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# 'Man on a Tightrope'

## ---Bypassed but Revived

By LUTHER NICHOLS

ONE of the things that drives movie people to drink (and we'll have one, too, Gus, if you don't mind) is the way audiences bellow for better films, and then, when they get them, don't go to see them.

Take "Man on a Tightrope," with Fredric March, for instance. Here is a picture that makes most others look like badly-focused Kodak snapshots. Yet, when it opened here last month, it barely staggered through one week on Market street.

*Which brings up the question: What do people who clamor for "better" films really want?*

☆ ☆ ☆

IS IT sex? "Man on a Tightrope" has more in a real sense than 50 bathing-suit teasers. Gloria Grahame sees to that as a circus owner's smoldering wife who dallies with a lion tamer, and when she's not smoldering, Terry Moore takes over as the owner's ardent daughter, given to rolling in the hay with an ex-GI roustabout.



Gloria Grahame

Moreover, there's a sequence in which Miss Moore and her friend frolic down a river to the music of Smetana's "The Moldau" that tops, for sheer lyric eroticism, anything we've seen since that Swedish masterpiece, "Miss Julie."

☆ ☆ ☆

IS IT excitement? You couldn't stand any more nail-chewing suspense than this film builds up as it tells its story of a tired, moth-eaten Czechoslovakian carnival that tries, against disheartening odds, to break through Red frontier guards into Western Germany and freedom. Made in South Bavaria, near the Red border, the picture adds an authentically charged atmosphere to its thrills.



Fredric March

Is it good acting? In this film the acting is in several cases more than good; it's great. March in particular, in a complex and difficult role as Cernak, the circus owner who salvages his self-respect from his oppressed crumbling world, turns in the performance of his life. And Director Elia Kazan, a former actor himself with the famed Group Theater, has evoked an almost vehement air of conviction from his players.

☆ ☆ ☆

THE picture has had better plugs than most good films in Life, Newsweek and other national periodicals. The critics have exhausted their superlatives on it.

All these requirements for popular appeal have been met, and more. True, the film had one major handicap in the local sweepstakes—that of being second-billed to a Betty Grable musical, "The Farmer Takes a Wife." Which is something like pasting a Petty drawing over a Matisse. And for all the local advertising it got, it might have been a three-minute trailer.

*But, whatever the cause, the fact remains that people didn't go to see it—and the loss was theirs as much as it was 20th Century-Fox's.*



☆ ☆ ☆

NOW, however, "Man on a Tightrope" has been retrieved from the ashcan of neglect into which it was carelessly chucked, along with such other fine films as "Miss Julie," "The Set-Up," "I'd Climb the Highest Mountain" and "The Stranger Between."

It reopens on Wednesday of this week at the Metro, a neighborhood house at Union and Webster streets. Hence this piece, at risk of letters imputing that the writer owns part of the film, is written to call it once more to your attention.

Robert Sherwood, the playwright, wrote the script, basing it on the experiences of the Brumbach Circus, which actually did escape from Czechoslovakia. Members of that troupe (and its equipment) were employed by Kazan in the film. They give it a bizarre quality: a striking contrast of an antic world with a rigorously somber one, of a wildly individualistic artistic group with a regimented, fear-filled police state. This contrast Kazan has exploited beautifully to make his points about democracy vs. Communism, yet without ever being laborious about it.

Another fine director, Joshua Logan, once wrote something that applies most pertinently to "Man on a Tightrope" and to anyone who hasn't seen it:

*"No matter how great theatrical art may be, it becomes nothing if it is not shared."*



Terry Moore