

OBITER

THE REAL AND THE SENSATIONAL. A pretty exercise in comparative filmology was recently set for the Londoner by the simultaneous appearance of the films *Baby Doll* and *Gervaise*—one American, the other French. Each is a study in the sordid; each is wonderfully well acted; each is superlatively directed; the camera-work in each is admirable. One would suppose that on leaving the London Pavilion and the Cameo-Polytechnic one would be assailed by much the same reactions of admiration and repulsion. Nothing would be further from the facts.

Baby Doll, unfortunately, arrived in this country heralded by a positive fanfare of advance publicity in newspapers of every kind, owing to Cardinal Spellman's action in condemning it on pain of sin in his own diocese. This made it difficult for Catholics in this country; and Fr Burke, of the Catholic Film Institute, put what I think was the general British opinion when he rated the film, for England, as one that should be seen by adults only and then with reservations. The British Board of Censors, by awarding an X certificate, corroborated this. The trouble with *Baby Doll*—or one of the troubles—is that it is technically so brilliant. It is an extreme example of the work of Tennessee Williams, who wrote the script, Elia Kazan who directed it, and the actors of the group trained by that extension of the Stanislavsky theories now known as 'the method'. Not in any way a film to overlook. And all this wealth of talent is expended on a story so painful, so squalid and so hopeless as to leave the onlooker with a feeling of great despair. The frustration of the middle-aged seedy husband, married in name only to his beautiful, sluttish young wife, her obstinate refusal to take up the challenge of adult life; the exacerbated fury of the hard, successful Sicilian against the Southerners who impede his every effort; even the character of the mad old aunt—all add up to an expense of spirit in a waste of shame that would have shocked Shakespeare artistically as much as morally. Some of the sequences are certainly provocative and disturbing, but if this film is vicious this is due mostly to the enervating despair which soaks it. It is exasperating that something so very well done, so exquisitely filmed and planned, should in the aggregate amount to a completely ignoble effect.

Now with *Gervaise* the aesthetic and moral climate is quite other. The story of Zola's *l'Assommoir* is sordid enough in all conscience and the parabola of Gervaise's life from poverty through sturdy respectability to a drunken dereliction more absolute than that from which she started could easily, one might think, be more distressing than the

situation in *Baby Doll*. But in effect this is not so. The atmosphere quite lacks the febrility of the Kazan picture, and the facts are stated with an uncompromising lucidity that never in any way seeks to disturb by overheating the emotions. René Clement has directed the picture in an impersonal—almost documentary—way that makes its bare statement all the more telling. This film is tragic, where *Baby Doll* is melodramatic. Maria Schell's performance as Gervaise is less of a tour-de-force than that of Carroll Baker as Baby Doll, but it has a dignity and humanity which the younger girl is not allowed to present; and at the end, when the tiny bedraggled Nana tentatively pushes across the table a sweet her mother is too drunk to pick up, one is racked with a liberating pity. Life in late nineteenth-century Paris may be grey and ruthless, but it has a positive and invincible courage that is wholly lacking in the sleazy backyards of Benoit, Mississippi, where the garbage blows round the lacrimose inhabitants. I have never before so clearly appreciated the distinction between realism and sensationalism.

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REVIEWS

WALES AND THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND. By Roger Sherman Loomis.
(University of Wales Press; 21s.)

This is a collection of ten articles, nine of which have already been published. All deal with Welsh elements in early variants of the Arthurian story. All are marked by wide erudition and by imaginative vision. But at times there is an apparent reluctance to carry the arguments to their obvious conclusion. The most important of the essays, that on Celtic sources for '*Gawain and the Green Knight*', provides an example. Professor Loomis analyses with definitive mastery the mingled background of Irish and Welsh folk-lore that would suggest that the Romance took shape in some such area as the Palatinate of Chester in the fourteenth century and then states that the author of 'the narrative framework' was 'in all probability a Frenchman perhaps a contemporary of the architects of Amiens and Rheims Cathedrals'. In the same fashion Professor Loomis still emphasizes the crucial importance of Brittany as a centre of diffusion for the Arthurian story while all his research is suggesting that the real centre lay somewhere in the Welsh Marches, at a time when Brittany and Wales were