

PARABLE

A Review by Dudley Bennett

Almost as interesting as the film -- and it is interesting -- is the flap which has accompanied its appearance. The irrepressible Director of the Fair wishes it would go away, people are resigning from committees, Protestant leaders have taken up defensive positions, and one clergyman hints darkly that the producer has known Buddhist sympathies. Apart from the bad form of impugning the motives of The Protestant Council of the City of New York, some people, it seems to me, are clearly missing the point.

If upon hearing the parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15: 8ff) one of Jesus' listeners volunteered he thought the woman was foolish to have a party with the newly found money, and another mentioned that the story was not very well told, both I judge to have missed the point, for the parable, you'll remember, was about the kingdom of God. "Parable," quite apart from these other considerations, has an important message and it is telling it in the right place.

"Parable" is a 35mm. film in Eastman color running 22 minutes. It was produced to be shown at the Protestant and Orthodox Center by Fred Niles of New York, Chicago, and Hollywood. Written by Rolf Forsberg and directed by Mr. Forsberg and Tom Rook, "Parable" was filmed on location at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin, home of the Ringling Brothers. The museum is part of a beautiful park maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society on what was formerly the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Baily Circus winter quarters.

Mr. Fred Niles, the producer, is the winner of more than 30 film awards, including the coveted Venice Festival Award, for such outstanding films as "Mural--Midwest Metropolis," "A Letter from Tashi," and "Bowling." Other than "Parable," Niles has produced for the World's Fair the cinema-scope film for Greyhound, and the 360 degree film for the Port of New York Authority. Mr. Forsberg the writer, wrote and produced "A Tenth of an Inch Makes the Difference" which ran successfully off Broadway during the 1962-63 season and has also produced scripts for numerous stage and TV situations. Tom Rook just completed a 78 film TV series for the National Lutheran Council's "Light Time" series which ran on 145 stations here and abroad.

The film is a pantomime. A fundamental rule of good film is to "let the pictures do the talking." "Parable" dispenses with narrative and dialogue, and strangely the audience never misses it. The matter is too familiar and clear and the impact is nothing less than stunning. The Mime is dressed in flowing white robe and white grease-paint covers his body. Asked about the concept of the clown, Mr. Forsberg said the character is "certainly meant to suggest the Christ image" but added it must be left to the audience to determine whether the clown represents Christ or "the Christ in us."

The film begins with a circus parade and riding along behind on a donkey comes the Mime. In a series of events he involves himself in the lives of others, performing a succession of selfless acts, the culmination of which is his death.

The Mime is first seen helping a weary roustabout carry water to the trumpeting elephants. He sits in an "African Dip" show while a berserk white man throws baseballs at him, and rescues a pretty girl from an evil magician. He and the people who are now following him amazedly, break up the act of Magnus and his Living Marionettes, distracting the people in the tent by polishing their shoes. Symbolism is snowballing now as the white-garbed clown gets into the harness himself and in a grotesque

Crucifixion scene is murdered. As he is hoisted aloft, the magician stabs him, the racist throws baseballs at him and he is beaten by an irate side-show barker. The cries of his death agonies shatter the sound track. In the silence that follows three empty harnesses hang from the roof of the circus tent. In a fadeout shot, Magnus is seen brooding over the clown's death as he reaches for the white grease-paint. But that is not all. We see a pan of the countryside and off in the distance we hear the music of an approaching circus parade. After the parade has gone by, around the bend comes a lone, all-white figure riding on a donkey. Could anything be clearer:

To this reviewer the picture presents a clear and forceful message. The challenge of the gospel is for men to involve themselves in the lives of others in a helpful way. This is a risky business that is too often misunderstood, interpreted cynically, and rejected. It may issue in death. The acting, direction and score blend in a remarkably creative production. The film is rich in Christian symbolism that is thoughtful and intriguing. The evils of racial prejudice, trickery, dishonesty, rage and violence are all portrayed.

Certainly "Parable" deserves your attention and might just prove to be one of the highlights of your visit to the fair. At least one reviewer (Rev. John Banahan, the Archdiocese of Chicago Director of Radio and TV, in the Diocesan paper, the New World, May 8, 1964) has compared it favorably with the Pieta. While for me this is a bit extravagant, "Parable" does have some unforgettable moments.

New York Episcopal Bishop J. Stuart Wetmore has challenged critics of the movie in clear terms: "The film is contemporary and relevant to the World's Fair setting. It has already proved itself provocative. If those who view it see what it says about their own responsibility as Christians, they will be terribly humbled and see a new and demanding role for themselves in the face of contemporary social issues." (The Sign, May 1964, p.10.)