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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Kicking a Habit

A FEW weeks ago in, of all unlikely places, a small theatre in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona, the controversial film version of Jack Gelber's "The Connection" had its American premiere. Perhaps insufficient time has elapsed to assess accurately the moral decline in this relatively well-to-do and respectable community, but the picture had a very successful run, and played without incident. Pending an appeal from a New York court decision, which found the film's language objectionable, "The Connection" will probably now begin to open slowly around the country, in cities and states free of censor boards and repressive courts. And I say more power to it.

I say this not merely because I found it fascinating as an exhibit of bravura film making, which it is; but more especially because its director and co-producer, Shirley Clarke, has dared to venture into territory specifically forbidden to motion pictures. For a number of fairly obvious reasons, the commercial movie works in a horrifyingly constricted area, bounded on one side by the regulations of the Production Code, and on the other by strictures of "good taste" that are supposed to cover all other contingencies.

Unfortunately, there are some areas of life where "good taste" simply does not exist—particularly if that "good taste" is the taste of another, earlier era. Our playwrights and novelists have long since discovered that these polite shackles had to be abandoned if they were to write meaningfully of a world they never made. Whether "angry" or "beat," they drew their strength from their willingness (and wish) to fly in the face of convention. Movies, on the other hand, if only because they are so terribly expensive, find it safer to observe, and conserve, the conventions, to be no more daring than can profitably be exploited.

"The Connection" ignores all this. Gelber, writing his own screenplay, has made no attempt either to sweeten or sanitize his original play (although, mercifully, he has shortened it). Leach's pad, as designed by Richard Sylbert, is every bit as scabrous and claustrophobic as it was on the stage—perhaps even more so, since the camera permits us to see the cockroaches, and forces us to look at the peeling paint and cracking plaster. Most important of all, Shirley Clarke, directing her first feature film, has approached her material

honestly and seriously. "The Connection" does not compromise or sensationalize. It makes no effort to be popular (as the Los Angeles version did) by spicing up the proceedings with four-letter words. The words are there when they have to be there, when the characters would use them naturally. Similarly, there is considerable humor in the film—the hard-bitten humor of confirmed junkies. But it is a humor without jokes, a corroded wit that chills as much as it amuses. Few pictures have made so little effort to meet their audience more than halfway.

On the other hand, Mrs. Clarke has done an extraordinary job of cinematizing the original material. Holding to the single setting of the play, her picture becomes a documentary-like investigation of the flat and its inhabitants. (Not for nothing does one of them carry about a copy of Kracauer's "Theory of Film"!) As in Antonioni's films, the camera insists that we look, darting across the room for a close-up, moving from fingers on a keyboard to the rapt, gone expression of a listener, revealing the throbbing veins of the forearm prepared for a "fix," the

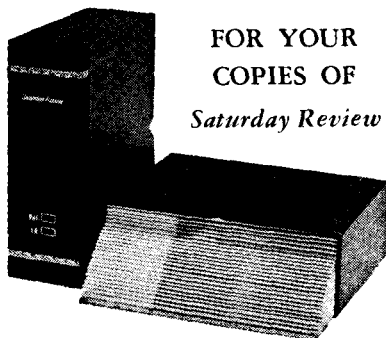


agonies of a junkie beyond fixing. Through sheer virtuosity, the director transforms what is admittedly a distasteful subject into an absorbing experience.

Many will find "The Connection" disturbing, even shocking. I regard this as the mark of its director's integrity. A study of drug addiction that is anything less than disturbing must of necessity be something less than honest. What is to me most impressive about this picture—even beyond its technical skill—is its sense of truth, its willingness to look without flinching, and to reveal without preaching. With it, Shirley Clarke has taken a bold step into new and unfamiliar territory for American movies, the motion picture (Continued on page 54)

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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT

Forward Without Anger

LONDON.

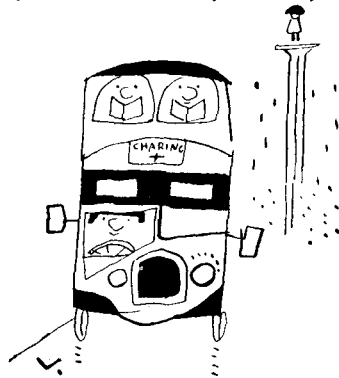
A MAJOR part of the excitement in this year's British theatre season seems to be coming from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company's London branch. Under the directorship of Peter Hall this group has cornered the actor market because it can offer performers annual employment in a repertory of classic and modern plays. And the attraction of good actors and West End attention has appealed both to directors and to the new wave of playwrights, many of whom have promised the company their next work. For the unknown playwright, the company has taken over the Arts Theatre and set up an experimental program which has just scored a success with its first offering, "Everything in the Garden." The play, which neatly describes the self-imposed corruption of some status-seeking suburbanites, was written by a forty-three-year-old Anglo-Irish TV writer, Giles Cooper.

Meanwhile, the company's other branches are flourishing, too. Its production of Jean Anouilh's "Becket" drew the prize both for the best production of the season and for the best performance, which went to Christopher Plummer for his portrayal of King Henry II. Its enthusiastic reception necessitated its being moved out of repertory into a regular theatre. Only the fact that Mr. Plummer was previously committed to playing "Macbeth" and "Cyrano de Bergerac" at the Canadian Shakespeare Festival in Stratford will keep it from continuing beyond May 5.

Mr. Plummer's performance is indeed remarkable as he boldly fluctuates between outrageous low comedy and eloquent high despair. In the early scenes he plays the King as a loutish, good-hearted vulgarian. He and Becket, played in the cockeyed style of Alec Guinness by Eric Porter, romp about sharing private jokes and insulting the clergy. When Mr. Plummer looks at a pretty young Saxon girl and says, "Shall we wrap her up to take with us or have her sent?" it is out-and-out music-hall buffoonery, but this sort of behavior is a symptom of the King's compulsion to tolerate life by joking it away. Behind it, however, there is always the wretchedness that is later to erupt in ordering Becket's assassination and the agonized fit of a man now completely alone in a world where he loves no one. Mr. Plummer plays the scene magnificently, and

the moment when he collapses in a spectacular fall over a table is as moving as it is breathtaking.

At its own theatre, the Aldwych, the company is continuing its repertory program, which at the moment includes last summer's "As You Like It," from Stratford, and Brecht's "The Caucasian Circle of Chalk." Just finishing is Michel St. Denis's production of "The Cherry Orchard," starring Dame Peggy Ashcroft and Sir John Gielgud. Because the production rehearsed eight weeks, it was able to achieve a high level of perfection and a number of marvelous moments. These include one scene in which the squeak of a man's new boots is used with precise timing to fill a silence; Dorothy Tutin as Varya summing up the joy she has missed in her life as "just a dream"; Peggy Ashcroft's hysterical laughter at herself as she embraces the furniture; John Gielgud's amusing apologies for talking too much and in the next breath talking some more; and a truly funny priggish love scene between Ian Holm as Trofimov and Judi Dench as Anya. And yet this



fine gallery of nostalgic portraits, plus a few by less talented members of the company which are not so fine, seem too calculated, too reflective to move us. All the same, we admire and are richly entertained by a great deal of the performance.

There are some in London who feel that the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company is a middle-of-the-road solution to the problems of the English theatre, friendly to both the staid and the new but lacking the force it might have if it asserted the future against the past. And while there is probably some truth in this, the fact remains that this is the problem everywhere. The most hopeful thing about Mr. Hall's organization is that his company is facing the problem practically and without self-delusion. —HENRY HEWES.

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