welles may not have been responsible for it all, but one suspects him, knowing his past performances, and seeing the obvious enjoyment he gets out of being as cruel and terrifying as possible in this role.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 10, 1950.