



Something for Everybody

AS THE days grow shorter, the weather colder, and the scent of Academy Awards fills the air, the movie companies are beginning their annual barrage of big pictures saved just for this occasion. To an industry that is forever focused on the next film, a movie released only a few months back is almost ancient history—ancient enough, at any rate, to be forgotten by Awards time. Since Academy nominations demonstrably mean cash in the bank for the nominees, the new pattern is to release studio hopefuls in Los Angeles and perhaps one or two other major cities, but hold back their main distribution until after the Academy members have delivered up their deliberations. What this means is that readers in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles are likely to see the pictures discussed in these columns during the next few months just about the time they are reviewed. Less favorably placed but no less avid film fanciers may have to wait quite a while. Fortunately, *ars longa est*.

High among the current contenders (in certain strategic cities) is the protean Peter Ustinov's adaptation of "Billy Budd," which credits as its source the play by Louis O. Coxe and Robert H. Chapman rather than the novel by Herman Melville. To be sure, the Messrs. Coxe and Chapman fashioned for the stage a taut and dramatic exegesis of Melville's mystic philosophy; in Hollywood parlance, they had "licked" the story. It is just possible, however, that by going back to the original, Ustinov might have "licked" it still further into better screen shape. As it is, the film alternates between scenes of high action and spectacular beauty aboard an eighteenth-century British frigate, and scenes all too palpably studio-made in which the cast stands about discussing knotty problems in ethics. Melville articulated his ethical considerations into the development of his story handily enough (indeed, they were central to it); in this screen version, they often appear both intrusive and inconclusive. The climactic summary court-martial, with its examination of the differences between justice and law, is in fact so very summary that Billy seems to have been whisked off to the gallows with virtually no trial at all.

Another difficulty, posed by both the book and the play, is the inability of today's sophisticated audiences to accept a character as all good or all evil, all black or all white. Terence

Stamp, as Billy, gets around this somewhat by playing with an open-faced honesty and simplicity that make the lad's unblemished virtues appear the product of a natural naïveté. Robert Ryan's Claggart, on the other hand, smacks of nineteenth-century melodrama—all smiles and smirks and knitted eyebrows, and carefully measured menace in his every speech. It is a performance that Ustinov, as director, might possibly have modulated if he were not so concerned with the fussy details of his own Captain Vere—a role, incidentally, that he never quite seems to master. He is soft when he should be commanding, blubbery when he should be stern. Stout and unshaven, he is almost the antithesis of the precise, logical, soul-wracked captain of the *Avenger* that Melville drew. Indeed, either of his underlings, John Neville or Paul Rogers, might have cut a more likely figure in the role.

This is not to declare "Billy Budd" a disaster area. Far from it. Ustinov, as producer, director, co-author, and star,

has aimed high. He has earnestly tried to encompass Melville's purpose into his screenplay, and has permitted no compromise to soften the edge of Billy's tragedy. He has mounted his production handsomely, and Robert Krasker's black-and-white photography of men crawling the rigging of a ship under full sail is not easily forgotten. And he has invited an almost uniformly excellent cast to compete with him for scene after scene. He may have fallen short of his target, but the effort to reach it is admirable.

"What Happened to Baby Jane?" sets out, on the other hand, to do considerably less, but achieves its goals with something breathlessly close to perfection. Quite simply, it is a shocker—a shocker in the best Hitchcock tradition; and at the same time a superb showcase for the time-ripened talents of two of Hollywood's most accomplished actresses, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Scenes that, in lesser hands, would verge on the ludicrous simply crackle with tension—or, as in the shots of Miss Davis dancing raptly on a crowded beach, they are filled with unbearable pathos.

Tempting though it be to fling all the bouquets at these long-reigning favorites, no small part of the credit be—
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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT



Room at the Bottom

EVEN in Sidney Michaels's some-
what too extroverted adaptation,
François Billeldoux's "Tchin-
Tchin" is a rare and wondrous thing.
The word "thing" is used advisedly be-
cause "Tchin-Tchin" falls within none
of the conventional dramatic forms. It
merely follows the heartbeat of a re-
lationship between two human beings
as they progress away from well-ordered
lives, and away from the more dramatic
wordly love affair which has deprived
each of his respective marital partner.

For his jilted pair, M. Billeldoux has
selected two people who would seem
to be the least likely to succeed in hold-
ing a conversation with each other. Ce-
sario Grimaldi, the uncouth and ramp-
ant head of a construction company, is
everything that Pamela Pew-Pickett has
been brought up to abhor. Pam, in
turn, is everything Cesario cannot ap-
preciate, a coldly reserved and com-
pletely unvoluptuous lady who subli-
mates the expression of real emotion
into charity organizations that permit
her to do her duty toward fellow men
whom she doesn't have to see or meet.
But now, with their two lives suddenly
having been made meaningless by the
turn of events, they both, without con-
sciously realizing it, so desperately need
to share their grief that their natural
incompatibility becomes not only un-
important but in an odd way absolute-
ly essential.

In other words, the situation, and not
society or their individual self-pro-
tective instincts, compels their des-
tinies, and this can only be so if they
are not given the means to reattach
themselves to someone with whom they
can repeat a socially acceptable, selfish,
and purposeful approach to daily life.
It also requires a lot of alcohol.

As the jilted alcoholic lady, Margaret
Leighton is even more moving than she
was in her previous prize-winning per-
formances here in "Separate Tables"
and "The Night of the Iguana." While
director Peter Glenville has asked her
to play a parody of British inhibition,
Miss Leighton never lets the role's
surface characteristics come out of
anything but a deeply suffering person
who blames only herself for whatever
harsh treatment she has received.
Whether she is awkwardly begging for
affection from a man she cannot excite,
or whether she is furiously but unavail-
ingly crying out that she is not "a
punching bag," Miss Leighton is in
total combat with her destiny, but all
within her precise artist's discipline.

Thus she achieves a nakedness that is
more naked than it is possible to get
in life. Although Anthony Quinn's
Cesario is less fully achieved—probably
because he tries too hard to demonstrate
each line—his performance is a con-
siderable improvement on the one he
gave in "Becket," particularly in the
later scenes where quiet acceptance and
gentle humor are called for.

The adaptation and the production
also work a little too hard, tending to
make us expect something more event-
ful, something more significant. Any of
several Will Stevens Armstrong settings
would be sufficient for a whole other
play. And the incidental music tends to
represent a cacophonous world rather
than the delicate emotional current
growing despite it. Since Mr. Michaels's
additions to the play work intelligently
in the direction of clarity and height-
ened theatricality, the difference be-
tween this version and the original will
only bother those who can mourn such
seemingly small details as the changing
of Mrs. Puffy-Picq to Mrs. Pew-Pickett.

For luckily Mr. Michaels has not al-
tered the play's underlying virtue. It
remains the tender passage of two ter-
ribly considerate people into a rela-
tionship that has its own miraculously
impractical logic, and it arrives at an
extraordinary beauty the other side of
shabbiness, a beauty somehow more
genuine than the contrived handsome-
ness of a strivingly efficient world.

Sidney Kingsley's latest play, "Night
Life," appears to be an admirably am-
bitious attempt to describe the temper of
our times, and to affirm the playwright's
belief that the idealist still has a chance
to triumph over the frighteningly pow-
erful cynic. In a key club, where only
money and power are respected, we
meet a variety of characters including a
rising thug who is taking over the
American labor movement from the
more honest men who control it. This
hot-headed mobster, played by Neville
Brand, is also about to marry the nice
young girl (Carol Lawrence) who sings
at the club. She is really in love with
an honest lawyer (Jack Kelly) who has
refused both marriage to her and a
job at the U.N. because he has lost
faith in the future of mankind. While
the ending is intensely dramatic, the
play suffers both from its lack of focus
on the most important character, a mid-
dle-aged square played by Walter Abel,
and from offering reportorial values
where it has led us to expect poetry.

—HENRY HEWES.