

excels in the expression of chaste, classic nobility. In fact, the performances of *Alceste* with which Flagstad closed her Metropolitan career were probably the most artistically rewarding she gave in that house. It is sad that they were never captured on records. What we are offered now is of a lower order. For some reason Flagstad was persuaded to record the opera in Italian, and this seems to have posed problems of vocal production and musical communication that she could not entirely overcome. Certainly her 1956 performance does not recapture all the ringing ardor of the English-language performances at the Met five years earlier. Moreover, she is hobbled by Geraint Jones's stolid, oratoriolike conducting. But again, despite the reservations one must make, the recording remains of great value. The "Grove of Death" scene, with its vaulting, long-lined declamation, will be particularly treasured by anyone who responds to clean, unadorned vocalism.

UNADORNED is the word for Flagstad's kind of singing. She does not overwhelm the listener with interpretative insights or carry him away with the force of magnetic passion. Indeed, she rather tends to hold him at arm's length. This chilly manner prevented her from ever making much impact as an interpreter of lieder during her recital-giving days. Flagstad's recent recording of songs by Richard Strauss and Hugo Wolf (London 5292), however, forces at least a partial reevaluation. Doubters should listen to the sustained line in Strauss's "*Mit deinen blauen Augen*" or the radiant climax in "*Ich trage meine Minne*."

No one, of course, has ever doubted Flagstad's mastery of the song literature of Edvard Grieg, and it is good to have further evidence of it in two new LPs (London 5263 and 5290) and to marvel again at the smoothly sung portamentos in "*En Drom*" and at the impeccable opening of "*Fra Monte Pincio*."

Flagstad is to singers what Heifetz is to violinists—the embodiment of clear, precise, forthright musicianship. Hers is not the only way of making music, but it is a good way, and nobody has yet come along to take her place.

## MOVIES: *A Prisoner's Tale*

HARRIS GREEN

IN HIS FILM *A Man Escaped*, French writer-director Robert Bresson tells the story of a young Resistance worker who is captured by the Nazis and of his subsequent attempts to escape. Bresson, himself a prisoner of the Germans in 1940, has eliminated any personal involvement in the film and instead has based his film on an autobiographical account of capture and escape by Commander André Devigny, published in *Le Figaro Littéraire*. With such material and experience behind it, the film could have become a flamboyant, highly subjective documentary, complete with overwrought narration and an irresponsible hero hurling taunts through the bars at his torturers. Happily, Mr. Bresson has realized that such stuff would narrow the scope of *A Man Escaped*. He has kept his approach to the tale scrupulously objective, even to the point of detachment.

In fact, in the opening scene (which an introductory note has curtly identified as "Lyons, 1943"), there is such an impersonal manner in the direction that for a moment one wonders if a director is functioning at all. Here the young Resistance worker in the custody of the Gestapo is making his first frantic bid for freedom by bolting from the car that is taking him to prison. Bresson allows his camera to sit impassively by—to stay in the car waiting—not venturing forth to investigate or even to turn slightly to see the scuffle that is obviously taking place outside. Eventually the prisoner is hustled back, handcuffed,

and given a thorough beating. But at this point the camera discreetly fades into the next scene. Violence and excessive melodramatics have been excised from *A Man Escaped*.

THERE ARE no professional actors. The young prisoner is played, and quite well, too, by François Leterrier, a philosophy student who attends the Sorbonne. The others, whom we gradually meet emerging from their cells or exercising in the prison compound, are likewise amateurs.

Instead of commonplace background music, Bresson has used a superb sound track that re-creates in haunting fashion all the despair and loneliness of the place, along with an almost abstracted blend of restrained narration (by Leterrier) and prison sounds (clanging doors, echoing footsteps, distant volleys). When a scene must be underlined or elevated, it may be graced by a choral passage from Mozart's *C Minor Mass*.

*A Man Escaped* is a series of separate scenes arranged to fit into a large, over-all pattern. By never overstating the contrast Bresson heightens it with his own restraint. His montage of short scenes, in which three minutes of viewing time may encompass either continuous action or a span of weeks, adds an aura of timelessness to a film whose very essence is time—the time it takes to saw through a door or to scale a wall or to wear a soul down to defeat. The German, heard barking his incessant command "*Pas parler!*" or glimpsed from the rear and at a distance, emerges not as an individual but as a force. The young hero (about whom we know so little) becomes its opponent. Bresson, carefully selecting and molding sights, sounds, and scenes, makes their contest not an excuse for thrills but, instead, an allegory of captor and captive, in which the implications transcend, as they must in all works of art, the individuals themselves.



# The Algerian Ordeal Of J.J.S.S.

MAX ASCOLI

**L**IEUTENANT IN ALGERIA, by Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber. Knopf. \$3.50.

I would not say it's a pleasure to read this book, or to review it. Yet the reader's discomfort is a puny, passing thing compared with the trying six months Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber spent in Algeria as a lieutenant in the French Army. There are books that make the reader almost ashamed at taking a fast, free ride through the experience that the author had to endure hour by hour, day after day. *Lieutenant in Algeria* belongs to this category—books the reader must take on the chin.

Servan-Schreiber writes about the Algerian mess as he saw it. Many other Frenchmen who have fought or are fighting in Algeria see things differently, as this book takes pains to make clear. I wish Americans could hear their report, too, and above all, I wish we could learn that life in Algeria had become at least bearable for the French who live there as well as for the Moslems. Perhaps the situation is improving, and there is a chance, as the French authorities claim, that the conflict may turn into a political one, carried on among Algerians with ballots. Or perhaps, as others say, the fighting going on there is still as aimless, bloody, and inconclusive as Servan-Schreiber thought it was a year ago when his tour of duty ended.

For Americans, this report on Algeria has a familiar ring. There are no reasons why we should assume a holier-than-thou attitude toward France. What has been happening during these last few months in our own South has proved once more how wretched life becomes for those who think there is still room for charity and reason in the most envenomed racial conflicts.

There is of course an enormous difference between the French predicament in Algeria and ours in our own South. We have a civil war of nerves there: Organized groups of

white and Negro citizens fight each other with legal and extralegal means, yet with an astonishing restraint on physical violence. Or perhaps this is not so astonishing if we remember that our South was soaked in violence throughout the Civil War and for years after. A point of saturation has been reached where violence scarcely pays. The price was so exorbitantly high that France and Algeria could never afford it.

**A**CCORDING to this book, there are several wars going on in Algeria, all rolled into one. There is the war of organized rebel groups, fighting for Algerian self-government—a self-government that, according to the extremists among the rebels, should lead to the unrestrained sovereignty of the Algerian nation-to-be. The extremists do not yet represent the whole Moslem population, but in Servan-Schreiber's opinion they ultimately will if the French Army treats all Arabs as enemies or potential enemies.

The French Army is engaged in both war and "Reconstruction" at the same time: It uses all means of conventional warfare to crush the rebels and concurrently it is trying to establish, even before victory, a postwar civil order. But what spirit guides the "pacification" campaigns—that of Abraham Lincoln or that of Thaddeus Stevens? According to Servan-Schreiber the official government program is Lincolnian, the actual practice vengeful and wantonly oppressive. The Lincolnians are the targets of radicals on both extremes. The all-out colonialists attack them with weapons ranging from slander to blackmail to stray bullets, while the Arab fanatics avidly seek every opportunity to torture and maim those who work for understanding and co-operation and friendship between the two races.

In this tangled web of wars—military and political, fought with tanks

and knives and character assassination—the war that concerns Servan-Schreiber the most is the one waged by Frenchmen against Frenchmen, and within the conscience of many a Frenchman. Of this war he is a partisan and a witness, and his testimony doesn't pretend to be anything but a partisan presentation. He is at his best when he describes the anguish, the hopes, sometimes the despair that keep stirring in his own mind and in the minds of other Frenchmen around him.

The source of major, ever-recurrent anguish is invariably the same, though every time it makes itself felt, the bite is sharper: It is the fear that France may not only lose Algeria, which is bad enough, but may lose her soul in Algeria. Routinized or thoughtless killing, used as retaliation against the sometimes horribly savage butchery perpetrated by the Arabs, may turn a whole generation of French youngsters into callous, docile followers of a leaderless fascism.

**I**T MAY BE ASKED, Why should we be told about all this, why should this French tale of horror and despair be put into approximate English? Couldn't these Frenchmen keep their own civil strife to themselves? The answer is that the French just don't do things this way. Since the Revolution at least, whatever moves them deeply becomes the object of concern and involvement for all civilized men. The French have no national privacy, and ask for none. It will never be forgotten how the whole world was shaken by a crude miscarriage of military justice at the expense of an obscure little captain.

Once again, one is reminded by this little book that France does not belong only to the French. Should this ever happen, France would join the ranks of those improbable nations like Laos or Tunisia that owe their precarious existence to the dismemberment of France's empire.

Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, age thirty-three, has been playing the role of child prodigy and prodigal for so many years that even his friends could fear, at times, he had turned into a sort of Peter Pan of French political journalism. With this book, in itself an act of courage, he has done a man's job.