

Sails Ho!

JAY JACOBS

HERETICAL as it may sound to Melville buffs, the play *Billy Budd* by Robert Chapman and Louis O. Coxe struck me, the first time I read it and when I subsequently saw it on television, as a decided improvement on the master's novella. Melville was not only our greatest novelist but frequently our most garrulous. His locutions were florid, his allusions distracting, and his disregard for brevity Olympian. And however well his inflated style may have accorded with enterprises as huge as *Moby Dick*, it was ill suited to a parable essentially as stark and taut as *Billy Budd*. In getting directly to the substance of Melville's broodings on what they termed "good, evil, and the way the world takes such absolutes," Messrs. Chapman and Coxe preserved, it seemed to me, all the strength of the original work while eliminating most of its weaknesses. I thought then—and still do—that their play was one of the finest this country has produced, and hoped that one day a responsible film-maker might try it as a motion picture.

Peter Ustinov is a responsible film-maker and *has* made a motion picture of *Billy Budd*; and, while I hasten to add that it's a far better picture than most, it isn't quite the picture it might have been. Mr. Ustinov, who produced, directed, "supervised," partly wrote, and acted in the film, obviously went about his varied assignments with the very best of intentions. Unfortunately, his screenplay derives from both the Melville and Chapman-Coxe texts, and incorporates a few ideas that occurred to neither the novelist nor his original adapters. The result is that we are now almost right back where we started, before the dramatists divested the novella of its irrelevancies. Stirring as it may be in itself, a lot of tarry scene-setting at the outset in no way expedites the confrontation of natural goodness (Budd) with natural depravity (Claggart, the master-at-arms); a confrontation, producing an "antipathy spontaneous and profound," that was the sum of Melville's story and the

substance of the Chapman-Coxe play. (As you may remember, Billy Budd, the "handsome sailor" whose only defect is an inability to speak in moments of emotional stress, answers Claggart's baseless accusation of mutiny with a blow that kills the master-at-arms, whereupon a court-martial, though recognizing the injustice of its findings, condemns him to death.) Once that confrontation between good and evil is accomplished, "the way the world takes such absolutes" is all that remains to be shown, and it is at this point that the pivotal character becomes—or should become—the ship's master, Edward Vere. Regrettably, Mr. Ustinov's Vere fails to capture the anguish of a good man bound in conscience to work evil upon innocence in the service of forces beyond his control. "The way the world takes such absolutes" turns out to be cut and dried and coolly legalistic; and it is on Budd's neck instead of Vere's anguish—the anguish of us all—that our sorrowful attention is focused. Even this focus, such as it is, doesn't last long, but dissolves into a lot of anticlimactic nonsense in which a conveniently discovered French vessel and a sanctimonious off-screen voice both try to convince us that Budd has not died in vain.

The chief weakness of the film, though, lies in a halfhearted attempt to analyze and motivate Claggart, who requires no motivation whatsoever, and "in whom [as Melville wrote] was the mania of an evil nature . . . born with him and innate, in short, a 'depravity according to nature.'" In the film, Claggart—as played by the eminent sado-masochist Robert Ryan—is given to hinting vaguely about an unhappy childhood, or some other psychic disturbance in his past, that may not justify but may at least account for his monstrous behavior toward those in his charge.

In a postscript to their dramatization of *Billy Budd*, Chapman and Coxe were at pains to point out that "To find the stuff of dramatic morality pure is no easy task, since, how-

ever hard one may try, Freud will turn up and all one's efforts will post off to the clinic and the analyst's couch to work out a modern salvation. Thus a critic can say of our play that such a phenomenon as Claggart could never appear in our world with all we know of the psyche and the ego." Still, in a morality play like *Billy Budd*, such a phenomenon is symbolically true, however implausible he may be as a human being. In choosing verisimilitude at the expense of symbolic truth, Mr. Ustinov and his associates have reduced what might have been a superb film to one that is merely much better than most.

IF ANY IDEAS on good, evil, or anything else are voiced in the attenuated course of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, I missed them in the general uproar that a decibel-happy composer named Bronislau Kaper has provided as a musical background for the film. This latest account of William Bligh's unhappy expedition to the South Seas is endless, deafening, gaudy, vulgar, light-years beyond belief, and (I blush to admit) thoroughly diverting. Both fact and fiction take a proper mauling here; but since the result—if not the intention—is entertainment pure and simple-minded, I would, like Captain Bligh himself, be overzealous in the performance of my duties were I to bewail the distortion of either the Nordhoff and Hall novel on which the film allegedly is based or the historical incidents that inspired the novel.

Do you belong to a generation that thrilled to the cotton-candy illustrations of N. C. Wyeth? Or to one that unashamedly could hiss the villain of a stock-company melodrama? If so, SEE the *Bounty* of Tahiti, under a skyful of Howard Johnson ice cream! SEE Trevor Howard snarl and glower as Captain Bligh! No matter what generation you belong to, SEE thousands of naked (well, half-naked) island beauties shake and shimmy to the choreography of Hamil Petroff! SEE spectacular naval action, as the *Bounty* tumbles like an old shoe in an automatic washer, during a storm off Cape Horn! SEE even more spectacular navel action, as those island beauties continue to shake and shimmy! And, if you don't

see anything else, SEE Marlon Brando (complete with British accent) in glorious Technicolor, Ultra Panavision 70, monumental cockalorum, and splendiferous finery, as Fletcher Christian, an exquisite beside whom such other peacocks as Beau Nash and Louis XIV would have seemed as drab as a pair of White Plains commuters.

Whatever he may have been trying to do, Lewis Milestone, the director, has made something very close to a musical comedy of the film, and not a bad one at that. In one of his more deliberately funny scenes, Mr. Brando is ordered ashore to seduce a chieftain's daughter in the interests of Anglo-Tahitian diplomacy. With the Union Jack flying at its stern, his launch sets off on its momentous mission, while Mr. Brando stands stiffly at attention and an ear-splitting rendition of "Rule Britannia" explodes over the Pacific like a test bomb at Eniwetok. Just a few more moments of this sort would have made *Mutiny on the Bounty* the hottest surprise of its kind since *Little Mary Sunshine* opened.

If you must go down to the seas yet again, I can think of no pleasanter way of setting about it than to see *Damn the Defiant!* The crew here is still another mutinous lot (has the tired businessman been supplanted by the restive organization man in the affections of our filmmakers?); their man-o'-war, like Billy Budd's, is on its way to engage the French in the year of the uprisings at Spithead and the Nore; and if the story is no more plausible than "The Jumblies," no matter. The film's distinction lies in its authenticity of detail and visual splendor. There are some fine Hogarthian scenes ashore, in which a press gang combs the fiddler's green for a reluctant crew; an absolutely inspired moment when a cargo net full of squealing whores is exchanged for another packed with squealing pigs; and a rousing climax is provided by a fog-shrouded sea fight that would have delighted the eye of J. M. W. Turner and justifies the development of the wide screen. Sir Alec Guinness, in a frowsy wig and well-starched upper lip, is in command here, at least when his authority is not being superseded by the mutineers.



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AFTER talking about it off and on for more than seventy years, the British still are not sure whether their National Theatre can be ready in time for the fourth centenary of Shakespeare's birth on April 23, 1964. But the government and the London County Council between them have put up the \$6,440,000 needed; two committees, studded with enough lordships to make up a Shakespearean cast, are preparing to build and run the theatre; and Sir Laurence Olivier is to be the first director.

Of the two companies that were originally supposed to join forces in the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare at Stratford-on-Avon can look back on many brilliant productions, but only in the past couple of years has it started building up a permanent company. Ironically, it had barely set up for the first time a London outpost at the Aldwych Theatre—whose *Troilus and Cressida*, already seen at Stratford and Edinburgh, has been acclaimed as one of the finest Shakespearean productions in recent years—when it decided, for reasons that are still obscure, to pull out of the National Theatre project.

The other company, the Old Vic, has (as some American theatregoers have discovered) gone through a period of doldrums, relieved by some good work in non-Shakespearean plays like *Ghosts* and Schiller's *Mary Stuart*. Under a new hard-driving director, Michael Elliott, it may achieve the strength and cohesion it will need as the nucleus of the National Theatre. And London playgoers have had a chance this fall to see the company at its best in *Peer Gynt*, a rough but vigorous stab at an elusive target.

UNHAPPILY, the Old Vic's new vigor has not entirely reassured those who witnessed the near-disaster of Olivier's three productions at the first Chichester Festival, held this summer in a brand-new theatre sixty miles south of London and widely taken as a rehearsal for Sir Lau-

rence's coming work at the National Theatre. The Chichester theatre, a mushroom shape on the outskirts of a small cathedral town, aroused much interest as the nearest thing in Britain to the neo-Elizabethan playhouse that Tyrone Guthrie brought into being at Stratford, Ontario. This was no accident: Guthrie's work was a strong influence. The smart audiences that descended on Chichester found themselves sitting fanned out around three sides of a large platform stage. Their almost unanimous complaint was that a lot of the time they could neither see nor hear properly.

Chichester's one success, *Uncle Vanya*, suggested mostly that if you put on Chekhov with a star cast (Olivier, Michael Redgrave, Joan Plowright, Sybil Thorndike) something remarkable is bound to come through. *The Chances*, a Beaumont and Fletcher comedy reworked in the Restoration period, was just a mediocre play. John Ford's *The Broken Heart* provided the fairest test—a stately, melancholy work of the post-Shakespearean decadence, unknown to the public at large but admired by students for the strange plangency of its verse. Unfortunately, the Chichester test made it seem an incomprehensible bore. So as to give everyone a chance to see the actors, Olivier made them scamper about almost as fast as if they had been playing *Charley's Aunt* rather than a work whose atmosphere should recall a court portrait by Van Dyck. Along the way most of them, Olivier included, rushed through their lines: a lot of the time the audience just did not know what they were talking about. The climax of absurdity came when the heroine (the beautiful, clear-spoken Rosemary Harris), dying of heartbreak and inanition, announced that she "must leave the world to revel in Elysium"—and all the while kept scurrying about with the energy of a physical-education teacher.

Gabble and rush also affected *Peer Gynt*, the Old Vic's first venture under the new régime. One reason