Return to Room at the Top

ONE TENDS to be wary of sequels to successful films. *Room at the Top,* released here in 1959, was a stunner; it was the harbinger of a new wave of frankness in British film-making; it introduced Jack Clayton as a director of skill and subtlety; it won Simone Signoret an Academy Award; and it had a striking performance by Laurence Harvey as a young man who worms his way to the top by seducing the big boss's daughter, getting her pregnant, and marrying her. *Life at the Top,* also from a novel by John Braine, is the sequel, and it takes up the same characters some nine or ten years later. Again it is Laurence Harvey playing Joe Lampton, Donald Wolfit returns as his father-in-law, but Jean Simmons replaces Heather Sears as the wife. Simone Signoret is out of it, naturally, because the character she played died in a suicidal auto accident. Her husband is still around, however, and he's planning to marry a pretty young girl.

So far, I'm sure, it sounds like an English Peyton Place revisited, and for the first ten minutes it appears as though we're about to be treated to a closetful of skeletons, scandals, and secret sensualities. Joe Lampton and his wife aren't happy together, Michael Craig is the seducer of the rich provincial married set, and svelte Honor Blackman is in town running a local television show on her way to the big time in London. Then the sure, talented hand of a new Canadian director, Ted Kotcheff, takes over. Adulteries do occur, and demeaning scenes of unsavory revelation, but the story builds into a surprisingly perceptive study of a man's bleak encounter with his true image.

Joe Lampton has made it, all right, but what is he really? His high position with the big firm owned by his wife's father is a paternal handout. His white Jaguar belongs to the company. His nice, big house is in his wife's name. His son already has a tonier accent than he'll ever have. So, in an effort at redemption, spurred by an affair with the television lady, he heads for London and there learns truths bitterer than those he fled. And, somehow, so well done is it that the film is almost as absorbing as its predecessor. The acting is a great help. Laurence Harvey takes his abilities out of wraps and demonstrates once more how thoroughly he understands Joe Lampton. Jean Simmons handles his wife with remarkable sensitivity, and Donald Wolfit is once more splendid as her father. Not all of the scenes have the ring of honesty, as when Lampton, elected to the town council, blasts the venality of the Conservatives (they're given a political philosophy somewhat to the right of William Buckley), but, even so, it is effectively staged. The editing makes use of the currently fashionable abrupt cuts, and they do build tension and underline meanings. Producer James Woolf had excellent instincts when he returned to *Room at the Top.*

Producer-director Fred Coe's instincts were not as reliable when he decided to turn his Broadway success, *A Thousand Clowns,* into a movie. First of all, as a film director he hasn't got much beyond television basics, and secondly, the screen transference is uncomfortably close to the stage original, complete with projective acting and exit lines. Not that the film is a total loss—not by any means. For Herb Gardner's play had a cogent theme to explore—that of a man attempting to escape the falsities and hypocrisies of his television writing career, and to live a simple life free of cant. And Mr. Gardner can also write witty and clever lines, and these lines, though they are often presented stagily, give moments of charm and delight. There is also Barbara Harris. She just can't say anything without giving it an extra delicious twist of parody. Her plumpish, passive face shades into dozens of minute changes of expression. Miss Harris is a total joy. She doesn't work at all; she simply happens. Jason Robards, Jr., though, works at being charming. The effort is apparent, and Fred Coe's constant use of TV close-ups emphasizes his failure to be completely convincing. Nor does Barry Gordon, a sixteen-year-old actor attempting to act a precocious twelve-year-old boy (the ward of Robards), give much proof of being comfortable before a camera. Martin Balsam is a good deal better as the writer's agent-brother, and Gene Saks has an amusing set piece as a mawkish television personality.

In an attempt to get the story out of its essentially one-set framework—the much too cutely cluttered rooms of Robards—the camera is taken on a series of montage tours of New York City, somewhat reminiscent of those of London in *The Knack.* They help, but not enough. On the other hand, the brass-tacks conversations between the brothers, the well-adjusted agent, and the rebellious writer do get at the dilemma of a sensitive man attempting to cope with an artificial world of commerce pretending to be art.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

Angry Middle-Aged Man

IF I COULD SEE only one of all the attractions currently playing on Broadway, I would pick *Inadmissible Evidence*. Not that John Osborne's extended personal statement is a play with a beginning, middle, and an end, or even with an orderly progression of crises and denouements. But it is all-out theatrical statement, naked and shattering yet ultimately soaring above the desperation it so relentlessly presents.

For what Mr. Osborne has done is to reflect in one stubborn individual's irrational resistance to his times a fierce portrait of our backwardness and our forwardness, both of which strike him as unsatisfactory. He is not making a plea for tolerance or corrective action, but, as Shakespeare did in *Lear*, simply and superbly expressing a horrifying nightmare. Osborne's latest protagonist, like his Neo-Luther, Archie Rice, George Dillon, and Jimmy Porter, is a visceral and crude-speaking man who needlessly and purposelessly offends and alienates everyone, as he tries to remain loyal to his own anger and insolence.

This time his name is Bill Maitland, a cracking-up lawyer in his late, late thirties, and we meet him on trial, Kafka-style. The charge is some vague minor offense against society, and his equally vague defense rambles desperately through the sort of never-quite-right clichéd phrases one might find oneself using in a dream. As he mumbles jumbled sentences about his perfunctory belief in the increasing need for more scientists, more schools, the ties of family life, the "forward-looking . . . machine tool line reassessment" with "faculties of memory and judgment far beyond the capacity of any human grief or any group of human who has ever lived," we are overwhelmed by the gobbledegook specter the average man seems to accept without alarm simply because he sees no point in being frightened by something he feels incapable of doing anything about. And Bill Maitland's only important difference is that he recognizes its horror and his cowardice and mediocrity, which he wretchedly persists in following to whatever end it may lead.

The dream then moves to a two-day period of Maitland's law office where his anxieties and libido manifest themselves. His practice is dwindling, his partner is leaving him for a more conservative firm, one secretary he has seduced is quitting, another is available for after-hours sport but the solace she offers is temporary. He is having difficulty scheduling sufficient time for his mistress. And his infidelity is rapidly turning him into a villain and his wife into a martyr in the eyes of all their friends.

But this is not all. His work is going to pieces. Taxis with "For Hire" lights on pass him by on his way to the office. He is living on pills to relieve his cranium-splitting headaches. He can no longer retain information or even read a book. And during the course of the ensuing action his interviews with clients only serve to make him project their complaints into his own alienation from all social institutions. Perhaps the most devastating scene in the play is a long showdown with his seventeen-year-old daughter, in which he assesses the cool generation she represents. Here the angry young man has grown into the angry middle-aged father, as bitter about the following generation as he was about the preceding one, but for different reasons.

The dialogue is less showy but more profound than we have come to expect from Osborne. While he cannot resist an occasional quip like telling his wife that he's sure their daughter is going to marry an emergent African, "that is if she hasn't already sent her virginity to UNICEF," there is something deeper-reaching in his filial harangue when he says, "But there isn't much loving in any of your kindness, not much kindness, not even cruelty, really, in any of you, not much craving for the harm of others, perhaps just a very easy controlled sharp pleasure in discomfiture."

The role of Bill Maitland is certainly one of the longest and most demanding ever written, and Nicoll Williamson fights his way through every impassioned second of it, never allowing self-pity or tragic nobility to take over. It is an unforgettable portrait whose stubborn monotony receives not our pity but our cumulative admiration. If his supporting cast seems far less effective, it is nevertheless good enough to let us see what the playwright is driving at.

What *is* he driving at? He is driving at everything in modern society that demeans the individual, wastes his talent, and punishes his emotional expression. There is complaint that the play, which is shorter here than in London, is still too long. But this comes from those not yet able to perceive that *Inadmissible Evidence* is one of the great works of the modern theater. —HENRY HEWES.