SR Goes to the Movies

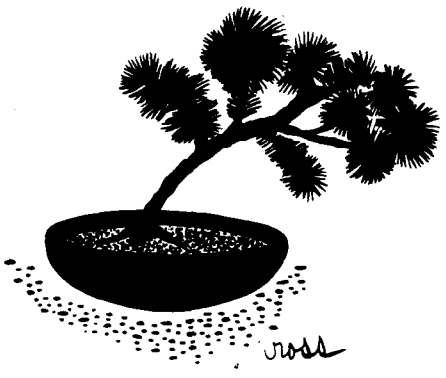
CONRAD'S FAR EAST, STRINDBERG'S GLOOM

ONE way of describing the literary excellences of a work of fiction is to say that, ineluctably, it defies transference to the stage or screen. I came across an encomium of this sort in an essay that H. L. Mencken wrote on Joseph Conrad, published at a time when movie audiences were thrilling to the tribulations of Lillian Gish in "Broken Blossoms." Mencken saw no possibility for Conrad's stories and novels to get beyond the bounds of the printed page. Of "An Outcast of the Islands" he had this, in particular, to say: "The world fails to breed actors for such roles, or stage managers to penetrate such travails of the spirit, or audiences for the revelation thereof." A silent movie, "Lord Jim," and a talking version of "Victory" subsequently seemed to prove Mencken all the more right. Nevertheless, forces were working, all unbeknownst to Mencken, to prove him wrong. For at the time of writing the above declaration young Carol Reed had reached the age of ten, Ralph Richardson at fifteen was still far from his knighthood, Robert Morley was a little fellow of eight, and Trevor Howard had not yet learned to walk.

The new movie that Carol Reed has done is called "Outcast of the Islands" (Lopert). It is pure Conrad, surprisingly close to the original novel both in event and spirit. What is left out Conrad might very well have wanted left out at a later date, for in this early work he provided three separate climaxes. Reed has chosen the one that is most ironic and most appropriate. Conrad also included some fairly uninteresting intrigue between the Arab and Malay settlers of Sambir, where the redoubtable Captain Lingard established a trading post on his "secret river." Only enough of this has been left in to make the essential story clear. What has resulted is a steamingly alive movie, strikingly photographed (much of it "on location" in Ceylon), wonderfully acted. The very first moments of it make you aware that you are in firm, sure hands, that your trip to the Malay straits is both necessary and worthwhile. This is not only the best that Carol Reed, already the possessor of a stunning reputation as a director, has yet done, but it represents something of a new departure for him. "Outcast of the Islands," which he has produced as well as directed, shows him moving into a more serious and rewarding phase, something quite different from the crime and thriller movies with which his name is usually associated.

"The Third Man" and "Odd Man Out" showed his fondness for atmospheric effects, and this same fondness may have determined his attraction to a writer who filled his works with them. The novel was drenched with atmosphere; Conrad himself called it the most "tropical" of his Eastern tales. In the movie the atmosphere hangs just as heavy: a dirty, muddy river; the rocky reefs at its mouth that prevent entrance of any but Lingard's schooner; the native huts on poles sunk into the mud-banks. You might think that Reed and his photographer had found the very river that sparked Conrad's imagination, even though its exact geographical location is never made fully clear in the book. The movie doesn't make it clear either; it's merely tropical and Far Eastern. The time is probably the later 1800's, when there was some fierce rivalry between the British, the Dutch, and the Arabs for the trade of the East Indies, and before "a great pall of smoke had been sent out by countless steamboats." Within this generality Reed has created his specific details lovingly, seeming to search for those that are particularly Conradian. Conrad's Far East, it must be admitted, is sometimes regarded as slightly mythical. One does not get a feeling of a period, but rather of a tale-like atmosphere—one altogether real during the time of the telling and, in the movie, of the viewing.

"An Outcast of the Islands" was Conrad's second novel, written, so he tells us, in response to his editor's suggestion, "Why not try another?" The question seems to have had magic properties, for Conrad immediately began work on what turned out to be a curious sort of sequel to his first book, "Almayer's Folly." Captain Lingard and Almayer had already been introduced in that book; so had Babalatchi, the scheming native. The new book went back in time to show how the prosperity of Lingard and Almayer, the peacefulness of Sambir, had been disrupted by a strange romance between Willems, a protegé of Captain Lingard, and Aissa, a native girl, half Arab and half Malay. The book actually turned out to be a study of the disintegration of a once proud man, and it is on this decline and fall of Willems that the movie concentrates.



This theme, it occurs to me, is a hardy perennial, one that most writers seem unable to avoid when dealing with exotic neighborhoods. It became very new and shining in the hands of Conrad—the melodramatic trappings are only on the surface of his works—and it has lost no luster in the hands of Carol Reed. There is nothing stereotyped in this movie, no Dorothy Lamour wandering around in a sarong. There is, however, someone infinitely more attractive, a young Arab actress called Kerima, who plays the part of Aissa. The fact that she has no lines to speak somehow emphasizes all the more the libidinous nature of Willems's relationship with her. She, it can be said, seems to have stepped right out of the book, and so have others, to loom before us, alive and engrossing.

For this Carol Reed had the help of a fine, authentic screenplay by William Fairchild, and some splendid acting. Ralph Richardson's performance as Captain Lingard is superlative; equally so is that of Robert Morley as Almayer; both give the impression of having been specifically bred for their roles. Perhaps the hardest job, though, fell to Trevor Howard as Willems; he had to make clear the successive stages of degradation, and the final, self-loathing that is left to Willems as retribution for his betrayals of Captain Lingard. Wendy Hiller is seen to advantage, but not very often, as Almayer's wife. Conrad devotees may notice a few changes in race and coloration in some of the minor characters, but these are hardly consequential. Multitudinous audiences "for the revelation thereof" are surely owing to "Outcast of the Islands"; it is a beautiful and intensely absorbing film, made possible by a rare amalgam of cinematic and acting talents.

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Space is lacking, unfortunately, to go into the many merits of a new Swedish movie, "Miss Julie" (Trans-Global Pictures), that opened in New York recently. It is based on the Strindberg play of similar title, and

has been sensitively directed by Alf Sjoberg. Some of the acting now and then seems a little heavy for American taste, but for the most part the picture is a restrained and beautifully photographed rendering of one of Strindberg's representatively gloomy plays. Anita Bjork, as the haunted Miss Julie, struck my fancy most among the actors. She manages to make quite credible her confusions, her futile affair with the butler of her household, and the impulse towards self-destruction bred in her by parents of differing moralities and ideologies. It is altogether a period piece, of course, for it would be hard to take seriously some of Strindberg's revelations in a present-day context, but Miss Julie's dilemma is poignant nevertheless. The play has been broadened out to include more characterizations and some flashbacks of the past. The latter are sometimes poetically done, but occasionally have the look of obvious contrivance about them. They are, however, always a help in understanding the girl's tormented spirit. An unusual and worthwhile movie. It was a prizewinner at the last Cannes festival, however much that might mean.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

SR Recommends

Outcast of the Islands: Reviewed in this issue.

Miss Julie: Reviewed in this issue.

Walk East on Beacon: An admirably detailed filming of counter-espionage in the USA, made with the cooperation of the FBI.

Singin' in the Rain: Gene Kelly in a nostalgic spoofing of the early talkies.

Encore: Another trio of Maugham short stories turned into an engaging film. (*SR* Mar. 29.)

The Man in the White Suit: Alec Guinness invents a fabric that will never wear out—with hilarious consequences. (*SR* Mar. 29.)

My Six Convicts: Prison lore based on Donald Powell Wilson's book of same name. (*SR* Mar. 29.)

Deadline—U.S.A.: For once, a true-to-life film about the newspaper profession. (*SR* Mar. 29.)

The Marrying Kind: Matrimony runs a bumpy but witty course as delineated by actress Judy Holliday, director George Cukor, and writers Kanin & Gordon. (*SR* Mar. 22.)

5 Fingers: L. C. Moyzisch's "Operation Cicero" turned into a spy film that avoids all the usual clichés of the genre and includes an abundance of the Mankiewicz sophistication. (*SR* Mar. 8.)

Cry, the Beloved Country: A sensitive screen translation by Alan Paton of his moving novel of South African life. (*SR* Feb. 2.)

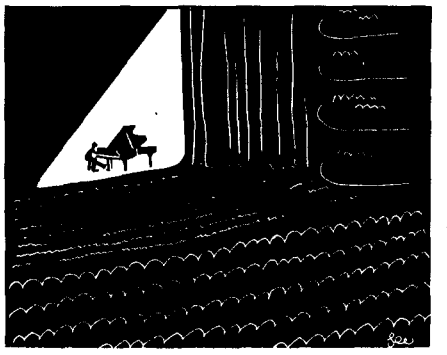
The Young and the Damned: Luis Bunuel's enlightened and enlightening study of Mexico's juvenile delinquents, reviewed here under its original title, "Los Olvidados." (*SR* Sept. 15.)

Wendy Hiller, Ralph Richardson, Trevor Howard, Robert Morley—"rare amalgam. . . ."

—*From "Outcast of the Islands."*

Kerima (center)—"seems to have stepped right out of the book."

Music to My Ears



"AMAHL" & "ELIJAH" JOIN "PARSIFAL" IN THE EASTER PARADE

STUDENTS of seasonal music-making found some unfamiliar but hardly unwelcome deviations from custom in the matter produced for Easter observance. To the traditional — Bing-willing — "Parsifal" (at the Metropolitan) the City Center provided the counter of the airy "Amahl" of Menotti, and the Philharmonic-Symphony interceded in Carnegie Hall with a streamlined "Elijah" trimmed by Mitropoulos for the hour-and-a-half pattern of the Sunday broadcast.

Whether what was heard was actually Mendelssohn's "Elijah," or Mitropoulos's, involved not merely the omission of certain choral and solo episodes that have a part in the unfolding of the story, but more fundamentally the conductor's whole approach to the score. He achieved a striking improvement in the usual balance of chorus vs. orchestra in Carnegie Hall by asking for a U-shaped platform on which the chorus was arranged around and *above* the instrumentalists; but he also achieved a rather nervous rendering of Mendelssohn by fast tempos and sharp accentuations which disturbed the flow of the music. This conductor's merits are many, but a relaxed hand with a simple melodic statement is not among them.

Thus, such a superb episode as "If with All Your Hearts," eloquently phrased by Richard Tucker, came out jumbled and insecure for want of firm rhythmic integration, and the equally fine "Lord God Abraham" was pushed along rather unceremoniously, rather than being spread expansively on the air. To be sure, Desire Ligeti, a Hungarian bass imported to sing this and other music of Elijah, has neither the secure top nor the molded sense of legato to do Mendelssohn justice, but Mitropoulos did not help with his over-active tempos.

In the interests of interest Mitropoulos had his Elijah on a pulpit-like platform at stage right, Mmes. Frances Greer and Martha Lipton at the rear near the chorus, and Richard Tucker off at the left where the organ usually is. Elijah gestured toward Heaven from time to time, Miss Greer walked around to sing one bit near Elijah, and Tucker mounted a little flight of steps for some of his singing. I doubt that this added much to understanding of the text, since the articulation was uniformly poor; it did detract from attention to the music by devices of movement much more artificial than the conventional static concert manner. Some of the orchestral playing was first class, as was the work of the Westminster Choir; but the net worth of the performance could have easily been declared on any questionnaire, without incriminating anybody but Mendelssohn.

Menotti's audacity in transferring his creations from one medium to another—radio to stage, stage to radio to records to films—seemed stretched to perilous extremes in the transfer of "Amahl and the Night Visitors" from TV to stage, but it survived the ordeal for a single reason: the basic power and integrity of the musical impulse. On the stage of the City Center young Chet Allen's boy soprano was nearly inaudible in the seventh row and must have been but a whisper in the balcony, and some of the scoring cozened by the microphones was wafer thin in the theatre. But the opening string passages, beautifully phrased by the rising young conductor Thomas Schippers, cast a spell that was never dispelled by what followed, however close to the limits of audibility. Those who disparage Menotti for not writing modern music should at least honor him for writing what is indubitably music. He may be reaping the past rather than sowing the future, but his shoot, however slender, puts out leaves and bears fruit.

Aside from the thinnish scoring and the perilous reliance on a boy soprano in a leading role—no Allen, no Amahl —the stage production sustained all the impressions conveyed by TV: the good, simple, sustained invention in the score, the forceful character of the Mother as played by Rosemary Kuhlmann, the effective characterization of the Kings, as sung by Lawrence Winters, Richard Wentworth, and Michael Pollock. Eugene Berman's complicated setting left me in doubt whether the scene was Riverdale or——, but the universality thus implied had its point. "Amahl" seems a more likely perennial than "Elijah," if only because the identity of Schippers with his task was more complete than Mitropoulos's with his.

As for "Parsifal," it is Tennyson's brook, so far as operas are concerned —men may come, men may go, etc. Whether, brook-like, it babbles, purls, or soothes depends largely on momentary matters of casting and direction, for everybody knows that the now-pallid Urban production is ugly and disillusioning. Fritz Stiedry directs it with all the contempt for elapsed time of which Mitropoulos's "Elijah" was so critically aware, and with a certain want of the incisiveness that gave the latter's Mendelssohn sharpness of outline, if nothing else. Herbert Graf's well-planned action for Act II made the flower maidens less a Vassar daisy chain than usual, though the costuming grows ever more impoverished.

Since there is as fine an Amfortas at large as George London, neither Paul Schoeffler nor Hans Hotter made me altogether happy. Likewise the alternate players of Guernemanz, Deszo Ernster (earnest enough, but lacking any legato) and Jerome Hines, who has come along remarkably in a very difficult role but remains more convincing when heard but not seen (via radio in Act III) than when heard and seen in the theatre in Act I. For a big man, Hines gets relatively little plus effect from the length of arm and limb he has to manipulate.

Altogether, the broadcast was the best of the three New York performances, for it included both the vibrant Kundry of Margaret Harshaw and the musically sung Parsifal of Hans Hopf. Miss Harshaw was disaffectingly costumed for the seduction of Act II, but she forges steadily across the musical terrain taking bumps, declivities, and rises in stride. Already marked by uncommon word emphasis, it could amount to great singing, for the voice knows no fears and is rich from bottom to top. Hopf's Parsifal bore out the expectations roused by his Walther, for he can curve a phrase where most other Wagner tenors sing a series of notes, his range is ample, his power adequate. He could, however, learn to support his tones better, especially in the low register, where they sometimes fell off to inaudibility for lack of sufficient breath. Altogether, however, he makes a very listenable Parsifal, and a not-too-impossible looking one.

—IRVING KOLODIN.