



Three Problems in Film Adaptation

THE motion picture is such an amalgam of arts that its existence as an art-form in its own right is frequently overlooked. One repeatedly encounters the notion that because a movie uses great gobs of Tchaikovsky in its score, or interpolates dances by the Ballet Russe, or is based on a play by Shakespeare, it is necessarily more "artistic" than a simple, straightforward "shoot-'em-up." It's a pretty theory, and one that snob critics have been using to whack away at the film medium with ever since "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari." "Caligari's" settings derived from the expressionist paintings of its day, hence it was obviously art. What its admirers failed to ask is whether it was *cinematic* art.

Clearly, this question was uppermost in Renato Castellani's thoughts as he prepared his new, ravishingly beautiful screen version of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" (United Artists). Castellani wanted to make it not a filmed play, but a *movie*. To an astonishing degree he succeeded. Shakespearean purists may be critical, even shocked, at the liberties he has taken with the text. Others undoubtedly will praise the film because Robert Krasker, its cinematographer, has contrived to turn the screen into a veritable art gallery of old masters. His color, lighting, and compositions repeatedly recall the works of such sixteenth-century painters as Bellini,

Titian, Holbein, and Caravaggio. But to reject the film because it departs from the original—or to hail it simply for its handsome photography—is to miss the real significance of what Castellani has accomplished. He has recast a triumph of the poetic theatre for a form that is in many ways its very antithesis.

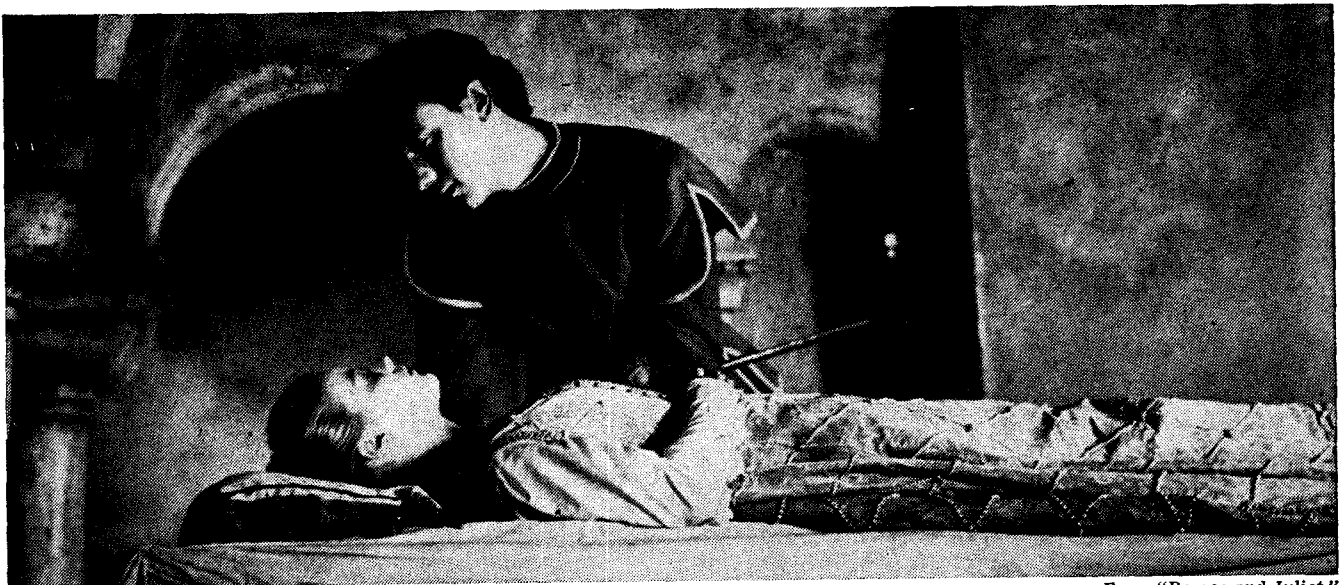
Castellani, an exponent of the Italian neo-realist school of film making, is fully aware of the camera's unique ability to show us *things*—great, sweeping landscapes or the corner of a friar's cell, a teeming market-place or the intimacy of a boudoir, all in the flash of a moment. Shakespeare, writing for a stage that was bare of scenery and with a minimum of props, had to create these backgrounds through poetic imagery. To the extent that he succeeded the need to reconstruct sets in solid, three-dimensional form disappears. But the motion-picture medium demands those shapes and forms. Its actors cannot exist in a void. Laurence Olivier, in "Hamlet," sought a compromise through shadowy constructions, suggestive and evocative. They left his film cold, contrived, and unhuman.

Castellani has met this same challenge in two ways. He has eliminated many of Shakespeare's purely descriptive passages (Juliet's speech that opens Scene II of Act III, for example), allowing the Verona streets and north Italian countryside to speak for them-

selves. And where the language has been retained the scenes are given a richness, a sensual beauty that fully complements and sustains it. Friar Lawrence's first appearance ("The gray-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night") is not in his cell, but outside the walls of Verona, gathering up his "baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers" in the green serenity of early morning. And Benvolio has his first scene with Romeo by a misty, placid stream instead of in "a public place," as on the stage. In short, the film's exquisite photography is functional—not merely "artistic."

Again, because Shakespeare was writing for a bare stage, he often used rhyming couplets to indicate the end of a scene. Castellani has eliminated many of these, repeatedly substituting lap dissolves to keep the story flowing on. For it is story that he is mainly concerned with—Shakespeare's tragedy, and the human beings caught up in it. Cutting boldly for action, he has dropped many a famous line—including the entire "Queen Mab" speech. To hasten the climax he has removed the apothecary scene (Romeo now stabs himself with the same knife that Juliet uses). To heighten the climax he has inserted a quick sequence of coincidences through which Romeo just misses Friar Lawrence after Juliet's interment, all leading logically and dramatically to the final tragedy at the tomb.

Perhaps his boldest stroke of all, however, was the casting of two young and inexperienced players as the "star-cross'd lovers." To anyone accustomed to mature Juliets and middle-aged Romeos, Laurence Harvey and Susan Shentall in these roles will prove a revelation. Harvey, trained with the Stratford Players, has a light, lovely



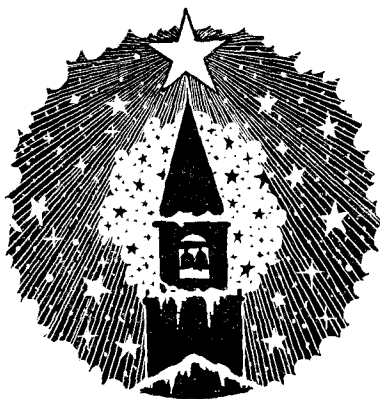
—From "Romeo and Juliet."

Susan Shentall and Laurence Harvey—"the emotional truth emerges."

voice, a fine diction, but he acts without fire or any great intensity. Miss Shentall, blonde and placid as a Fra Angelico madonna, reveals her lack of professional training in a curiously halting delivery. And yet, despite these faults, the emotional truth of Shakespeare's drama emerges as it rarely has in more finished performances. Because Miss Shentall looks like a young girl, she conveys fully the utter lostness of Juliet when father, mother, and nurse turn against her after Romeo has fled Verona. Because Laurence Harvey looks like a youthful lover, he bounds and moons and mourns without the sense of affectation that marred even so memorable a Romeo as Leslie Howard's. Their Romeo and Juliet achieve a poignancy, an urgency, a credibility as human beings that I, at least, have never before encountered on stage or screen. For once I found myself hoping that Friar Lawrence would reach the tomb in time to avert the tragedy.

In the supporting cast, Flora Robson and Mervyn Johns are outstanding as the nurse and Friar Lawrence (their roles have gained in stature through the trimming of other parts). Norman Wooland makes a graceful and beautifully spoken Paris, Sebastian Cabot seems a Holbein come-to-life as Capulet, and John Gielgud reads the introductory Chorus with a dignity and directness that sets the tone for the entire production. Surrealist Leonor Fini has created a gallery of period costumes that are both handsome and dramatic. And the timeless beauty of Verona and Mantua provide a richness of *décor* that no studio could hope to rival. There may be more poetic productions of "Romeo and Juliet" than this one, but it is hard to imagine that it will ever be excelled either in physical beauty or sheer cinematic intelligence.

WHILE Shakespeare's plays remain a challenging Everest to moviemakers everywhere, works from the foothills of our contemporary theatre are constantly being quarried for use in Hollywood. And yet, though the modern, realistic drama would seem to be considerably closer to the motion-picture medium than Shakespeare's poetic plays, their adaptation into movies are not always an unqualified success. Screenwriters learned early that it was not enough simply to set the camera in front of some scenery and let the actors go on about their stage business. No matter how electric the drama, it was invariably shortcircuited on a stagnant screen. But even today many of them are only just beginning to realize that there is a good deal more to the filmic adaptation of plays than breaking each scene down into



a variety of backgrounds, with two lines in the taxi, three in the elevator, and two more in the living room.

For there is a profound difference between watching a play and watching a movie, a psychological difference created by the camera. The camera, penetrating instrument that it is, brings us close to the people of the drama. In the theatre, we are prepared to watch and listen until the situation unfolds and begins to grip us either intellectually or emotionally. At the movies our psychological defenses are down. We respond immediately, almost psychically, to those huge faces on the screen. We identify ourselves with them and their problems. If the film fails to establish that *rapprochement*, that empathy between its characters and the people in the audience, it remains cold and lifeless. And not even a new background for every second line will give to it the kind of animation that is the special province of the movie.

George Seaton, who both adapted and directed the new film version of Clifford Odets's play of a few seasons ago, "The Country Girl" (Paramount), reveals a keen awareness of this difference between the two media. His credit title reads, "Written for the screen by George Seaton"—and that is precisely what he has done. His "Country Girl" still holds to Odets's basic characters and situation: an aging actor, frightened by the responsibility of a starring role in a show, uses his wife as a mask to hide his own insecurity. But Seaton has changed, reshaped, even re-created the play for film purposes. (One of the difficulties of adapting Shakespeare is that the adapter has much less freedom to make such drastic alterations.)

Seaton opens his film not in the mean and shabby hotel room of the original, but in the theatre itself. The show is in rehearsal. The company needs a leading man, a singer. The director hopes to engage Frank Elgin, once a popular star but a bad risk now because he's known to be a drinker. Elgin is given a hearing, the producer agrees to take a chance on him—and Elgin disappears. Thus, in the first ten minutes of the

film the *milieu* is established, the main line of action set in motion, and the main character sympathetically introduced. An empathy is quickly established because all these things have been seen by the audience, not simply talked about.

This is not to suggest—as some more rigid film estheticians would have it—that the spoken word is an obtrusion in a primarily visual art. There are ideas too subtle for pantomime, too elusive for gesture, and for these dialogue is essential. Seaton, radio-trained and a top screenwriter before turning director, is not afraid of dialogue. At several points he immobilizes his camera completely for minutes on end to give full attention to the words. But once the words have registered the camera is promptly turned loose again to prowl, to observe character and the mounting tensions of a play in rehearsal. Seaton displays a canny sense for the balance between words and visuals—and the basic cinematic sense to know that the visuals must come first.

His camera presents, for example, many things that words alone could never convey—mood, atmosphere, the "feel" of an empty theatre after the actors have left it and the work light is turned on, the backstage fluster of a Broadway opening night, and, through a beautifully imagined lingering lap dissolve, the startling contrast between the early, successful Elgin and the present failure. Throughout, Seaton receives splendid support from his cast. Grace Kelly is blazing and eloquent as the wife, William Holden bitingly forthright as the young director, Anthony Ross properly harassed as a producer. And Bing Crosby's portrait of the weak-willed, fear-ridden, talented drunk exceeds anything he has yet done on the screen. Seaton and Crosby developed the role together, shaping and changing it to meet their conception of Frank Elgin. As a result, admirers of the original play may protest that this character (and Holden's director as well) differs in some essential ways from what Odets had in mind. It's a valid protest. But more important is the fact that Seaton, holding to the theme of the play, has fashioned from it a new work, valid as a film and peopled with characters who are fully-dimensional and absorbing in their own right.

THE animated film, though a branch of the movies, has its own laws. Problems of identification and empathy take second place to the underlying challenge it offers the artist—to create freely, out of his own imagination, a picture he can move through space and time at his own will. The cartoon film is a seven-minute flight of fancy, re-

stricted only by the art and imagination of the man who makes it.

Interestingly enough, whenever cartoons have been elongated to feature length the producers have turned to outside sources for inspiration—generally to fairytales and children's classics—as if afraid that their own creativity might not sustain the greater length. Disney, of course, has always interpolated considerable original material in his "Snow Whites" and "Cinderellas," as well as characters invented by his talented staff. The English cartoonists John Halas and Joy Batchelor, adapting George Orwell's great political satire, "*Animal Farm*" (De Rochemont), set themselves a task that was both easier and more difficult. Orwell's spare, vivid prose is almost picture writing: "The hens perched themselves on the window-sills, the pigeons fluttered up to the rafters, the sheep and cows lay down behind the pigs and began to chew the cud." It reads like a shot sequence. Except for a change at the very end (a suggestion of a new revolution), and the elimination of some of the minor incidents, human characters, and animals, Halas and Batchelor were able to reproduce Orwell's book almost line for line.

But Orwell intended "*Animal Farm*" as a grim parable on the rise of the modern totalitarian state, the state in which, as he says, "All animals are equal—but some animals are more equal than others." The whole point of his book was that the parallels be apparent, its characters and types recognized. The pig leaders of the revolution, Napoleon, Snowball, and Squealer, the sturdy proletarian Boxer, and Benjamin, the pessimistic donkey—all had to be created in film to carry through that recognition. Obviously, animation was called for. But the imagination of the animators was necessarily restricted to problems of characterization for the *dramatis animati*, planning their appearance, mannerisms, and backgrounds.

As a result, "*Animal Farm*" emerges more successfully as an honest adaptation of the Orwell book than as a significant contribution to the art of the cartoon film. The pigs are properly hateful, Boxer is noble and long-suffering, the lean black hounds (the secret police) frightening and terrible. But the entire film gives a sense of being tied too closely to its source—while lacking the urbane mockery and keen cutting edge of Orwell's prose. Perhaps its main significance is the suggestion that the feature-length cartoon can be used as a medium for something beyond fairytale storytelling. Unfortunately, "*Animal Farm*" implies rather than proves this contention.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



TV AND RADIO

TV's Withered Dames

THE *B.B.C. Quarterly* is a journal for those interested in the art and science of broadcasting. In its Autumn 1954 issue (regrettably the last) there is an article, "Shakespeare on Television," by Michael Barry, head of television drama for the British Broadcasting Corporation. The author, writing of an English TV production of "*Macbeth*," states: "The director was now working very much in close-up, and over all we were carried too close to the play, with the result that it was difficult to view the whole with a clear perspective. Significantly, the *witches* were remembered after more important scenes in the tragedy had been forgotten." "Double, double, toil and trouble"—the three weird sisters of Shakespeare's dark drama of crime with blood have also loomed unreasonably over every American television presentation of "*Macbeth*."

Inevitably they have ministered to their mistress, Hecate, and hissed their prophecies at Macbeth in some form of sinister and grotesque ballet movement. The sense of their spoken Elizabethan obscurities is difficult enough to follow on the printed page. On TV, writhing, contorted, choreographic, the witches have officiated, without fail, over steaming cauldrons of stage-waits. Maurice Evans, the Shakespearean actor-producer, however, managed to slow the Grymalkins up to an agreeably understandable walk on his recent television presentation of "*Macbeth*" for Hallmark Greeting Cards on NBC. (The production was transmitted in RCA compatible color, but this report is on the monochrome reception.) Instead of witches' figures in the opening scene, there were witches' faces, looking directly down on the camera, as into a pool: faces—and hands, bony-fingered, making approved union witches' passes in the air. The pot and the cooking were gone: arrived was the opportunity to hear clearly what the witches were saying. Mr. Evans unbearded them, though. Speaks Banquo in Act I, Scene 3, of the original text:

You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me
to interpret
That you are so.

The Hallmark witches had no beards;

they appeared as not too weird maiden aunts.

This offering to the gods of the living room was not without new damage, though. In the same scene, on looking upon the witches for the first time, Banquo asks:

What are these
So wither'd, and so wild in their
attire,
They look not like the inhabitants
o' the earth,
And yet are on't?

Any similarity between the image Banquo conjured up and the work of the NBC costume and make-up departments was purely coincidental. And there you have the very essence of the difficulty with Macbeth's witches on television.

Wreak havoc with their "fillet of a fenny snake" routines in the good cause of clarity; and the same strokes that simplify them to the ear, double-bladed, cut large swaths in the "foul and filthy air," the strange and violent seas of terror that underlie and overcompass the heavy, damned, and monstrous universe in which the career of the Thane of Glamis takes sudden fire and comets to its doom. The impact of the play depends on a cumulative build-up of "horrid deeds" and "horrible imaginings." The sensitive stomachs of TV audiences and the technical limitations of the TV screen tend to work against the ideal effect, to delete, dilute, scale down for general taste and comprehension. And, as the play's nerve-ends are tied in neat, surgical curls, so the vital fluid of it is lost.

Act IV, Scene 1, is a case in point: the cavern scene, in which Macbeth, having murdered King Duncan and noble Banquo, comes to the witches to seek reassuring portents of his uneasy future. On stage, screen, on less recent TV, this scene has ever presented the supreme challenge to the scenic designer. For here before the amazed murderer's eyes must pass the apparitions of an armed Head, a bloody Child, a Child crowned, with a tree in his hand, and a show of eight Kings, the last with a glass in his hand, Banquo's Ghost following. In Mr. Evans's production the challenge was wisely refused. Macbeth lies down, instead, upon his own bed in his castle, and dreams. The witches appear above his head in the