

# Heard and Seen

CANNES 1961

The Fourteenth festival of films at Cannes is not, it would appear, likely to go down in the annals as one of the more important of the series, unless something electrifying happens in the remaining sessions. As bad luck would have it, one of the most important, interesting and, for Catholics, disagreeable films of the festival was shown on the very first day of the festival proper (which opened with *Exodus* not shown in competition), so that many other critics besides myself just missed it. This was Jerzy Kawalerowicz' film *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* (Mother Joan of the Angels) a study of diabolic possession in a seventeenth century convent. It had apparently taken people a fair amount of time to work out that this is *The Devils of Loudun* story transposed into a Polish setting, with some quite gratuitous extra details, such as the fictitious murder of two servants tacked on to the doings of an otherwise historical character without explanation. The Polish hierarchy took the unusual step of issuing a grave condemnation of this film when it first appeared, and informed critics here all agree that it is an extremely bitter anti-clerical—even anti-religious—polemic, excellently directed and extremely rewarding cinematically.

No kind of opposition to this intelligent, competent Polish contribution was offered by the Brazilian entry, *A Primeira Messe* (*The First Mass*), a picture of inordinate length and stupefying piety. The first thirty minutes or so, showing a small boy living in great poverty but much gaiety in a Brazilian village between the wars did at least give some signs that the director, Baretto, had once made so good a film as *O Cangaceiro*, but this initial advantage was soon dissipated, and I have seldom seen so many people get up and ooze out as happened less than half way through this film. On the other hand, *Hoodlum Priest*, an American picture directed by Irvin Kershner from a script by Don Murray who also stars, is a lively, intelligent, tough picture based on the true story of a Jesuit, Fr Dismas Clark, who gave up teaching respectable boys in St Louis some fifteen years ago in order to devote himself to helping discharged prisoners and delinquents in general. Don Murray, not himself a Catholic, plays the part extremely well and if at times some of the episodes of delinquency and violence seem a little reminiscent of other films, he at least brings a refreshing lack of sentimentality to the working class priest's lack of sympathy with the 'squares' and his genuine love for the 'hoods' who make up his parish. The extreme and painful detail in which we are shown the last moments of a boy in the condemned cell will upset the squeamish and are, perhaps, over-laboured, but it must be remembered that both Father Clark and Don Murray are passionate opponents of capital punishment and wished to make their point without imprecision. Technically, I found particularly interesting the director's use of quite

long sequences in which one saw, but did not hear, the actors speaking; this was remarkably effective in one of the early sequences of a clandestine meeting on a train. In an age of noise, a little silence sings very gratefully upon the ear.

I have often been to press conferences at festivals, but when it was announced that the O.C.I.C. jury could have a special meeting with Don Murray after this picture was shown, I did not realise that I was going to be running it. It turned out that he knew no French and most of our members' knowledge of American was defective, so an exhilarating but exhausting hour was spent translating questions and answers that ranged from the abstruse metaphysical enquiry to brisk technical information. What did transpire from all this was that Don Murray is as honest and attractive a personality as he appears in his films, which is considerably more than can be said for many film stars of his eminence. *Hoodlum Priest* did, in fact, win the O.C.I.C. prize.

Few of the other films shown so far reach what one could describe as festival calibre, but we have had the luck to see de Sica's *La Ciociara*. This is one of those films which he is able to finance for himself every few years from the spoils of those truly terrible acting chores he undertakes in other people's pictures. This, made from Alberto Moravia's *Two Women*, is a profound study on several levels, wonderfully well acted by Sophia Loren, Jean-Paul Belmondo and a newcomer called Eleanor Brown. Many people have seen in it simply an indictment of war—this it certainly is—but for myself I think that the director has also embarked on an exploration of the nature and weaknesses of human love. Sophia Loren plays a widow—too young to live without a man—who uses her little daughter as a focus of all her pent-up affections and protects her with an almost terrifying ferocity from the difficulties of life, only to lead her into a disaster of unthinkable cruelty in the end, when both mother and daughter are brutally raped by a detachment of Moroccan soldiers. Belmondo plays a student who knows love only in theory, both for women and for his neighbour; the villagers think only of themselves or, exceptionally, their own families. No one has the courage to love with self-detachment. Sophia Loren's performance is formidable—earthy, full of salty humour and peasant gusto—making one realise how grossly miscast she has often been on account of those lovely long legs and slanting eyes: this is a real actress. If only for the pathos of de Sica's use of the cries of swifts screaming and circling over the wrecked church, joyfully before the rape and just as joyfully after the horror has passed, I would put this very high amongst his achievements.

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