

A CONTEMPORARY OLD MASTER

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

THE press conference to be given by Jean Renoir during the Venice film festival was announced for 4.30; knowing the Italian attitude to punctuality, it was no surprise to find only a handful of people there at the advertised time. But as one of them was Renoir himself, talking off the cuff in a perfectly audible voice to the two men perched on the table behind which he sat, one had the rather gratifying feeling that this was a private audience, and that the late-comers were missing something special. So indeed they were, but they were getting something rather special too, because the reason they were so outrageously late was that they were all seeing the original, uncut, version of *La Règle du Jeu* in the great hall next door. Watching Renoir as he lounged back in his shirt-sleeves, arguing, laughing, gesticulating with the eager young men who listened with a kind of intoxicated deference, it was difficult to believe that he had been born in 1894, so much their contemporary did he sound. It was odd to think that behind that ugly, Khrushchev-type mug worked the keen brain that had given us films like *La Partie de Campagne*, the marvellous *Bas Fonds* in which Jouvett and Gabin played together, *La Bête Humaine* and *La Grande Illusion*, which won a prize all over again at Brussels last year.

At length the film ended and sometime after five all the journalists came crowding into the room, arc-lights and cameras were focused and he waited politely until all the ballyhoo was over. He had put his coat on by now, and looked much less like one of the boys, but the moment he began to talk he might just as well have been one of the 'nouvelle vague', so great was his enthusiasm and vitality. He spoke mostly about *Le Testament du Dr Cordelier* (which had been seen earlier in the week), starring Jean-Louis Barrault—the film that he had made for the French television by a quite revolutionary method. For one thing he had used five, six or even more cameras simultaneously, so that he shot whole scenes in one block instead of building the film up frame by frame; for another, he had finished the picture in ten and a half days' shooting, and said he could have done it in less if he had been given more than a fortnight's rehearsals, which is what he was allowed. He also said, which I found illuminating, that this method of shooting had so infuriated the film world that his picture—for it is a feature film in its own right, in spite of having been designed for T.V.—had not only not been booked for circuit, but had been refused any commercial showing at all. He went on to talk about the new picture he

is now shooting on his father's property at Cagnes, also by this multiple camera and microphone technique. Called after one of Manet's more famous pictures, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* introduces a most ravishing newcomer, Catherine Rouvel, whom he then and there produced from the front row, to delighted gasps from the audience. This picture, he said with relish, is to debunk science; he did not, he said, care for sacred cows and he thought the scientist was getting altogether too much reverence these days on most insufficient grounds.

This set-piece of a speech was value enough, but it was even better when it came to the questions; somebody asked him a question about *Dr Cordelier* 'from the aesthetic point of view'. 'The aesthetic point of view does not interest me in the least', he said flatly; 'the only thing that interests me is the development of my story.' Thinking of some of the gruel-thin scenarios on which British pictures have been built, one heaved a sign of relief. Did he mind, someone else asked, the smallness of the T.V. screen? 'If you told a jongleur', he replied, 'that he had to perform in a church, a market place, a castle or a camp, he just got on with the job: now I couldn't care less what size screen I use—high, wide, narrow or T.V., it's all the same to me. It is absurd to be bound by technical limitations.' He went on to say that he thought that the wide screen was, essentially, a hang-over from the days of the silent film which continually needed new gimmicks to give it life; with his multiple method you would have to have actors who could *act* (hence the need for longer rehearsals), and it would no longer be possible to give a sequence significance by clever montage—you would have to visualize your story scene by scene, perhaps later even act by act, as it were. On and on, he went, pouring out ideas and jokes and profound criticisms, with most of the audience watching him with that expression of admiration and affection that Abelard might have received from his students. It was both touching and exciting, and I thought again as I had often thought before, that one could learn more about the cinema in half an hour from a great man talking than from a whole shelf of books.

NOTICE

From December the first the editorial address of BLACKFRIARS will be: Blackfriars, CAMBRIDGE. All communications regarding advertisements, subscriptions, etc., should continue to be sent to: The Manager, Blackfriars Publications, 34 Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C.1.