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Program Notes

Marcel Pagnol's ANGELE concerns a young woman of rural Provence who finds herself pregnant and unwed. She is forced to go to Marseilles and become a prostitute in order to live, but she is found there by a young man from her village who marries her and takes her back to the land. ANGELE treated the theme of unwed motherhood more seriously than did Pagnol's previous three films, the FANNY trilogy. The title role is portrayed by Orane Demazis, who had played Fanny. This picture also contains the first important role for Fernandel, who had entered films in 1928 and had played small parts in cheap comedies until ANGELE. Like Raimu, Fernandel was one of Pagnol's favorite actors, appearing after ANGELE in the same director's HARVEST (1937), THE WELL-DIGGER'S DAUGHTER (1946), NAIS (1947) and TOPAZE (1949).

Although I have already commented on Marcel Pagnol's attributes as a director of films, I shall try to clarify the more general aspects of his technique by contrasting it with the methods of others. The essential differences of approach that separate Pagnol from directors such as, to cite recently presented examples, Gustave Machaty and Carl Th. Dreyer involve whole theories of film-making. Dreyer and Machaty, although stylistically extreme opposites, can both be called imagists in the broadest sense, that is, each scene or shot in their films is built upon the entire image captured by the camera. Each shot is a careful construction in which the smallest detail is meaningful,--serving the director's purpose in establishment of mood, advancement of the plot, or in suggestion of a hidden significance or simply as an element in an aesthetic composition. In this way they make the fullest use possible to them of the mobile visual medium in which they work. Sound, when it occurs, is used by them in the same manner; it serves to augment the visual image, as background music or as a selection and rendering of speech which, existing as more than a merely explanatory device, underlines and accentuates the graphic presentation. The human figure in such films is characterized indirectly, emerging through the part that it plays in the formation of the image. The importance of the actor is thus somewhat diminished: a great part of the acting is done by the camera and, through it, by the director and cameraman.

Pagnol, on the other hand, is an example (practically the epitome) of the stagey technique in which by far the greatest number of films are made. His skills are essentially those of a writer and director for the stage--he excels in his sense of casting, in his ear for dialogue and in his selection of pleasant backgrounds. His camera, however, instead of being the instrument of his art, equivalent to the painter's brush, is merely the handy recording device that enables him to naturalize and vary his settings. His films serve as a theatrical on which the characters speak for themselves; they stand out, performing against a background that is usually artistically passive, although it can be used to powerful atmospheric effect, as in several parts of ANGELE and HARVEST, and more especially in JOFFROI. While Pagnol's work is thus of little in-the-strictest-sense-cinematic value, the reliance which he is constrained to place on the directly evocative powers of his actors forces into relief the remarkable and highly individualistic performances that make his films the dramatic and comedic triumphs that they are.

J. M.