

## OBITER

THE JAPANESE FILM. It is sufficiently difficult for the western filmgoer to appraise a Japanese film, unacquainted as he is with the whole climate of opinion that gives it meaning, without Miss Beatrice Lillie confusing the issue with her solemnly wicked parody of the conventions of Japanese acting carried out, it would appear, in a spasm of distaste for the whole dreary business. It was perhaps lucky for us as well as for the reception of Japanese films that we were given time to see one or two before she arrived on the scene.

We have in fact seen few enough when it is remembered that the output of the Japanese film industry for 1954 alone saw the production of no less than 373 feature films; for our part we have to guess at the quality of this huge flow of film from the most exiguous selection. *Rashomon*, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, *The Gate of Hell* and, recently, *The Seven Samurai* from amongst the formalized historical legends; the poignant *Children of Hiroshima* from contemporary topics, and von Sternberg's exceedingly distasteful *Saga of Anatahn* to show us what can happen when German expressionism is crossed with Japanese brutality and violence. We can, in fact, only judge from our own standards and it is interesting in this connection to note that *Gate of Hell* which won a Grand Prix at Cannes was considered so bad a film on its own ground that, according to a recent report by a Japanese writer, its director, Kinugasa, could scarcely believe the news when his award at Cannes was reported to him. *Rashomon* was the first to reach us, and its impact was immediate. The beauty, the technical skill, the astonishing and—to our preconceived ideas—so very un-Japanese performances of the actors, the dignity which never deserted the characters even at their most violent and uncontrolled; above all the integration in the telling of the triple narrative in purely visual terms blew a great wind through the traditions of the western screen.

*Ugetsu Monogatari* reached us a little later, when we had had time as it were to digest the impressions of *Rashomon*, and we were consequently slightly more accustomed to the conception of these highly formalized medieval stories, retold with a freshness of attack that recalls the *chanson de geste*. Moreover, as we had some idea of what we were likely to see, we were quicker to absorb the intense beauty of the visual set pieces, and less shocked by the inexorable cruelty, noise and violence. No one who has seen this film is likely to forget sequences such as the exquisite departure of the boat across the lake in the dawn mists whose delicacy and restraint gave a lyrical pathos to a scene in which the importance of the human characters was attenuated almost to imper-

ceptibility, as the strings of the Vienna Philharmonic can spin a filigree *pianissimo* which ends by being nine-tenths imagination. And here again the mixture of decorum and *pietas* with an abandon of fury seemed to explode almost dangerously against western sensibilities. *The Gate of Hell*, in Eastmancolor, not the usual Japanese process of Fujicolor, presented to our astonished eyes moments of extreme beauty—the sudden view of the temple arch in the glittering shallow waves of the lake for instance—and though the colour may not come up to the standards of the Japanese themselves, to us it was the most exciting thing we had been given since Renoir's virtuosity in *The River*. On reflection, though, the story was unsatisfying and the point unclear. But with the arrival of *The Seven Samurai*, again directed by Akira Kurosawa (who made *Rashomon*) and starring in a part of magnificent buffoonery the exuberant Toshiro Mifune who had played the bandit in the earlier film, we felt in the presence of authentic brilliance. The story of the village, ceaselessly ravaged by bandits, which decides to make the revolutionary innovation of hiring Samurai to protect it, on the analogy of gamekeepers and poachers, is strongly ideological in flavour, and the contrast between the mercenary, stupid villagers and the austere selfless mercenaries is a curious one. The leader of the Samurai is a character of compelling nobility and charm and his comrades in this forlorn hope, notably the lean dangerous dedicated swordsman, are all of so much higher calibre than the men they die to protect that the final shot of the three survivors, standing wearily below the grave-studded hilltop where the flags flutter over their dead companions as the villagers stage their lumpish triumph, is very moving in its sense of waste and the inevitability of defeat in victory. The brutality of this film has been grossly over-exaggerated by some critics, for it is in no sense laboured or relished, and the story could not have been told without it. The danger lies in the glorification of the fighting man in his romance and discipline and not in the presentation of the agony and death which extinguish him. *The Children of Hiroshima*, the latest film to reach us, is a melancholy, muted sidelong study of Hiroshima ten years after, made without recrimination, a flat statement of fact with no inferences drawn and with one sequence—that of the explosion of the bomb—which sent all the critics rummaging through their vocabularies to do it justice. Opening during the paper strike it did not do well in London, and soon gave place to a second showing of *Unmarried Mothers*: 'by public demand,' the notices outside the cinema said. Besides being a good film, it is a document of peculiar and painful interest to all who live in these islands, and anyone who gets the chance of seeing it should brace themselves and go. Without more examples of films made in Japan on modern themes we can hardly judge if this

is typical or not, but it is certainly interesting enough to make us wish to see many more in the same idiom as well as the beautiful and stylized historical pictures to which we are by now accustomed.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

UGO BETTI AT CAMBRIDGE. The *Spectator* of April 29th devoted a dozen pages to 'Cambridge Christianity', and on the same day the University Italian Society gave the first performance in England of Ugo Betti's play *Il Giocatore*. The two events are not so unconnected as you think. The *Spectator's* action was a rejoinder, mostly Anglican and Non-conformist, to the *Twentieth Century's* politely anti-Christian manifesto last February, which incidentally had roused Professor C. S. Lewis to some interesting reflections in the *Twentieth Century* for April. And then Betti's brilliant and disturbing play—which, unobtrusively, had a success beyond our hopes—came as a small further jolt for secularist humanists. For it is a truly religious work, and no less so for being touchingly human.

When Betti died nearly two years ago, his fame was spreading outside Italy. In Paris in particular his genius had been recognized. He had also returned to the practice of the Catholic faith. *Il Giocatore*—first performed in Italy in 1951—was one of his last plays and it is pervaded by the dramatist's belief in a divine order behind the imperfections of human law. Betti was professionally a man of law—a judge in fact, and apparently a rather severe one—and this circumstance much affected his choice of subjects and his angle of vision. *Il Giocatore* is the only play of his I know, but it is, I believe, fairly typical: a close-knit study in the imputation of guilt, lightened by wit and fantasy and a strain of puckish, mordant humour which recalls his master Pirandello; as do the precise crystalline economy and agility of Betti's dialogue. But if Pirandello's agility reflected the insecurities of a deeply sceptical intelligence, that of Betti, in *Il Giocatore* at least, vibrates with a sense of man's liberty as created by God. There is no pantheism. God creates man free and distinct. God is as real as stars and railway stations, and also tremendously 'other'. In the *Giocatore* indeed this distinction and contrast is stretched at the end to the point of unorthodoxy.

Two themes interweave to govern the action: justice and love. Two themes and two questions. Did Ennio Pascai murder his wife? And in any case, did he love her? A rapid and often amusing judicial enquiry settles the first question in terms of human law: Pascai is acquitted. But a movement in reverse counterpoints this foreground action. Step by step Pascai is forced away from the icy indifference to his dead wife with which he began. Gradually he nears the point of seeing this as a mask concealing his deeper self; until, his assurance shaken, he cries out

for a justice more complete than any human court can administer; and for justice *against* himself. For if he had not physically killed his wife, he had willed to be rid of her. Yet his pride is still strong enough in the last scene to re-will her death; and simultaneously human justice re-acquits and divine justice condemns him. Yet he is not damned; his old pride and new love combine to reverse the sentence with reasons which theology could not approve—as if man's freedom were cancelled did God hold him to the consequence of his use of it.

Theologically this is a blemish; yet one remembers the play with joy and gratitude. It has moments of thrilling and piercing beauty. It conveys a sense of realities more real than matter and more just than the human soul. Yet the world of matter and man is *there*—not effaced. Betti is a poet on two planes at once; that is his importance. And the enthusiastic and intelligent performance of his work by a handful of undergraduates is, I suggest, encouraging.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

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## REVIEWS

CHRIST AND THE CAESARS: HISTORICAL SKETCHES. By E. Stauffer. (S.C.M. Press; 18s.)

Why did Caesar, in the person of Constantine the Great, suddenly capitulate to Christ and make the persecuted faith of a small minority of his subjects a *religio licita* and ultimately the official creed of his empire? That is one of the most significant questions of all time; and the purpose of this book is to offer an answer to it. Here the story of the first three centuries of our era is painted in the terms of conflict between falsehood and truth, between two opposing gospels of salvation, the cycle of heaven-sent rulers and the final advent of the Son of Man, the imperial myth of the divine emperor and the fact of the Incarnate Word. It was to Truth itself that Caesar submitted.

Every Christian will assent to this antithesis and verdict. No Christian can fail to be profoundly moved by the deep conviction and sincerity with which Professor Stauffer portrays the freshness, clarity, vitality, seriousness, purity, and confidence of our faith as seen against the background of the staleness, confusion, effeteness, cynicism, 'dirt', and disillusionment that were one aspect of the world into which it came. It was the Faith that saved the classical ideals of freedom, courage, truth, beauty, married love, joy, and clemency (the last being Julius