

Beauties and Badmen

By CYNTHIA GRENIER

VENICE, ITALY.

BY VIRTUE of presenting and crowning two of the decade's most exciting examples of masterful film-making, the twelfth Venice Film Festival, just concluded, earned itself a nice little niche in movie history.

Fittingly enough, the two prize-winning films hail from Japan and France, two countries whose contributions to world cinema already stand high. Fitting, too, is the fact that the films are directed by two of the finest talents in the movie business today: Aikra Kurosawa ("Rashomon" and "Ikuru") and Alain Resnais ("Night and Fog" and "Hiroshima Mon Amour"). "Yojimbo" and "Last Year at Marienbad" are nearly perfect examples of two directions in movie-making today, and, as such, are utterly different one from the other. About the only quality shared by both is a marvelous and total mastery of the visual medium.

Despite its Eastern origins, "Yojimbo" is unquestionably the greatest Western ever made. It is shot with a glorious brio that caused the demanding Venice audience to burst out in repeated rounds of applause throughout the two-hour-long screening. As for the story line, just about any school-age viewer of "Gunsmoke" could predict the plot turns from the moment free-lance samurai Toshiro Mifune strides into town until, all wrongs righted, he finally exits in the swirl of a dust storm. But what director Kurosawa and actor Mifune do with a tale of classic simplicity is scarcely believable. The originality and ease of the camerawork are breathtaking, without ever for a moment appearing forced or arty. Mifune (the bandit from "Rashomon"), who won the Volpi Cup for the best male performance hands down, plays with tremendous authority, a controlled cruelty, and an engaging wit.

In addition to moments of extraordinary beauty, the film has some fine little shockers. The first sight samurai Mifune sees on arriving in the deserted town, for example, is a friendly little dog trotting briskly along with a bloodily dripping human hand in its mouth. The yelps of female protest at this scene must have carried clear



Scene from Kurosawa's "Yojimbo"—out of the East, a great Western.

across the lagoon to Venice. One terrifying scene, in which the hero is mercilessly battered about by an Oriental Jack Palance type, brought cries of "basta" from the spectators, and can pretty much count on comparable reactions from censors everywhere.

The festival's top prize, the Golden Lion of Saint Mark, went to France's "Last Year at Marienbad," which unlike "Yojimbo" could hardly be termed a simple film. As a matter of fact, it is probably the most difficult—at first impact—motion picture made to date. And one of the most important. Actually, to anyone at all acquainted with contemporary literature of the likes of Messrs. Joyce and Beckett, "Marienbad" becomes relatively clear.

Scripted by that distinguished advocate of the New Novel in France, Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Marienbad" opens with a beautifully shot exploration of the corridors of a Mad Ludwig castle in Bavaria, with a repeated invocation of its desolate, baroque splendor. Having hooked the spectator into acceptance of the palace, which has the strange half-reality of a dream, Resnais begins to people this world. We have the narrator, who tells a coolly beautiful young woman dressed in a Chanel gown that they had met and loved last year in Marienbad—or was it Frederichsbad? She denies ever having

seen him before. And from there the film twists and leaps forward and back, multiplying and altering details, reshaping and reviewing events, until finally, convinced of his love, the young woman leaves the desolate palace with the narrator.

The baroque palace, referred to as a hotel in the film, could easily be a luxurious clinic or even a suite of elegant antechambers in Hell where people serve out eternity in eternal boredom. Director Resnais, a calmly handsome young man with the air of a talented surgeon or a dedicated priest, when asked what he had had in mind, smiled and said he and Robbe-Grillet had intended the film to deal simply with the relations among three people, the components of the traditional triangle, but that upon finishing the scenario they had realized that their story could be interpreted as representing a kind of Hell, although that certainly had not been their conscious intention. Whatever the intention, conscious or unconscious, the work is indeed capable of interpretation on several levels of meaning with almost equal success.

The fact that a film like "Marienbad" found producers—it is a costly production, no New Wave quickie this one—found a jury to crown it with one of filmdom's most cherished awards, and found 2,000 members of the public to cheer its award is a very exciting testimonial that the motion picture is a medium of much greater complexity and possibility than most of us ever imagined. Even more important, "Marienbad" means for the future more courageous producers and more exciting movies. (Curiously enough, however, director Resnais himself wistfully declares he'd give just about anything to have made "La Dolce Vita.")

Apart from the two giants and a large number of first-rate films in the Information (or noncompetition) part of the festival, the principal entries seemed determined to prove the virtual eclipse of many a once mighty film talent. Two long-time, all-powerful Italian directors—Vittorio de Sica and Roberto Rossellini—whom Italians were hopefully counting upon to clean up on the prize side, come a cropper with embarrassing decisiveness.

Rossellini's Technicolor treatment of a Stendhal short story, "Vanina Vanini," about the love of a Roman princess and a young Carbonaro (quaintly translated as "a charcoal burner" in the English language handouts) produced guffaws and snickers from the audience, and, unhappily, rather deserved them.

De Sica's "Last Judgment," which jury and public alike were sure from

the beginning was destined to cop the Golden Lion, came as a far greater shock. With just about every first-rate Italian star in the cast plus Fernandel, Jimmy Durante, Melina Mercouri, and Ernest Borginine, with a script by Cesare Zavattini, with a great story idea (how people react when a voice announces from the clouds that "Last Judgment will be at six o'clock today"), De Sica nonetheless committed the unpardonable cinema sin by presenting the public with an utter bore. The fanciest-dressed, standing-room-only audience of the whole festival hardly bothered to clap at the end. People simply looked reproachfully at De Sica, seated in the box of honor, and silently filed out.

The one other disappointment came from Poland's talented young Andrzej Wajda, who had made such an impact with "Kanal" and "Ashes and Diamonds." His new film, "Samson," is fashioned with a rare beauty and intelligence, and his actors are almost flawless.

But the film is a failure, for the strangest of reasons. "Samson" is the story of a young Jew who inadvertently escapes from the Warsaw ghetto, lives for a year in a cellar in constant fear, dies by bringing a factory down about the ears of German soldiers. The only trouble is the young Jew is shown as utterly humble and fearful. Although Wajda claims to be presenting a sympathetic picture of the Jew to offset any waves of anti-Semitism, he unfortunately simply offers up a stereotype dear to any anti-Semite. The character completely lacks the dignity, the last-ditch stubborn pride that marked every Jewish ghetto face in the German newsreel shots shown in "Mein Kampf." Had Wajda given his this dignity, he would also have created a dramatic tension, and might have found that he had made a great film.



Friendly Integrity

I HAD often heard it rumored that certain programs in the "CBS Reports" television film series, once shot and in the can, had been shelved because they were judged by management to be "too hot." I asked Fred W. Friendly, the producer of the series (who solos for the first time this coming season without his former co-producer, Edward R. Murrow), if the rumor were true. "No," said Mr. Friendly; and then he went on to tell me about the only time a "CBS Reports" program was prepared and not shown on the network—not, however, because it was too controversial. The John Birch Society was the subject of the projected program. Fifty to sixty thousand feet of film had been shot in Santa Barbara, California, a wealthy community with a large proportion of retired citizens. The group had members there. Santa Barbara has a branch of the University of California. The city also has a local newspaper published by a colorful figure who voted for President McKinley and has taken a stand in opposition to the Birchites.

Fred Friendly thought that the impact of the ultra-right political organization on the nation could be accurately reported by a show in Santa Barbara which delineated the interaction of its members, the students at the university, and the newspaper publisher. The producer could not arrange to shoot film of an actual meeting. The group refused to cooperate in this except on its own terms and these were not acceptable to the network. Mr. Friendly did have three hours of voice tape of an actual meeting of the group, given to him by a "quasi-official government agency." Seven or eight minutes of this tape, said the producer, with the camera showing the D.A. listening to it, would have made a case against the Society. No problems of libel were involved. Associates of the producer urged him to use the tape. He refused and the entire program was cancelled. A major reason given by the producer is the fact that the tape had been "bugged"—made without the knowledge or consent of the Birch Society.

The CBS documentarian said that his conscience didn't let him use the questionable tape. "To use bugged tape at this stage of the program's history, after all it has stood for," he continued, "would have diminished the end by the means." This decision is

interesting in view of an opinion he holds about television documentaries generally. "Good journalism," he maintains, "is no longer enough. What we must strive for is involvement. Democracy is no spectator sport. We watch everything from the sidelines—baseball, sex. We haven't figured out a way of involving people in controversy."

Mr. Friendly feels that among the many programs he has produced, he has successfully created involvement only in three—"The Population Explosion," a program on Senator McCarthy, and during five or six minutes of "The Polaris," which dramatically showed test missiles being fired from the nuclear submarine. Involvement, esthetic or political, is produced by empathy, identification, clearly understood situations. The successes cited by the producer had these elements obviously. It is difficult to engage them in more abstract subjects handled by "CBS Reports." No doubt there would have been involvement in the John Birch Society program, if it had been presented on the air. Heroes and villains abound, along with strong emotions. Stakes are concrete, clear, immediate. In 1947, the Commission on Freedom of the Press listed five ideal requirements for a responsible press (including broadcasting). One of them was "the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society."

PERHAPS Mr. Friendly met this requirement more admirably by cancelling the show and sacrificing involvement (at the cost of bugged tapes) than he might have met it by putting the show on the air. The dilemma of ends and means is usually resolved by postulating a good end that justifies bad means. To illuminate the nature of the John Birch Society is a good end, I would think. Who will not agree that this end would have been poorly served by overriding the democratic prejudice toward fair play and using the tapes anyway? Judge Learned Hand, in his widely quoted address, "A Plea for the Open Mind and Free Discussion," made this appropriate comment: "Risk for risk, for myself I had rather take my chance that some . . . will escape detection than spread abroad a spirit of general suspicion and distrust, which accepts rumor and gossip in place of undisputed and un-intimidated inquiry."

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