



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

Something for Everybody

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.

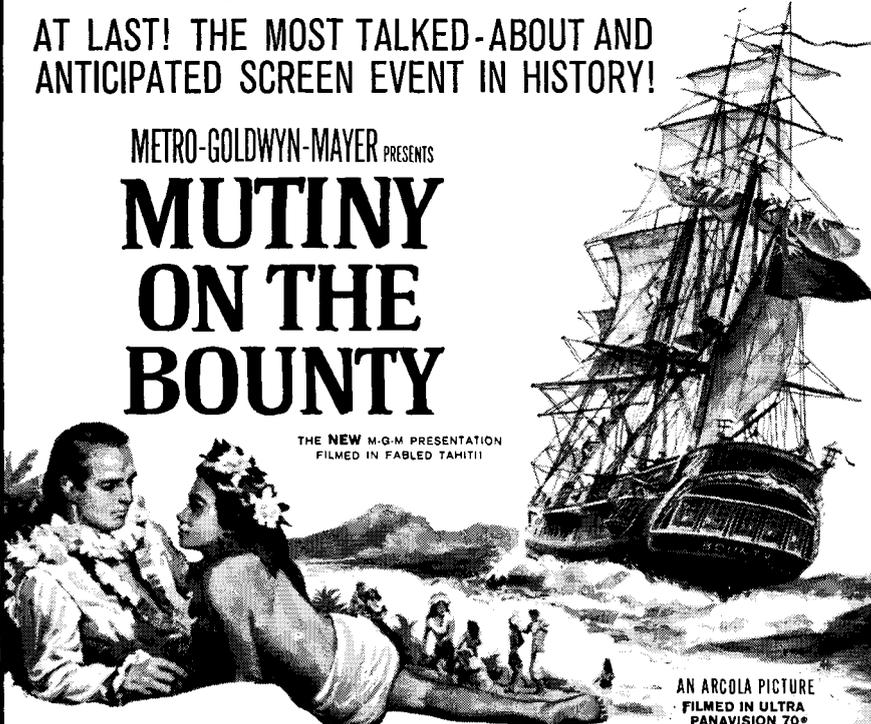
Tempting though it be to fling all the bouquets at these long-reigning favorites, no small part of the credit be-
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BROADWAY POSTSCRIPT



Room at the Bottom

EVEN in Sidney Michaels's somewhat too extroverted adaptation, François Billetdoux's "Tchin-Tchin" is a rare and wondrous thing. The word "thing" is used advisedly because "Tchin-Tchin" falls within none of the conventional dramatic forms. It merely follows the heartbeat of a relationship 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. Billetdoux has selected two people who would seem to be the least likely to succeed in holding a conversation with each other. Cesario Grimaldi, the uncouth and rampant head of a construction company, is everything that Pamela Pew-Pickett has been brought up to abhor. Pam, in turn, is everything Cesario cannot appreciate, a coldly reserved and completely unvoluptuous lady who sublimes 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 consciously realizing it, so desperately need to share their grief that their natural incompatibility becomes not only unimportant but in an odd way absolutely essential.

In other words, the situation, and not society or their individual self-protective instincts, compels their destinies, 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 performances 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 unavailingly 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 considerable 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 eventful, 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 heightened theatricality, the difference between 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 altered the play's underlying virtue. It remains the tender passage of two terribly considerate people into a relationship 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 handsomeness of a strivingly efficient world.

Sidney Kingsley's latest play, "Night Life," appears to be an admirably ambitious 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 powerful 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 middle-aged square played by Walter Abel, and from offering repertorial values where it has led us to expect poetry.

—HENRY HEWES.