



A Saint for All Seasons

IF Thomas Becket, that "meddlesome priest" who was raised to sainthood by the very king who engineered his assassination, continues to enthrall literary imaginations, the reasons are not hard to find. His drama was played against the most exalted settings—the court of England, the court of France, the Pope's palace, and Canterbury Cathedral. It is the story of a man who grows from libertine to martyr, ready to die for his principles. And it has at its core not merely the ancient conflict between church and state, but the even more basic conflict between earthly and temporal power.

With such riches, mining can take place on many levels. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, T. S. Eliot made of Thomas's martyrdom a mystic ritual whereby the Church was strengthened and reaffirmed. ("For my Lord I am now ready to die,/That His Church may have peace and liberty.") For Jean Anouilh, a far more worldly playwright, Becket's story afforded a classic demonstration of the theory that the office makes the man. Once Thomas, however reluctantly, accepted his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury, his fate was foredoomed. Although he had for years been King Henry's crony, his only trusted friend,

in the Archbishopric Becket's loyalty was to the Church; and he was not a man to serve two masters.

Clearly, for Anouilh—and for audiences that will soon be viewing Hal Wallis's massive, handsome production of Anouilh's play, *Becket*—the prime fascination is the struggle of wills between two strong, proud men who are drawn to each other as people, but who are ever more sharply divided by their historic roles. Strange material for a film, perhaps, and even stranger for a spectacular; but by casting Richard Burton as Becket and Peter O'Toole as King Henry II, Wallis has brought flesh, bone, and sinew to medieval history. They are superb—O'Toole mercurial, flashing, unpredictable; Burton somber and withdrawn, but gaining in grandeur and intensity with each successive scene. They balance each other—in a sense complete each other. Since at least one of them remains on screen throughout the film, the dynamics of their growing conflict never falters.

Much as the two stars dominate the picture, however, they never overpower it. For Mr. Wallis has also provided a supporting cast that for sheer brilliance could hardly be excelled. John Gielgud, in his all-too-brief scenes as the suavely manipulative King Louis VII

of France, parries Burton's lines with the graceful assurance of a fencing master. Martita Hunt makes Henry's mother, the scheming Queen Matilda, at once regal and sinister—one of those alarming women who know their own minds so well that any contradiction becomes automatically a major affront. And Pamela Brown's Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry's wife, is just the kind of whining, simpering, well-bred lady, filled with resentments and spite, who would drive any full-blooded husband to search out forbidden, but less forbidding, conquests.

Portly Donald Wolfit, whose very eyebrows seem to light up at the suggestion of an evil scheme, makes the Bishop of London a marvelously oily menace. Felix Aylmer conveys the pomp and pride of the Catholic Church when it reigned supreme in England. Jennifer Hilary contributes a touching cameo as a peasant girl who has momentarily captured the fancy of her King. Indeed, despite the presence of such distinguished Italian actors as Paolo Stoppa and Gino Cervi, only the brief sequence involving Becket and the Pope seems less than fully realized, as if the actors had suddenly become conscious of history peering over their shoulder. In the remainder of the film, they *are* history—not in the riotous, newsreel fashion of *Tom Jones*, but in a vital, loving, and minutely researched reconstruction of the twelfth century as it might well have been.

But the cast, so skilfully handled by director Peter Glenville, accounts for only part of the success of this remarkable picture (which, incidentally, despite the preponderance of British credits, remains an American production). *Becket's* settings—some of them still standing from the twelfth century, some of them reproduced by John Bryan with an amazing sense of authenticity—help enormously to validate the characterizations and give them substance. Canterbury's dark, lofty interior and vast façade with freshly hewn stones, forbidding castles with their richly curtained rooms, multi-hued tents of an army encampment, cobbled streets of a French town flanked by graceful balconies (bedecked with French beauties)—all of these, combined with Margaret Furse's resplendent costumes, convey a sense of the living past.

This is important because, unlike the theater, in films it is the backgrounds that create credibility. On the stage, it is the players and the language; no one expects—or needs—a real room, a real castle, a real battlefield. On Broadway, for example, Becket's final interview with his King was played by the two actors with hobbyhorses strapped



Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole in *Becket*—an appeal to the mind.

about their middles. This was enough to convey to the audience that they had met on horseback; the audience accepted the device, then turned its attention to the words of this poignant encounter. In films, on the other hand, this could never work. The artificiality, the contrivance, would remain uppermost—and would probably elicit distracting giggles in addition. And so, on the screen, Becket and Henry confront each other astride two magnificent beasts on a strip of sand beside the Channel, the French and English armies ranged behind them, with a black Norman castle looming in the distance. Against such an impressive setting, their words gain in significance and their characters in stature.

Wallis himself seems to have been aware of this when he moved what could readily have been filmed as a closet drama onto the largest sound stages in all Europe, flung up some of the mightiest settings since the palmy Ufa days, and elected to shoot his picture in the giant-screen Panavision process. For once, this munificence does not stunt the actors or their story (which was invariably the case with the De Mille spectaculars, for example, whose puny plots and *papier-maché* people were made even more artificial by his visual opulence). Instead, in *Becket*, the settings provide an appropriate arena for a contest of vast consequence, for ideas of considerable import, and for characters who have their own grandeur. And the large screen, far from deflating them, permits them rather to appear at their proper scale.

Added to this is Edward Anhalt's screenplay, with dialogue that joins imperceptibly with Anouilh's own while expanding scenes to take advantage of the camera's mobility (although his transitions from London to a French battlefield, or from Paris to Rome are poorly managed, as if still dependent on a printed caption in a theater playbill). Laurence Rosenthal, who wrote the music for the Broadway production of *Becket*, has expanded his score and thickened its texture to give firm support to the action on the screen. Geoffrey Unsworth's color photography, with its rich, formal designs, is a constant delight to the eye. But *Becket*'s greatest appeal is to the mind—and, as a spectacular, that is also its unique triumph.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.



SR/March 7, 1964

MUSIC TO MY EARS



Music's Idea Man—Sutherland

IDEAS abounded in the third (also, regrettably, the last) of this year's concerts in Carnegie Hall by the Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of George Szell, who might be described as the thinking man's conductor. Some of them made music and some didn't, but there was abundant stimulation in an evening that included the C-major (*Jupiter*) Symphony of Mozart, Peter Mennin's new No. 7, and the fourth piano concerto of Beethoven in which Ivan Moravec of Czechoslovakia made his first New York appearance.

Because of a delay en route (enough time at Philharmonic Hall to determine that further attention to Hugo Weisgall's *Athaliah* would be unrewarding), I missed the first movement of the *Jupiter*. But the second was beautifully played, as was the Menuetto, in a non-dancing way. Szell's thinking cap was firmly in place for the Finale, which had a keenly penetrating presentation. Clearly Szell is aware that this is a "problem" movement, in which the course of the fugal figurations sometimes vanishes underground, as with a hidden river. But Szell found the mainstream of it all the way, even to a rhythmic pattern in the timpani that is commonly overlooked. There is, of course, the possibility that Mozart did not mean to carry the fugal purpose through the movement, but Szell's quest of a structural principle sustained the interest in some ordinarily obscure passages.

More ideas followed in the Mennin symphony, which continues a devotion to this composer's interest last expressed when Szell performed his piano concerto in 1958. Mennin has subtitled his work *Variation-Symphony*, which is one clue to its content. Another is the division of its single uninterrupted movement into five sections that parallel the four movements of conventional symphonic procedure, with a perorating coda. The composer gives ample warning of intent with the pronouncement of a motto theme in the double basses at the work's opening. It shows itself in a variety of guises subsequently, up to and including the culminating restatement at the very end.

All of this is unquestionably organic and productive of a well-organized skeleton, in which the Adagio is connected to the Allegro, the Allegro is connected to the Andante—and so on. What was lacking, to my way of hearing, was a fleshing out of the skeleton with some-

thing more robust in the way of musical meat. Mennin has a prodigious skill in draftsmanship, but it now tends to produce a convincing blueprint rather than a slightly building. When listening interest threatens to lag, he moves boldly to rouse it by means of heavy brass (trombones and tubas), reinforced from time to time by timpani (two players), cymbals, suspended cymbals, etc.

Szell, who doesn't ordinarily occupy himself with such easily resolved complexities, gave the score as much attention as if it were a problem in Haydn-esque transparency. But the real joy of this evening, which will keep the inner man yearning for "more Cleveland" until the real thing returns, was the orchestral playing in the Beethoven concerto. The opening episode was a miraculous blend of sonority and definition, in which every choir was meticulously in tune, every dotted eighth and sixteenth had precisely the assigned value, and the sound was both supple and prismatic. Moravec's musicality (as noted in a recording of last year) is much above average, his artistic intent sophisticated. But his clear, bell-like sound is insufficiently modulated for dynamic interest, the poetics of the work less realized than its prose. However, against such a refinement of discourse as the orchestra provided, almost any pianist would have suffered—save, perhaps, Szell himself.

FOR those to whom the execution of vocal runs and roulades, trills and fioritura in general are the cause of joyous transports—and there seemed to be one in every seat of a sold-out Carnegie Hall for the American Opera Society's concert version of *Semiramide*—Joan Sutherland's glossy execution of the music for Rossini's heroine was doubtless an event of the year, possibly of the decade. For those who prefer such facility mated to dramatic meaning, it was a repetitive exhibition of virtuosity, full of trapeze-like near-misses surely redeemed by a well-timed lunge, embellishments artfully articulated, and a sunburst of a top F squarely on target at the climax of "Bel raggio lusinghier."

However, Rossini in the serious vein of biblical tragedy is hardly the composer of enticing originality and resourceful contrast that he is in opera buffa. The recitative clings to a predictable pattern, and the orchestral commentaries are rarely expressive on their

own. What surprise there was in the presentation came from the excellent effort of Marilyn Horne as Arsace. She beat Miss Sutherland to the first bravos with her singing of "Ah! quel giorno agnorammente," and showed excellent discipline, generally, of her bright voice. Competitively, Richard Cross (Assur) and Walter Carringer (Idreno) were left behind before the first act was completed, this being a style of singing to which contemporary male singers have devoted less productive effort than their female counterparts. Richard Bonyngue marked the time steadily at the conductor's desk, but provided no strong impetus otherwise.

THERE was a variety of vocal interest in other events of the week, including Gabriella Tucci's return to the Metropolitan to sing a strong Leonora (her first) in *Il Trovatore*, against, rather than with, Franco Corelli as Manrico (his brilliant D flat at the end of the first act was a shade louder and a shade longer than his "partner's"). Calvin Marsh did creditably in his first di Luna. In less good voice after an absence of many months was Victoria de los Angeles, in a program of songs in Carnegie Hall. Her refined art was admirably employed in Schubert's *Mein*, and Brahms's

Ständchen, but she hardly commands the intensity or variety of vocal colors for *Tod und das Mädchen*. The Spanish material was, of course, a special delight.

MUCH of what was required, vocally, for Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* was provided by Maureen Forrester and Richard Lewis at its latest hearing from the New York Philharmonic. They were the soloists at its last performances by the orchestra under Bruno Walter in 1960, and the program began, as it did then, with Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*.

The more pity then that Josef Krips didn't reproduce more of Walter's magnificently just perception of Mahler's purpose through which he made that masterwork his own. If he had, there would have been fewer excesses (and the insufficiencies that always go with excesses), especially in the rather raucous treatment of the opening, and the piecemeal delivery of "Von der Schönheit", "Der Trunkene im Frühling," and, least coordinated of all, the "Abschied." Krips dwelt inordinately on isolated verbal phrases and musical details (even to the insertion of unscored ritarids in a script meticulously marked by its creator) to the detriment of large

lines and total effects. There was a tempest of applause for the piece as played, for Miss Forrester makes an ear-filling sound, if not a very meaningful one, and Lewis now has taken to making an "acting part" out of "Der Trunkene," whose intoxication should be felt rather than seen. In such circumstances, however, the performance left the "Abschied" wanting in the unbearable weight of sadness it should convey. With Krips, it was quite bearable.

—IRVING KOLODIN.

Soederstroem and Sergi

CONTINUING its habitual cast shuffling, the Metropolitan's latest *Ariadne auf Naxos* enlisted Elisabeth Soederstroem as the Composer for the first time. She seemed to have all the prerequisites for a first-class performance: a knack for convincing male impersonation, excellent English diction, a well-placed, medium-size soprano, and a fine sense of style. The only unanswered question concerns the Swedish soprano's ability to dominate the climax of the prologue in voice as well as action. On this occasion, her basically sturdy sound got buried in Martin Rich's even sturdier orchestra, which, one suspects, might have been restrained to the advantage of both Soederstroem and Strauss.

Earlier in the week, the Met's seedly old swan "boat" carried a new *Lohengrin* to 39th Street in the person of Arturo Sergi, the American-born, German-trained tenor who had made his debut late last season in *Boris Godunov*. Although Sergi's vocal equipment is rather light (and his physical equipment rather heavy) for ideal fulfillment of Wagner's heroic requirements, he came to grips with the role effectively. This had as much to do with importation of the costume he wears in Wieland Wagner's Hamburg production as with intelligent rationing of power. Also new was William Dooley, a stentorian Herald who might be well advised to exert less pressure on his top tones.

Returning from previous seasons were Jerome Hines as King Henry, who upgraded considerably the Met's current standard for Wagnerian basses, and Irene Dalis, whose Ortrud was strong vocally, stronger dramatically. The only principals held over from the seasonal premiere were Régine Crespin, still uncomfortable in Elsa's high lyric passages, and Walter Cassel, on this occasion an admirable replacement for Hermann Uhde as Telramund. (Cassel had also taken over the role from his indisposed colleague in the previous performance, after a nearly disastrous first act.)

Joseph Rosenstock merged the old and new elements smoothly, and with more spirit than anyone had a right to expect.

—MARTIN BERNHEIMER.

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