

Drama

JOSEPH
WOOD
KRUTCH

MOST spectators will probably agree that "A Bell for Adano" (Cort Theater) is, so far, the most effective American play to come out of the war, and some part of its success is no doubt due to the fact that it does not attempt too much. I have not read the novel upon which the play is based, but it is obvious that the author did not plan an epic or hope to get into one evening the whole truth about either war or the men who fight it. He had, instead, a simple story to tell, and though that story has implications of the greatest importance, no attempt is made to force it to carry more weight than it can easily bear, and its simple action is not cluttered up with more or less irrelevant incidents introduced out of some mistaken notion that a good play about the war must somehow get in some reference to all its major aspects.

I confess that what I had read of John Hersey's novel did not much predispose me in its favor. The story, so I read, was concerned with the misadventures of a Civil Affairs officer who realized—as his superior did not—how much a conquered Sicilian village needed the ancient bell which the Germans had carried away. That suggested to me something a little precious and a little sentimental. But in the play at least, the bell, convenient symbol though it is, remains in its proper place, and what we get is not a merely sentimental tale but a moving and substantial story of the conflict between two men—one with a decent sense of the decencies for which we are supposed to be fighting, the other a blood-and-guts general to whom war is war—merely a question of our team against the other. This general never appears on the stage, and his influence is directly felt only twice—once when we hear him through a window bullying a peasant in the street below and once when his long arm reaches out to remove the officer whose humanity is bringing life and hope back to the village. But as the curtain falls it is still an open question whether all that decent men have been able to accomplish will not be undone by the ruthless arrogance of the general and his kind.

Paul Osborn, a practiced craftsman, has made a smooth dramatization which deserves the high praise implied in say-

ing that no uninformed spectator would ever need to suspect that the story had been told before in another form. Fredric March, as the man of good-will, gives a performance of remarkable restraint and effectiveness; the rest of the company, performances generally very good indeed, though I did find it necessary to remind myself from time to time that real Italian peasants probably are in actual fact nearly as much like stage Italians as these seem to be. But perhaps the most significant thing about both the novel and the play is the seeming willingness of the public to take both the one and the other to its bosom.

Six years after the First World War was over New York audiences greeted "What Price Glory?" with an enthusiasm which could mean only that the ribald cynicism of that play expressed as the audience wanted someone to express its own not quite articulate reaction to the events through which it had just lived. Today, three years after we entered the present conflict, a corresponding audience would hardly be expected to be in the mood for a "What Price Glory?" but one might guess that it would find itself most strongly attracted to some expression of militant nationalism, to some tale of martial courage, or even to some representation of the crude horrors of war. Instead, it has chosen to acclaim a humane appeal that this war shall be made in actual fact a war of liberation rather than a war of conquest. If "A Bell for Adano" were a work of extraordinary power and hence capable of imposing itself, its success would mean less as a symptom. But for all its effective simplicity and sincerity it is hardly strong enough to demand more attention than the public is ready to give it, and its success must mean that it says what many want it to say. That many do want to have just these things said is a fact hopeful enough to be worth noting.

Billy Rose's "Seven Lively Arts," now housed in the elaborately refurbished Ziegfeld Theater, seems to me to provide about everything which can reasonably be desired in a spectacular revue. It is true that nothing now remains of an original intention to stress Art with a big A except two stunning virtuoso performances by Benny Goodman and a rather tame ballet in the classical style. It is also true that most of the entertainment is provided by the established stars rather than by any of the newcomers; but at least two of these established stars are at the top of their

form, and Mr. Rose has provided spectacle with his usual lavish hand. Beatrice Lillie is still unique and still capable of making the gamut from A to B yield more variety than most performers can get out of what looks like a really extensive range; Bert Lahr can still make more and uglier faces than any two other comedians on our stage. The skit in which Miss Lillie appears as a high-born English lady who has learned out of a book how to talk to American soldiers in their own language is very funny indeed but no funnier than that in which she sings a waltz song and has nothing except herself to use as material. Mr. Lahr's rendition of a drinking song in the manner of "The Student Prince," is also hilarious, even though it was obviously suggested by his masterly rendition, some years back, of "The Song of the Woodman." Doc Rockwell's lecture on female anatomy will continue to be a high spot unless the police insist that the young lady who indicates the organs under discussion by means of an illuminated manikin must in the future make fewer embarrassing mistakes.

Films

JAMES
AGEE

FRANKLY, I doubt I am qualified to arrive at any sensible assessment of Miss Elizabeth Taylor. Ever since I first saw the child, two or three years ago, in I forget what minor role in what movie, I have been choked with the peculiar sort of adoration I might have felt if we were both in the same grade of primary school. I feel I am obligated to this unpleasant unveiling because it is now my duty to try to review her, in "National Velvet," in her first major role.

So far as I can see on an exceedingly cloudy day, I wouldn't say she is particularly gifted as an actress. She seems, rather, to turn things off and on, much as she is told, with perhaps a fair amount of natural grace and of a natural-born female's sleepwalking sort of guile, but without much, if any, of an artist's intuition, perception, or resource. She strikes me, however, if I may resort to conservative statement, as being rapturously beautiful. I think she also has a talent, of a sort, in the particular things she can turn on: which are most conspicuously a mock-pastoral kind of simplicity, and two or three speeds of semi-hysterical emotion, such as ecstasy,

an odd sort of pre-specific erotic sentiment, and the anguish of overstrained hope, imagination, and faith. Since these are precisely the things she needs for her role in "National Velvet"—which is a few-toned-scale semi-fairy story about a twelve-year-old girl in love with a horse—and since I think it is the most hopeful business of movies to find the perfect people rather than the perfect artists, I think that she and the picture are wonderful, and I hardly know or care whether she can act or not.

I am quite sure about Mickey Rooney: he is an extremely wise and moving actor, and if I am ever again tempted to speak disrespectfully of him, that will be in anger over the unforgivable waste of a forceful yet subtle talent, proved capable of self-discipline and of the hardest roles that could be thrown it. (I suggest it jealously, because I would so love to make the films rather than see them made; but if only a Studs Lonigan for the middle period could be found—the two I will mention might conceivably overlap it—and inter-studio entanglements could so be combed out that both Rooney and James Cagney—from whom Rooney has learned a lot—were available, they could find in Farrell's trilogy the best roles of their lives; and those novels, done as they should be, could become three major American movies.)

There are still other good things about "National Velvet": the performance of Anne Revere as the girl's mother and of Donald Crisp as her father (except for their tedious habit of addressing each other as "Mr. Brown" and "Mrs. Brown," and some conventional bits of business which I suspect were forced down Crisp's throat); the endearing appearance (I don't suppose one can really call it a performance) of Jackie Jenkins; and a number of gently pretty "touches," mainly domestic, which may have been Clarence Brown's, who directed, or may have been in the script, or for that matter in Enid Bagnold's novel. And there are few outright blunders, like the silly burlesquing of one adolescent love scene.

Yet in a sense—the sense of all the opportunities, or obligations, which were either neglected, with or without reason, or went unrealized—almost the whole picture is a blunder mitigated chiefly but insufficiently by the over-all charm of the story and affectionateness of the treatment, by Rooney's all but unimprovable performance (I wonder only about his very skilful but

stylized use of his hands in his impressive drunk scene), and by a couple of dozen piercing moments—which may have transfixed me exclusively—from Miss Taylor.

The makers of the film had an all but ideal movie: a nominally very simple story, expressing itself abundantly in visual and active terms, which inclosed and might have illuminated almost endless recessions and interreverberations of emotion and meaning into religious and sexual psychology and into naturalistic legend. But of all these reins, all of which needed so light, hard, clear a hand, they seem to have been conscious only of the most obvious; and they have bungled even their management of those. Far from understanding and valuing their story for all it is worth, they don't even tell its surface half well enough.

To take just two samples of this: the sequence during which the horse is trained for his race gives you little more than generalized pretty-pictures instead of a précis of the pure technical detail which must have deeply excited, instructed, and intensified the girl, and so could and should have done the same for the audience. As for the race and the immediate preparations for it, they are only the more sadly flunked because, again in a secondary, generalized way, they manage to make you half forget the fact by being quite fairly exciting. If the audience could have experienced what the girl experienced, with anything like the same razorlike distinctness of detail and intensity of action and of spirit, they would have been practically annihilated. But they not only never have a chance to identify themselves with the girl or her horse; they hardly even get a good look at them, during the whole course of the race. The jockeys, moreover—and again their horses—are not only not characterized, and play none of their professional tricks on each other or the amateur; by some horribly misguided desire to enhance the contrast between their mature masculinity and the heroine's frightened nubility, they are selected to look less like jockeys than like guards on All-American. Such neglect amounts to a dereliction, not of art, if Hollywood fears and bridles at the word, but of the most elementary common sense, which amounts to the same thing. If a man wrote a piece of music so full of chowf-chowf, people would hardly bear to listen to it (unless it were given some such title as "The Four Freedoms," or perhaps "The Seven Against Thebes"). But that is not going

to make a flop of "National Velvet." I expect to see it again myself, for that matter.

Records

B. H.
HAGGIN

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- Thomas*: Overture to "Mignon"; Toscanini and N. B. C. Symphony, V 11-8545, \$1.
- Vivaldi*: Violin Sonata in D; Morini; V 11-8671, \$1.
- Wagner*: Part of Act 3 of "Tristan and Isolde"; Melchior, Janssen, Columbia Opera Orchestra under Leinsdorf, Teatro Colón Orchestra under Kinsky (not all of Melchior's singing is agreeable to the ear); C Set 550, \$5.50.

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