



## The King of Panache &amp; Mr. Macbeth

STRATFORD, ONTARIO.

WHAT is the best performance Christopher Plummer ever gave? His 1957 "Hamlet," which Tyrone Guthrie has called the best of this era? His 1958 Benedick, in which he first learned to trust his own talent completely? His King Henry in "Becket," which won the prize as the best performance of the past London season? Or his unorthodox Macbeth, which he finds the most challenging of any portrayal he has yet attempted?

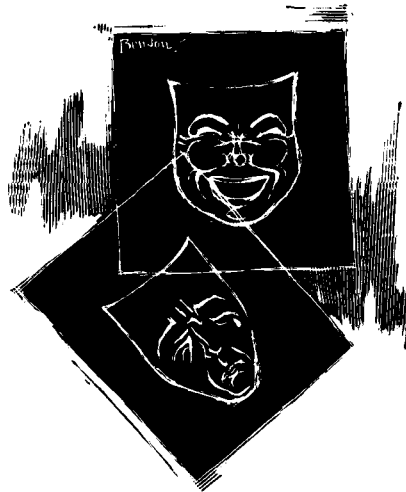
Paradoxically it is none of these, but his "Cyrano de Bergerac," which was put together comparatively quickly and is for him "a breeze." This performance appears—as clear as the nose on his face—superior to all the others. It is the best partly because this great actor's natural facility—so often inimical to roles that require intense commitment—is here essential to Rostand's quick-witted and dextrous hero. But, even more important, Cyrano seems to allow Mr. Plummer to relate many many lines and situations to his own world of experience.

This production, adapted and directed by Michael Langham, makes an impossibly romantic play convincing and moving by fighting its sentimentality with humor. Also, Cyrano is painted not as a noble heart suffering a great unrequited love, but as a man who cherishes elegance, wit, and the *idea* of love so much that, although his life turns out a great failure in the sense that he never achieves the things he deserves and wants, his panache constitutes a magnificent thumbing of the nose at mortality.

Here the famous first-act duel is played not simply as a theatrical stunt, but rather to reveal to us that for Cyrano the physical task of dueling is a trifle as compared with the mental task of inventing a sonnet as he goes along. It is the world of imagination and sensibility that this Cyrano treasures. Thus, when his opponent attempts stealthily to kill him while he stands composing with his back turned, Cyrano's deft turn to knock the sword from his opponent's hand just in time is breathtakingly theatrical, yet quintessential of this Cyrano and his governing sense of values. He is treating a mortal physical danger with the scornful ease of someone who understands that man's struggle with the real world is a comic business.

And as a comedian, Mr. Plummer gives it welcome. Using his unique ability to go abruptly from internal vulnerability to outrageous clowning without breaking the character's identity, Mr. Plummer has a field day when he is generating "the action." Perhaps his funniest moment comes when, after Christian has failed dismally at wooing Roxane on his own, Mr. Plummer tiptoes up to him and shakes his hand in mock-congratulatory hilarity.

While one-half of Cyrano is his ability to have fun with what the world takes seriously, Mr. Plummer is equally remarkable at creating the inner side of Cyrano's nature. Although Cyrano's oversized nose gives him a grotesque appearance, Mr. Plummer shows us a man who still dares to hope that Roxane will return his love. When he hears that she turned pale during his duel, Mr. Plummer tremblingly asks, "Pale?" and we see a flash of desperate hope in his eyes. A little later he makes poignant the hurt of rejection in a conversation with Toby Robins, who plays Roxane, in which they recall their friendship as children, before "adult" realities intruded on fairy-tale imagination.



But best of all Mr. Plummer has made the final hopelessly romantic death scene work by resisting its sentiment, by meeting death with a certain gaiety, and by arriving at some rather tough-minded assessments of his life as one in which he was all things—and all in vain. But he smiles as he recalls that he has reached the end of life with one virtue unspotted, his "panache." While the tone is light and unself-pitying, we weep just as helplessly as our grandfathers did at performances we would find ridiculous.

Mr. Plummer is beautifully supported by the entire cast. Desmond Heeley and Tanya Moiseiwitsch have collaborated to create costumes that are gorgeous and thus set off a Cyrano dressed simply in black. And Mr. Langham again proves that in his experienced hands this open stage is the finest in the world for creating the utmost imaginative bond between the actor and the audience.

Nothing becomes Peter Coe's novel production of "Macbeth" like the beginning of it. Three mud-caked hags are discovered dragging the body of a wounded soldier across the stage to despoil it, and at once the horror of humanity at its worst and the real barbarity of eleventh-century Scotland are created. Good, too, is our first glimpse of Macbeth, portrayed by Mr. Plummer as a laughing young man who dismisses the witches' predictions as ridiculous, but finds himself infected with their promises. And one can almost admire the complete rupture of the play's formality to turn imposing characters into ragged peasants with real daily lives. A MacDuff who lugs his saddle over one shoulder, a Lady Macbeth with a milk pail and churn, and a King of Scotland who personally dishes out the soup to his dinner guests all have the intention of bringing the play closer to life as we know it.

Where this production commences to go askew is at the point of Macbeth's return to his castle in a state of hysterical fear about the magnitude of this whole project. He falls whimpering to his knees to seek his wife's motherly reassurances. Here Mr. Plummer is showing us the inside view of a Hitler-like character whom we never see become imperial. Macbeth's fears are *more* than horrible imaginings.

But don't the interesting revelations about Macbeth come out of the contrast between his formal strength as a general and king, and his private sickness of mind and soul? It is his external strength that grows with evil, at the expense of his internal peace. Admittedly Mr. Plummer's daringly original performance has its moments of genuine excitement and psychological truth, and when Seyton tells him that his armor is not needed yet, the actor's kindly overruling of his servant with a smiling "I'll put it on" is memorable and amusing Plummer. But one wishes there were more shape to this splendid actor's daring, so that even if this diary of a coward were a violation of Shakespeare's intention, there would be fulfilled the intention of Plummer and Coe. As it stands it is a moment-by-moment portrait of a character responding to an assortment of private ideas and feelings. This is constantly interesting but cumulatively frustrating. —HENRY HEWES.



## The Bad Ones

**T**HE PORTABLE 35-mm. camera (it can literally be hand held) has, during the past few years, been helping the independently minded film maker to move into the feature area, without the heavy financing that normally would be necessary, since the portable camera eliminates the need for a large and costly crew.

The use of this camera has sometimes been to the good, sometimes to the bad. As an example of the former, Stanley Kubrick, when he made his low budget "The Killing," was able to flesh out his film by going directly to a race track and capturing, in a minimum of time, some superior and exciting footage, and gaining, too, the advantage of realism. But now, in "The Small Hours," we have a case that might well dampen the enthusiasm of those who assume that the off-the-cuff, or so-called improvisational movie has limitless possibilities.

Norman C. Chaitin, the writer, producer, and director of "The Small Hours," has used a few New York settings as background for a decidedly inept study of an advertising executive who, in twelve hours, moves through what we can assume is a crisis in his life — although it is not made clear what, exactly, is giving him the jitters. Even less clear, technically speaking, is the camera. It focuses in wobbly fashion on a group of creepy aspirants to Bohemianism, mainly in a tacky Greenwich Village apartment (tacky apartments are the fashion among members of the New York New Wave), during a party attended by the moody advertising chap. The people of the party would like to make love, but can't; they'd like to make movies, but can't, since Sam Goldwyn (who, by the way, has just reached his eightieth birthday) is unreachable.

Mr. Chaitin has them express themselves in some of the most doleful and foolish dialogue ever recorded on a wild track. I had thought that Rick Carrier's "Strangers in the City" was the most genuinely bad movie in recent memory, but Norman C. Chaitin has done something even worse. He has found no reason for our being remotely interested in his people, and either the actors who play them are off form, or Mr. Chaitin hasn't directed them well.

Then, all during what might be called the inaction, the unsteady camera produces on the screen an effect that, in my case, led to a curiously sea-

sick-like sensation. Those who contemplate seeing the movie might try some Dramamine beforehand.

And, from abroad, the new filmmakers come apace. Jean-Gabriel Albicocco is an obviously gifted Frenchman, only twenty-five years old, whose first feature is based on the Balzac story, "The Girl with the Golden Eyes." He hasn't succeeded in making a satisfactory modern equivalent of this tale of perversity in Paris, but he does assume that lighting is the key element in accomplished photography, and he has achieved some very unusual effects. He has not, however, been able to convey much meaning through the eerie atmospheres he establishes.

The striking Marie Laforêt (of "Purple Noon" fame) plays the girl with the golden eyes—or black in white eyes, in this movie—who falls under the influence of a lesbian Paris fashion designer, and then becomes banefully attracted to an egotistic photographer. An unwilling romance ensues, but visual intensity is not enough to capture the lushly romantic mood Albicocco seems to be seeking. And, when he wanders into fantasy—such as having doves appear from nowhere in one bedroom episode—he only makes his updated Balzac preposterous and, I'm afraid, pretentious.

While restlessness and revolt characterize the younger movements, there are those in Hollywood who prefer to follow long-trodden paths. Their chief prophet is Ross Hunter, a Universal producer who has placed Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin together in a purported comedy, "If a Man Answers." In horrid color, this lame effort shows a marriage-hungry teen-ager persuading a young calendar photographer into marriage, chiefly through persistence and posing him in abbreviated costume. Next, she bravely faces the problem of making the marriage "work," and in this is aided by her mother (Micheline Presle), who suggests she train her husband exactly as she would train a dog. Having been trained like a dog, Mr. Darin breaks loose from his prettily decorated kennel, and is eventually recaptured through another series of wiles. There is an ugly concept behind this kind of plot structure, and neither Mr. nor Mrs. Darin has the charm to make it palatable. The movie does, though, have the virtue of remaining continually in focus.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

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