Film Reviews

Sons and Lovers


A passion for life. . . . Among the many qualities to be found in D. H. Lawrence's work, this passion and feeling for the joys and sorrows of everyday existence cast a spell on the reader each time he returns to this author's best work. It so happened that I was re-reading Sons and Lovers at about the same time the film appeared, so I find it difficult to separate the original from its screen translation. In some ways, it is a dangerous book to adapt, for it is relatively simple to maintain a coherent story-line and yet miss the essence. And this is what has happened in Jerry Wald's production for Fox. Curiously enough, the film is not really long enough: a span of three hours might have encompassed the story's incidental riches (such as the description of the early life of the Morel family), but a mere hundred minutes reduce the story to the unhappy love life of a talented boy from the pits. Were the box-office risks too great? In any case, Lawrence's subtle character-drawing requires a large and leisurely canvas; compressed into a kind of Reader's Digest version, it is not surprising that it fails to achieve a firm personality of its own.

Some of these weaknesses stem from a script which suggests the participation of a number of hands besides the officially credited Gavin Lambert and T. E. B. Clarke. The comic interpolations, such as the wholly ludicrous presentation of the suffragette meeting, have a sub-Ealing flavor and in this context are painfully out of place. And yet, despite all these drawbacks, it would be ungenerous to deny the film's incidental pleasures. Something comes through, as they say: an occasional flash of Lawrence's proud dialogue, a moment of truth here and there, such as the first glimpse of the factory where Paul Morel begins his journey into the world.

This is a difficult book to cast: Lawrence's earthy characters with their deep family instincts and their painful attempts at personal communication need a special kind of response from the players and the cast chosen for this adaptation only intermittently measures up to these demands. Trevor Howard and Wendy Hiller tend to fall back on the familiar serio/comic traditions of the theater; both have a sure feeling for the point of a scene, but their personal mannerisms are also clearly evident and, in the final analysis, they seem a little too cozy and consciously proletarian. Despite his dry and rather monotonous delivery, Dean Stockwell makes a very honest attempt to create Paul Morel—his pale, earnest face has the right kind of frustrated eagerness, yet he fails to sustain the burning intensity so necessary for an adequate realization of the part. He is at his best in the scenes with the film's Clara, played by Mary Ure. This is probably her best screen performance to date and the nearest the film gets to an authentic Lawrencean characterization. Mysteriously sensual, sweet yet bitter, she plays with considerable emotional and technical control, notably in the parlor scene with Paul when their love begins to crystallize. (It is regrettable that a subsequent love scene has been removed from the British release version so that the film might get an "A" certificate).

Wendy Hiller, Dean Stockwell, and Trevor Howard in Sons and Lovers.
I have delayed mentioning the director’s contribution until now for the simple reason that his presence is only intermittently felt. Although Jack Cardiff’s camera eye serves him well in several stunning landscapes at the beginning, the sense of place becomes less acute as the film progresses, and the interiors do not have that “lived-in” quality which a designer like Trauner can create. More seriously, Cardiff fails to catch the throb of pain and passion which permeates so much of Lawrence’s prose. Some of the handling is quite workmanlike, but one never feels that he cared desperately for the story and Lawrence, of all writers, needs the total involvement of his adaptors. Cardiff also follows a contemporary fashion by using huge close-ups at moments of emotional crisis, without realizing that it is the feeling behind the face that really counts.

Sons and Lovers, then, proves once again how difficult it is to translate a lengthy, highly personal literary classic into a product of mass entertainment. The fact that it does not entirely betray the original is a point in its favor—the end, in fact, is unusually ambiguous, without quite conveying Lawrence’s meaning. Yet one cannot help feeling that given a little more time, a little more ambition, and a more consciously aware director, something finer than an “interesting adaptation” might have been achieved.

—JOHN GILLET

The Cousins


What is good cheer
Which death threats can disrupt?

Contempt for their country cousins is a hallmark of urban sophisticates. Since Horace, at least, an occasional conservative social critic has undertaken to reverse the judgment: the town mouse may live more luxuriously and excitingly, but the country mouse is snug. Chabrol gives us a version of this fable which is as strictly contemporary in setting as it is traditional at heart. Charles comes up from the provinces to study law in Paris, and he shares an apartment with cousin Paul. He is both fascinated and repelled by the elaborately conventional bohemianism of his cousin’s circle; he is drawn into it; it destroys him. (Horace’s mouse, and La Fontaine’s rat, escaped the perils of the city, and lived to point the moral.)

Chabrol presents a dispiriting picture of a group of Parisian law students who are deadly serious in their cocky rejection and reversal of the expectations that society has of them. Within the circle which provides them with social warmth they avidly and almost ritualistically seek a hedonistic satisfaction which constantly eludes them. To the bourgeois these young people (like our own beat generation) seem to be absolutely free and irresponsible, and this is an image that they cultivate. To Chabrol it is their lostness, their desperation, their huddling together like children, that are most evident. (Their childlikeness is accentuated by the presence at their party of a full-grown sot and lecher.) When frantic pleasure-seeking is obligatory, and permissible forms of pleasure are prescribed, the result is intolerance and a sub-threshold unhappiness. Charles, fresh from the provinces, has habitual and instinctive patterns that, in fact, promise to deliver him far more happiness than his city contemporaries are likely to find. He is attached to his family, he looks for a monogamous marriage founded on love, and he expects to work hard at his profession. However, he makes the mistake of falling in love with a girl whose appreciation of his virtues is aesthetic rather than emotional, descends into morbidity, and dies by an accident for which he is partly responsible.

Chabrol is strong in feeling for the rules of the game as played by these stranded young adults. Paul’s friends pour their energies into devising ever new ways to demonstrate their freedom from the larger society which they have not yet entered. Paul himself is an artist in this respect. In Paris, of all places, what