



AN EARTHIER KIT

AT ITS EDINBURGH unveiling Christopher Fry's "*The Dark Is Light Enough*" [SR Apr. 3, 1954] seemed beautiful but terribly remote. Although the dialogue was more direct than previous Fry exhibits, the characters remained more interested in wit and poesy than in such dramatic events as the Hungarian rebellion of 1848 raging outside the window, a husband held hostage by the invading army, a bit of near-adultery, a duel in which the son of the house is shot, and the death of Countess Rosmarin, the play's leading character. Of course, non-interference is the ideal of civilized Christianity, and—of course—the essence of comedy is for the individual to achieve a momentary superiority over the stream of events that leads to death. Nevertheless, as a piece of theatre "*The Dark Is Light Enough*" seemed to twinkle a million light years away. If the characters onstage refused to get excited about matters, why should we the audience?

In the new American production, director Guthrie McClintic has moved his cast halfway between the earth and the Milky Way. Whatever the characters may say, they do seem more emotionally involved in the here and now of the play. The effect is perhaps comparable to what happens when Shakespeare is played in another language. There is a gain in basic clarity, but a loss in poetry and complexity. What is clear in this production is that these Thursday evening discussions held at the Countess's home create a special milieu, a finite heaven that may surpass the Biblical one. Just as "*Camino Real*" was not a geographical spot, but the down-moment through which the romantic must pass, so perhaps is Christopher Fry's "*Thursday world*" the up-moment in the lives of the compassionate.

While English audiences may not have known where the sound was coming from, they received a measure of enjoyment from just listening to Dame Edith Evan's celestial symphony. Here in New York Countess Rosmarin is played by Katharine Cornell, and her performance is a beautifully-thought-out violin solo. To it Miss Cornell brings an admirable honesty, assuming nothing that the audience isn't in on. She works her way through speeches as if to retest their validity. While this approach may break the rhythmic fall

of Fry's swift snowflakes, it leaves us with a very human Rosmarin whose concern with the vicissitudes in the story keeps us involved at critical moments. Miss Cornell also manages a rare touch of extremely mortal humor when, after taking a great deal of trouble to learn a bawdy soldiers' tune, she remarks, "There are better songs, of course." If Rosmarin is God, as the script suggests, Miss Cornell makes Her an earth-bred deity whose every bit of divinity is taxed by bellicose mortals.

God's loss of omnipotence is easier to accept than what has happened to Richard Gettner, the play's cynic, who represents the worst and most rebellious in all our natures. Tyrone Power has elected to play Gettner simply as a pitifully weak coward. The result may be a character more clearly defined than he was in the script, but it also leaves us with a dull and colorless protagonist in a play that needs every bit of force it can muster.

In a supporting role, John Williams as a man who reconciles the fact that he is sometimes a liar with an unimpeachable integrity gives a performance that has style, force, and reality. While Mr. Williams's excellence is no news to those familiar with his career, he seems in this play to have found a new intensity. The remainder of the cast is nowhere nearly as comfortable with the particular problems of performing Fry, and are thus seen at a disadvantage.

Part of the trouble may be Oliver Messel's rich romantic scenery, which challenges the actors to outshine it. While they have wisely chosen not to allow this challenge to provoke them into a patently artificial kind of histrionics, they have in simplifying "*The Dark Is Light Enough*" fallen short of making matters very exciting. Still Fry's sad comedy is conceived on a

higher level than any play on Broadway, and is not to be missed by anyone who likes to thread his way through the uncharted cosmos, particularly in the pleasant company of a Katharine Cornell who is more friendly and down-to-earth than I have ever seen her. In cases like these the less-than-replete is more than enough.

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George S. Kaufman, who with his wife, Leueen MacGrath, were the original adaptors of the new musical "*Silk Stockings*," is reported to have described Ernie Martin of producers Feuer and Martin as "Jed Harris rolled into one." This tribute to the producer's relentless drive towards perfection as he sees it may explain the phenomenal success of Feuer and Martin, who have just achieved their fifth hit in five attempts.

When "*Silk Stockings*," which began as an attempt to attach jokes about the Russians to a story (they finally selected "*Ninotchka*"), opened in Philadelphia the show had plenty of laughs but its total effect was depressing. Mr. Kaufman, who had been directing the show, became ill and retired. Subsequently Cy Feuer took over the direction and Abe Burrows came in to work on the book. Two jokes added by Mr. Burrows were a crack about *Ninotchka* belonging to "the Daughters of the Soviet Revolution" and another about looking up a prominent Russian in "*Who's Still Who*."

After seeing its long-delayed New York opening, it is pleasant to report that "*Silk Stockings*" is a jolly evening of sophisticated jokes with brief rest periods between the laughs during which snatches of lovely Cole Porter melodies are sung. There is also one very fine dance number, in which a group of Soviet artists attempts to interpret American jazz. Beyond that much praise one finds the going difficult. The lyrics are heard so sparingly that one cannot confirm the impression that most of them are below the Cole Porter standard; Don Ameche and Hildegard Neff perform with such confidence and pace that one hesitates to call them uninteresting; and a young newcomer named Gretchen Wyler has so much impact on the audience with her take-off on a Hollywood beauty "in her first serious *non-swimming* picture" that one cannot really tell whether the performance is coarse or merely a satire on the view of American vulgarity held by many Europeans.

What Feuer and Martin have done is to present the shining face of a hit musical so skilfully that one never notices it's not breathing.

—HENRY HEWES.





SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

SOMEWHAT BEASTLY TO THE BRITISH

THE AMERICAN motion-picture industry has so vigorously invaded the European market that some form of reprisal was inevitable. European producers—and England's primarily—have long sought to divert to their own coffers some part of that beautiful golden stream that flows incessantly toward Hollywood.

Recently they have adopted a relatively subtle plan. Realizing that most movies are sold over here on the basis of star names, they have lured into the English studios many of our top actors and actresses—aided, it should be noted, by a gap in our tax laws that exempted income earned by anyone residing outside the country for a period of two years. Gregory Peck is one star who has been taking well-publicized advantage of this loophole, and the most recent product of his looping is currently visible in the J. Arthur Rank presentation "The Purple Plain" (United Artists). A curious mixture of the American and British styles of film making, it thuds heavily between the two schools.

It's the kind of story our own studios grind out regularly several times a year—the one about the crack aviator forced to bail out with his crew over hostile terrain who leads his men to safety. This time the terrain is Jap-held Burma during the last war, a Burma of lush jungle vegetation and arid wastes made vivid by Technicolor and a resourceful sound crew. As a result, this section of the picture achieves at least its anticipated quota of standard thrills and chills. But even in an action picture the British feel that some attention should be paid to character, and Eric Ambler, who wrote the screenplay for this film, spends at least half his time establishing the obvious. Peck plays a Canadian flyer with no regard for his own life or anyone else's. A complete neurosthenic, he is the despair of his squadron until a friendly medic introduces him to a charming Burmese girl. Love. Peck has something to live for. And then, of course, the script dumps him in the desert.

All this takes too long to establish—too long, at least, if the main purpose of the film is to dwell on the flyer's derrin'-do. Peck manages to make the squadron commander fairly persuasive, the British contingent of actors supporting him is top-notch, and Win Min Than is lovely to look at in an array of pastel gowns. Even so, "The Purple Plain" fails to jell,

achieving neither the swiftness of a good Hollywood adventure film nor the depth of an authentically British character drama.

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Every once in a while the English studios turn out a movie that represents their idea of what American audiences want—a frothy, star-studded affair generously laced with songs, jokes, and sex. But, as "Innocents in Paris" (Tudor) again reveals, nobody can be Hollywood nearly so convincingly as Hollywood. Despite a cast that includes Alastair Sim, Margaret Rutherford, Claire Bloom, Laurence Harvey, and Claude Dauphin—and introducing Mara Lane, billed as "Britain's Marilyn Monroe"—the film ambles along a very tedious road.

* * *

On the other hand, there is still one section of Britain's film makers who have perceived that imitating Hollywood is folly and tailoring for American tastes is, at best, perilous. These producers make pictures primarily for their home market—films like "Passport to Pimlico," "The Lavender Hill Mob," and last year's "Genevieve." Though popular in their own country, their appeal is perhaps limited on this side of the Atlantic. But to audiences who relish the piquant differences that exist between our national temperaments and customs their undiluted Britishness is in itself a sheer delight. And when to that is added a gallery of types as charming and gay as the bubbling young medics who populate "Doctor in the House" (Republic) the combination is irresistible. Although based on a novel by Richard Gordon, there is little in the film that might properly be described as plot. It's simply the adventures of four high-spirited young medical students, and their girl friends, through five years of training at old St. Swithin's Hospital. Some of the fun, inevitably, is extracurricular—like Dirk Bogarde's heavy date with Kay Kendall (the stunning girl who played trumpet in "Genevieve"); yet an amazing amount of it is indigenous to its hospital setting—the patients who know more than the internes, the blustering head surgeon, the blistering headmaster, and the diverse stratagems of the students to date the prettier nurses. If the dialogue is always as British as *Punch*, it is often just as amusing.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT

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