

THREE OUT OF THREE

In the course of an extended symposium on the director as author of his film, broadcast earlier this year in the Third Programme, Mr Paul Mayersberg launched into a scathing indictment of film critics who never bothered to refer, in their review of some particular film, to its significance in the context of the whole of that director's *oeuvre*. It had not occurred to him, apparently, that critics are not always permitted as much space as they want in their weekly stint, and that it is only occasionally that they can embark on a consideration of any director in depth.

With two successes in less than a month this spring, and an earlier film that was also hailed with respect and pleasure by most of the critics, it is perhaps the right moment to take a more searching glance at the work of the British director, Clive Donner, than is possible in weekly journalism. Donner first went into films as long ago as 1942, when he began as an assistant editor at Denham before his call-up for military service; he was lucky enough to go back again after demobilisation when, at Pinewood, he edited the incomparable *Genevieve* and other films including *The Million Pound Note*. Later he began to make films himself, and was responsible for *The Secret Place*, *Sinister Man* and *Heart of a Child*; it was not until 1962, however, with the appearance of the endearing *Some People* that he really made his mark as a director.

It is noteworthy that he has also worked extensively in television, both for ITV and BBC. Four years ago, in 1960, he made a series for Granada called 'Might and Mystical' and also directed various episodes of 'Danger Man' and 'Sir Francis Drake'—no nonsense here, as one can see, about scorning popular entertainment. At the same time he produced an educational series for the BBC to demonstrate 'Teach yourself English by TV', and he has directed features for other BBC programmes. He has also had a shot at stage direction, so that by and large he knows very well, from hard personal experience, the hazards and rewards of direction in three major fields of visual communication. It is indeed refreshing to find someone so willing to take on anything that comes along, a sure sign of the real professional.

I must admit to a prejudice in favour of *Some People* from its opening sequences, for it is set in Bristol, a city familiar since my childhood and one which has always, it seems to me, carried its heritage of history and romantic enterprise with as much gallantry and insouciance as it set itself to rebuild its bomb-shattered heart to fit and face the post-war technocratic age. The screenplay from which Donner made his film was written by John Eldridge on a theme which might very easily have been disastrously sentimental, for its subject is the confrontation of potential juvenile delinquents with the challenge of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. The dangers of hearty do-goodism were, however, most successfully side-stepped and this was due almost entirely to the flat realism of Donner's direction of his actors, combined with his imaginative manipulation of John Wilcox's beautiful muted camera-work.

The only top star—and a difficult man to fit into such a framework—was Kenneth More and the way in which he was never allowed to overshadow the performances of the young and largely untried players with whom he was matched was wonderfully well judged. The motor-cycling sequences down the wild road to Avonmouth were very exciting, and the whole projection of provincial city life, the suburbia of Filton and its factories contrasted with the docks, and the hint of faraway places as a familiar concept to those who might never stray further than Clifton Downs, made a remarkably *solid* film. It is not easy to set mixed-up kids against righteous adults without making fools of one side or the other: Donner avoided the trap with consummate skill, as he did the parallel dangers of class distinction which was another factor in the story. This film was a pleasure to see as well as a constructive contribution to one of the problems that is only too often sensationalised upon the British screen.

The Caretaker was shown in Berlin and Edinburgh months before it reached London, caught, as it was, in the log-jam of the distributors' monopoly about which we have heard so much of late. So *Nothing but the Best*, his third film, came to London first, at the end of February and was immediately greeted with enthusiasm by nearly all the reviewers. Again Donner had an excellent script, this time by the novelist Frederic Raphael, and again he used it to great advantage. Quite without the overt moral purpose of *Some People*, this was an off-black comedy about a clerk in a lushly pretentious estate agency who, as the synopsis neatly put it, is 'burning with the knowledge that his betters are his inferiors in everything but class.' Alan Bates is an actor of great personal charm, and it was clever to cast him as a very disagreeable character who is perfectly delightful to meet. He picks up an upper-class layabout in a pub, a part splendidly played by Denholm Elliott who has never been better, and so to speak hires him to teach the nuances of the public school background which he lacks. Satirical, quite heartless and with a devastatingly acute observation, the film proceeds to dissect the minute details that establish the old-boy network; the whole project is attacked with a light-hearted precision that is a joy to watch. Shot in colour where *The Caretaker* is in black and white, against a background as opulently meretricious as the other film was sordidly workaday, the fluency and wit of the direction make point after point with a visual punch that reinforces the accuracy of the dialogue. It is very pretty, too, with views of Cambridge and the odd stately home as well as office and London street. This is an a-moral story treated with the kind of polish that would have pleased Congreve—or Wilde, if it comes to that—and it is enormously entertaining.

The Caretaker is a very different matter. It must have been daunting to tackle Pinter's play after its world-wide success on the stage, but Donner has sailed in with great confidence. Alan Bates and Donald Pleasence play the parts of Mick and Davies as they did on the stage, but Aston is now played by Robert Shaw at the top of his considerable form. He is an actor of tremendous weight, and in his portrayal of this strange creature—half-saint, half-madman—he achieves an Olympian dignity that yet contrives to remain disturbing. The film has coped

with the dangers of opening out the play with great reticence; we are aware of the real world, but it is made to appear almost as disquieting as the junk-filled attic which is its microcosm.

Cold, chaos, dirt and discomfort force themselves almost physically upon us as we watch Davies begin his war of attrition against first one brother, then the other. The fantastic dialogue is as spell-binding as ever, but it must be admitted that the film does, on occasion, become more slack than the play ever did and boredom is apt to creep in here. The impossibility of communication, the validity of existence, the unrewardingness of charity which are, after all, what Pinter is talking about, are not easy questions to predicate in any medium; Donner has taken a gamble in putting them on the screen at all, and we should not be surprised that the solution eludes him from time to time. But we should be grateful that he has dared even to tackle it.

As in *Nothing but the Best* his camera-man is Nicolas Roeg, and the effects score is supplied by Ron Grainer who has collaborated in all these three films. It is odd that, out of such unpromising material, the visual images should be so satisfying and often so beautiful; note the outline of Aston, black and still against the light while the old man tries to win him over, Mick lurking dangerously round the door in the very beginning of the film, or the snow-patched garden in which Mick and Aston confer seriously, foreshortened figures to the eye of the old man spying from the window high above them.

It is not often that a director brings off three successes in three consecutive films—Resnais comes to mind, but not many others—and on this evidence there seems to be no doubt that Clive Donner is one of the most versatile and intelligent of the contemporary British directors. Let us hope that he is now given enough rope to exercise his talent to the full.

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