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Julius Caesar in Hollywood

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NOTES and COMMENT

Julius Caesar in Hollywood

When Hollywood gets hold of a classic, the results are sometimes unrecognizable. Witness, a recent filming of *Macbeth*, or Walt Disney's version of *Alice in Wonderland*—an egregious example of how to miss the point of a book completely.

To do Disney (and Hollywood) justice, it should be added that his earlier *Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarfs* deserves a place with the immortals. Of that film the late Father Mulry, a keen critic, said that it was the vindication of the motion picture as a fine art, distinct from the drama and its other component art media.

Because of this unpredictableness, Hollywood's are not the safest hands to which to entrust the classics. And the reasons for the unpredictableness are not far to seek. Supreme art is not the uniform result of a process in which "glamor" and "sex appeal" and "box-office attraction" and "entertainment value" are the supreme considerations.

When, therefore, Hollywood addressed itself to the task of filming Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, many misgivings must have been felt by those who love (and respect) their Shakespeare. In matters of this sort, one had learned to expect the best from the British and the worst from Hollywood.

Happily (one might almost say miraculously) these misgivings have not been justified and they may be safely dis-

missed, for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Julius Caesar* is a dramatic triumph of the first order.

In the first place, the casting is superb. It is idle to discuss (as all Manila is discussing now) which is the better actor: James Mason as Brutus, or Sir John Gielgud as Cassius, or Marlon Brando as Antony, or Louis Calhern as Caesar, or Edmond O'Brien as Casca. The acting is uniformly excellent—except perhaps on the part of an overstudied Calpurnia (if one might venture a criticism of a widely acclaimed actress).

In the second place, the filming technique is noteworthy. Contrary to the usual Hollywood practice, the faces are often not spotlighted but left in shadow. The cameras are frequently focused on the eyes (the shifty eyes of Cassius, the calculating eyes of Marc Antony), or on the lower jaw and the muscles of the neck. The soliloquies are not presented as Laurence Olivier might have presented them: as thoughts overheard by the audience. Instead, they are frankly spoken out, as the actors in Shakespeare's day must have spoken them out:

I cannot, by the progress of the stars,
Give guess how near to day . . .
It must be by his death: and, for my part,
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general. He would be crown'd:
How that might change his nature, there's the question:
It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
And that craves wary walking . . .

Again, contrary to Hollywood usage, the chief interest does not lie in scenery or pageantry or costuming or in an irrelevant love-story woven into the plot, or in any other adventitious element (and therefore, appropriately, the film is not in technicolor); rather, the chief interest centers upon the impact of character on character, the reactions of minds and emotions to events. Accordingly, certain little incidents in Shakespeare's text have been exploited or given unusual interpretations to bring out their full dramatic possibilities: the soothsayer foretelling the Ides of March; Calpurnia's dream and its effect on Caesar; the rhetorician Artemidorus; the final stab by Brutus, and Caesar's *Et tu Brute*; Antony's dramatic entrance into the Capitol, and his even more dramatic

entrance (breaking into Brutus' speech) to the Forum with Caesar's body in his arms. Probably most daring of all (although in itself a trifling incident), there is the garden scene in Act Two in which, while Brutus and Cassius are engaged in private conversation, the other conspirators while away the time by discussing the exact point in the east at which the sun rises:

Decius. Here lies the east: doth not the day break here?

Casca. No.

Cinna. O, pardon, sir, it doth, and yon gray lines
That fret the clouds are messengers of day.

Casca. You shall confess that you are both deceived.
Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises:

and Casca points his sword towards the camera, the camera is turned fully upon Brutus, who advances and says:

Give me your hands all over, one by one.

The implication is that Casca had pointed at Brutus—a bold interpretation, emphasizing the precise moment in which Brutus has been won over to the conspiracy to become its leader, and giving a symbolic meaning to the word “sun.” Actually, this interpretation is tenable only by doing violence to the text for Casca's next lines, omitted in the Hollywood version, show that he was talking of the physical, not a metaphorical, sun:

Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises
Which is a great way growing on the south,
Weighing the youthful season of the year.
Some two months hence up higher toward the north
He first presents his fire, and the high east
Stands at the Capitol, directly here.

It is difficult to improve on Shakespeare, but Joseph L. Man-kiewicz, who directed the film, seems to have achieved the difficult feat. This is superb directing.

One set of “stage props” is used to great advantage: the Roman statues:

Now, in the name of all the gods at once.
Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed
That he is grown so great?

says Cassius, standing squarely in front of Caesar's statue. And then, pointing to the bust of the elder Brutus,

There was a Brutus once would have brook'd
The eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
As easily as a king.

In any production of *Julius Caesar*, the major events are the speeches. This film's renditions of the speeches are unforgettable, particularly of Antony's funeral speech in the Forum which is the climax of the play. Yet the impression is given that it is not the few great moments, but a series of little moments, effectively exploited, which make the play. For instance, there is the constant contrast between Caesar's courage and his superstition, between his colossal vanity on the one hand and his physical weakness on the other:

I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd
Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.

Then in the same breath he adds:

Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf,
And tell me truly what thou think'st of him.

In like manner, the contrast is repeatedly emphasized between Brutus' unimpeachable integrity on the one hand, and his subtly self-blinding pride on the other—pride in his own logic: a blind logic, as it turns out, which repeatedly brings disaster on himself and his friends when Cassius' more perspicacious (if less honorable) intuitions might have saved them.

The outstanding merit of this film is that its producers have dared to give us Shakespeare unalloyed—with few subtractions and no additions. This is an unusual thing for Hollywood to do, and its success—even on Hollywood standards—proves one thing: that Shakespeare is superb drama, even for the modern movie-audience.

I saw the movie in company with a group of boys. It was remarkable how they reacted to the play. Some of them had seen the film three times, and wanted to see it a fourth. I sat in the rear of the bus on the way home, the boys crowded around, and we discussed the play. During a rather long

bus ride, hardly any other subject of conversation was introduced.

Which is, of course, as it should be. As a dramatist, Shakespeare is still unexcelled. He lived four centuries ago, but his plays are as contemporary as the atom—and their impact is almost as powerful.

May we hope for more films like this from Hollywood?

M. A. BERNAD

The Gender and Genesis of the Sotana

The *sotana* is so familiar to the people of the Philippines as a garb of their priests that they take it for granted and never give a thought to its origin. It is the inseparable and respected adjunct of the clerical state, and happy a father and mother on that day when their son reaches the major seminary and for the first time dons as a habitual garment this uniform of his vocation.

Walsh in *The Mass and Vestments of the Catholic Church* has the following interesting information about the *sotana*. He says that it was not until long after the twelfth century that the cassock or *sotana* became the exclusive garment of clerics. Prior to that time, it was the clothing of all alike, clergy, laity, male and female.

Formerly it was called the *pellicia* or *pelisse* (from *pelis*, a skin or hide) because sometimes it was made of the skins of animals, and even oftener of cloth lined with fur. This explains the name of the garment worn over it, the surplice or *superpellicium*.

It happens that the *sotana* resembles more the garb worn by women of western society than that worn by men, and this resemblance has led some to think of it as a feminine garb. But in fact, historically there is no such thing as a feminine garb. Historically, garments have held pretty much to two forms, gowns and trousers, and women and men have worn both types about equally. Sex is not the line of distinction. Rather it is climatic, trousers representing the arctic