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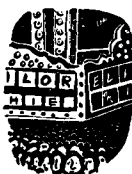
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### SATURDAY REVIEW

Circulation Department

25 West 45th St., New York 36, N. Y.



## SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

### A Matter of Attitude

THE INFLAMMATORY racist issue dominates two new "adult Westerns," but neither seems calculated to outrage the white supremacists. One wonders why. Why make a picture that handles hot, controversial material in a manner that either blunts the edge or reduces everything to a noncontroversial cliché? The simplest explanation, of course, would be to charge blind reaction, and substantiate it with sinister twists of plot and dialogue. (The Indians in John Huston's "The Unforgiven," for example, are referred to repeatedly as "red-hide niggers.") But the simplest explanation is invariably too simple for a medium as complex and contradictory as the motion picture. What seems more likely is that the producers, directors, and writers failed to think through the implications of their themes. They had ideas, but lacked a point of view.

One need not attempt to disentangle all the skeins that are threaded through (and occasionally lost) in the plot complications of "The Unforgiven." It is sufficient to observe that the main line develops the story of a beautiful foundling (Audrey Hepburn), an Indian girl growing up in a community that hates and fears the Indian. Although her origins have been kept from her, there are others who know, and demand that she be returned to her people, the savage Kiowas. The Indians know too, and want her back, for she is the sister of their chief. But her adopted mother (Lillian Gish) and her adopted brother (Burt Lancaster) are stubborn people. They have raised the girl and love her even though she is an Indian. In the end she fully justifies their confidence by shooting down her real brother when the Kiowas attack.

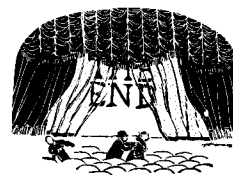
Obviously, the screen writer, Ben Maddow, is trying to convey something important through all of this. The blind, unreasoning hatred of a human being because of the color of his skin is wrong, he seems to be saying. (Maddow did the adaptation of Faulkner's "Intruder in the Dust" a few years back.) And love, not blood, is thicker than water, he adds. Now, both of these are admirable and elevating sentiments, but in the context of this story they seem curiously lacking in force or validity. The film finds nothing wrong in the fact that a white family stole an Indian baby; because they gave it love and a good home, presumably

everything is fine. And the Indian girl is asked to express her gratitude by killing her brother. It is tempting to speculate what kind of denouement would have been provided had she been a white baby stolen by Indians.

Nor does John Huston's direction do anything to strengthen the point of view. The reasons for the Texas settlers' unrelenting hatred of the Indians are muffled; and Joseph Wiseman, the vengeful saddle-tramp who reveals the secret of the girl's shameful origins, remains a man of mystery throughout. Characters appear and disappear with startling abruptness, suggesting that large chunks of the script were whacked out in the final editing. Sequences begin without motivation and end without resolution. "The Unforgiven," handsome and ambitious, proves ultimately as flabby in execution as in conception.

LIKE "The Unforgiven," John Ford's "Sergeant Rutledge" is set in that troubled period just after the Civil War, when so many of our democratic concepts were strained and tested. "Rutledge" tells, through many labored flashbacks, of the trial of a Negro non-com suspected of rape and murder. Although his commanding officer (Jeffrey Hunter) is convinced of his innocence, the good people of Fort Linton are in the mood for a lynching and crowd the rear of the courtroom, ropes in hand. But as the trial unfolds, as the evidence mounts—the sergeant defended a white girl against an Apache attack, acted with superhuman bravery in a patrol skirmish, met each misadventure with tact and ingenuity—the case against him falls apart. Unfortunately, so does the picture. Our man is too clearly a paragon, the charges against him too obviously trumped up, the prejudiced opposition too patently stereotyped. And, finally, there is the unavoidable suspicion that the sergeant has won out simply because, to use a popular Southernism, "he knows his place." But Woody Strode, as the beleaguered Rutledge, wins both sympathy and admiration with his innate dignity and imposing frame.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.





## BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

## November Song

GORE VIDAL's "The Best Man" will make American audiences think about politics and will provide them with many routine satisfactions in the process. Venturing into the precarious realm of prophecy, the playwright places the action of his new play in a hotel that is housing rival candidates for the Presidential nomination; the time is this summer. One candidate, Bill Russell, closely resembles Adlai Stevenson, although he is saddled with a fictitious rumor of promiscuity with women, and a past nervous breakdown. The other, Joe Cantwell, reminds one of Richard Nixon, except that he is charged with having built a reputation on an overpublicized crusade against the Mafia in American gangsterism, and with having been involved in a homosexual incident while in the army. This much of the play is propaganda and melodrama, and no right-minded theatregoer will take these elements as gospel. But when Art Hockstader explodes into the picture, the play gets down to real business. This Truman-like ex-President, who calls himself "the last of the great hicks," doesn't care about the private morality of the candidates. His all-important endorsement will go to the candidate who he believes will make the most effective President. However, he insists upon keeping the candidates guessing. He tells Russell, whom he likes personally much better than Cantwell, that both candidates have approximately the same stand on the important issues (i.e., they both believe in recognizing Red China), but that Cantwell has a better sense of timing, and in a crisis would act promptly rather than be immobilized by complex thoughts and philosophizing. Russell understands this, but Cantwell does not and tries to blackmail Hockstader into supporting him.

Hockstader is not so concerned about Cantwell's ethically disgraceful plan to sling mud, as he is about the fact that the decision to do so shows that Cantwell misjudged the ex-President's real intention, and is therefore not a good judge of character. And here Hockstader lays down the new law for modern Presidents. Anything goes, as long as you are right in your judgments.

Now we begin to see the truest part of Mr. Vidal's writing. Underneath the conventional reportorial melodrama which he has felt obliged to construct, there is visible a slow-burning contempt

for the deteriorating ways of contemporary America. "How you going to keep them down on the Senate, after they've been on TV?" is a neat capsule criticism of the way this new medium has become the tail that swings the Congressional dog. Mr. Vidal also scores the fact that elections have become popularity contests. And he deplores the necessity for politicians to "spread God over everything like cat-sup." In "The Best Man" he even shows that Russell, who doesn't believe in a hereafter (but rather that the doing of a good act sets off a series of other good acts and thus brings "immortality" to the doer) is more human than Cantwell, who does. Because he does, he needs to sell himself on the rightness of his sins *after* committing them.

In the last act, when Hockstader has been conveniently removed from the action he so colorfully dominates, Mr. Vidal can end his play in one of several ways—noble victory for Russell,

ignoble victory for Russell, ignoble victory for Cantwell, or a canceling out of both in favor of a blank face that may be filled in simply by giving it power and responsibility. Because "The Best Man" is not trying to be a great play, its ending is at the moment interesting food for conjecture, but it may have to be changed in November.

Under Joseph Anthony's fluid direction, Lee Tracy nicely blends his twinkling showmanship with the serious demands of the role of the battling ex-President, and Melvyn Douglas makes the transition from pseudo-Harding to pseudo-Stevenson without a bump. Frank Lovejoy's pseudo-Nixon is deliberately devoid of the charm which might mask the process of self-deception Mr. Vidal wants to show us. And Kathleen Maguire is devastatingly accurate as the cheap Mrs. Cantwell.

Will "The Best Man" change the minds of the many voters who see it in the next seven months? I don't think so. Nor is it apt to change the characters of any of the politicians. It is a small visit to a big subject, and one hopes that with this second popular hit in two tries, Mr. Vidal will now attempt a more fully committed attack on the things he seems to feel strongly about.

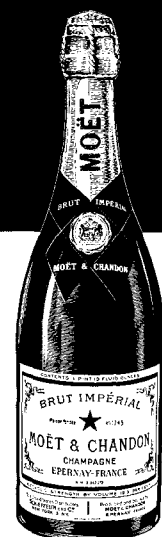
—HENRY HEWES.



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