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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

IN Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason*, however, soon to be featured at the fifth New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center, the camera bores in so relentlessly and revealingly upon its single character—a thirtyish Negro houseboy, would-be performer, and male prostitute—that by the end of its almost two hours, one feels that no significant shred of the man's past and personality has been left uncovered or uncommented upon. Filmed in a single, mammoth, twelve-hour session sparked by marijuana and copious alcohol, the picture rivets itself upon Jason as he reminisces, performs (imitations of Mae West and Butterfly McQueen!) and, under probing questions that come to him from off-camera, reveals layer after layer of self-knowledge and self-deceit.

Occasionally, the camera goes slowly out of focus, sometimes to effect a transition, sometimes quite arbitrarily to emphasize the ritualistic, oddly impersonal nature of this true confession, thus removing at least some of the sense of obsessive voyeurism. By the end of the film, however, after Jason has talked about his various employers, his family, his aspirations, and the details of his grubby existence, the feeling of intrusion has passed away, and one is left instead with a sense of revelation—revelation of a kind of life that, mercifully, most of us will never know at first hand. This, and the sense of witnessing a soul stripped bare, layer by layer—and the final shocking recognition that even then Jason is not certain that he has told the whole truth.

In *Jason*, the participant is fully aware that he is before a camera, and that his every mood and word are being recorded. Such, apparently, was not the

case with the dramatis personae of *The Titicut Follies*, which will also receive its premiere at the New York Festival. In this remarkable document, made by Frederic Wiseman and John Marshall, concealed cameras are pointed with utter objectivity (there is no commentary) at the guards and inmates of an unnamed institution for the criminally insane in Massachusetts. *Shades of Marat/Sade!* The film is framed by an annual birthday show staged mainly by the inmates, and presided over by a head guard who clearly fancies himself an undiscovered Ed Sullivan.

From there, the picture moves on to the daily routine—periodic psychiatric checkups by a German-accented doctor who licks his lips over every sex question, the guards' hazing of an elderly inmate who has not cleaned his room properly, and of a Negro who has been asking to be allowed to work. The men are not permitted to shave themselves for fear of doing themselves harm; but when the guard-barber seriously nicks one of his customers, there are no hot towels, no styptic pencil—not even a word of apology. And to intensify the horror, the men are kept stark naked except when exercising in the prison yard or when called in for a staff examination. Such total nudity seems the ultimate degradation—and nothing could be more shameful or abject than a man covering his genitals as he is led through the hospital corridors. *The Titicut Follies* is, to be sure, a film of our times, a startling example of film truth. But, inevitably, it must raise the ethical question: Where does the truth stop and common decency begin?

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

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