

Faithful in Small Things

JOAN OF ARC

(Sierra Pictures)

WHEN his daughter Jeanne first spoke of travelling from Domrémy to join the armies attempting to raise the siege of Orleans, Jacques d'Arc swore he would drown her with his own hands sooner than permit it. It was no doubt a momentary outburst—the protest of a harassed father who could no longer understand his daughter's thoughts or divine what dangers they might lead her into—but, as harsh words often are, these were remembered. Perhaps the gossips of Domrémy or Vaucouleurs kept them in mind; they probably reached print or parchment during the papal inquiry which vindicated Jeanne 25 years after her martyrdom. At all events, over five hundred years after they were uttered they were carefully copied into the script of *Joan of Arc*.

It might be interesting, though it would hardly be profitable, to speculate on how such coloured threads come to find their way into the ragbag of history, but at the moment all that I am concerned with is the way that particular thread indicates the general texture and pattern of the film-story.

As one has had cause to notice on this page before, when Hollywood's historical plays are under discussion, those of the better sort are often painstakingly documented. *Joan of Arc* comes into that category. In small things it is remarkably faithful—the circumstances of Joan's departure from Vaucouleurs and Baudricourt's words of farewell, the design of banners and devices, the styles of armour (with the possible exception of Joan's "white armour," which looks more like the work of a modern panel-beater), even the crosses etched upon her sword.

Accuracy of minor detail, however, is not enough. *Joan of Arc* is no miniature—it lasts two and a-half hours—and the broader perspectives are by no means so satisfying. If, for example, there are insuperable difficulties in the way of making a film where the events it depicts actually took place, then the business of filling in the background demands art and imagination. Yet far too often in Walter Wanger's over-populated set-pieces one is conscious mainly of the Hollywood sound-stage, of old familiar battlements freshly sanded over, and the hordes of earnest extras laying manfully into one another with property swords and daggers. The big crowd scenes—the assault on the bastion outside Orleans, the abjuration in the cemetery at Saint-Ouen, the marketplace at Rouen—are on the whole untidily managed. I felt at such times that the director (Victor Fleming) might well have remembered *Henry V.*, and remembered it with advantages.

However, it is in its attempts to catch the spirit and atmosphere of the times that the film fails most signally. The hands may be the hands of Esau, but (if one may be forgiven for extending the metaphor somewhat) the voice is the Voice of America. Contemporary colloquialism occasionally makes one flinch, but the film's weak-

BAROMETER

FAIR: "Joan of Arc."
FAIR: "No Room at the Inn."

nesses go deeper than the text. Hollywood, it would seem again, still lacks the intellectual maturity to handle deeply religious themes, or interpret with any sureness or sensitivity the major crises of the human spirit.

Once or twice Ingrid Bergman as the Maid did give a hint of what might have been accomplished. In the square at Rouen, for example, when she first saw the stake and the faggots the horror in her eyes was more moving than her army with all its banners. Beside her the only other person in the cast worthy of notice was José Ferrer, who played the Dauphin. Though he got little help from his lines, he did look as if he might have belonged to the 15th Century, his voice was pitched to fit the part, and he moved as if he had given thought to his movements. The rest—even Francis L. Sullivan—impressed me little or not at all. It was, in fact, difficult to avoid the conclusion that the French might have made a better job of it.

NO ROOM AT THE INN

(Pathe-British National)

NO ROOM AT THE INN, which has, quite sensibly, been released here on condition that children under 16 are not admitted, is scarcely as important as the initial shock-wave of publicity may have suggested. In Wellington it has been advertised, with more enthusiasm than accuracy, as "Wicked but witty: the Film of the record-breaking West End play."

As the same advertisement intimated, Reservations are Essential, but having made these it must still be conceded that this is a production of some quality. Most apparent from the outset is that the quality is uneven. In the first place, it should be made clear that this is an emasculated version (by Dylan Thomas and Ivan Foxwell) of the play by Joan Temple. As originally written, it was the story of a group of evacuated children, who, through the corruption of a billeting officer, fall into the clutches of a drunken and sadistic harpy. Driven desperate by hunger and ill-treatment the children eventually murder her and so the action is worked out. The screen-story is substantially toned down—the monstrous Mrs. Voray (played with great effect by Freda Jackson, who took the role on the stage)—dies by misadventure, and the plot is rather unravelled at the edges, but the film is still notable for the number of excellently limned character-portraits which it contains.

There are at least a dozen of these. Some of the players (such as Wylie Watson, Billy Howard and Frederick Moran, who appear as shopkeepers and borough councillors), make simple walk-on parts memorable. Others, like Freda Jackson and Joan Dowling (a female Artful Dodger) are impressive over longer distances. But the film suffers from poor staging. I should have thought it would not have been hard to find a genuine slum to act as a background.

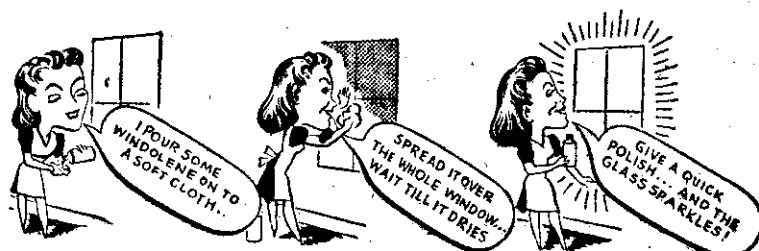
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