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FOUR SONS (1928)

Director: John Ford

Story from original by I.A.R. Wylie, adapted by Philip Klein

Cast: Margaret Mann, James Hall, Francis X. Bushman, Jr., etc.

A profoundly moving picture of family life in Germany during the war, giving a sympathetic insight into the effect upon the humble people of rural Bavaria of the great struggle. As an artistic creation the production is magnificent in the amazing effectiveness of its fine realism and in its utter simplicity. As a boxoffice attraction at the high scale its fate is in the balance.

In its favor are some of the finest and most touching passages of high sentiment ever shown on the screen, and the dramatic elevation of Mrs. Mann to picture eminence, which bids to exceed in public interest the sudden stardom of Mary Carr. The abundant excellence of the creation itself and the fascinating circumstances of Mrs. Mann's triumph are enormously valuable assets, and will probably suffice to give the Fox people another "Over the Hill."

Any obstacle that might have been anticipated from the risk of selling a sympathetic treatment of the German side of the war has been minimized by developing an American side of the story and by its happy ending, with the mother happily joined with her surviving son, by now a prosperous merchant in New York. The same thing works out in the tone of the story. While some of the sombre war-time episodes - the news of the death of three sons coming upon the grieving mother at home - are compensated by the lighter, sentimental sequences at the end, the picture leaving a cheerful effect.

The film is an achievement in artless realism. There isn't a moment when it does not live, and the whole production is utterly guiltless of theatrical device. Simple people, kindly and happy, are suddenly engulfed in the conflict, and tragedy comes upon the gentle villagers, among whom stalk the hated military martinets. It is the arrogant military class that plays the villain. The people are the pitiful puppets.

The story itself does not bear telling, so simple and unadorned is the commonplace history of a widow and her four sons. Joseph goes to America before the war, marries and has his own little delicatessen shop, and a baby is born. Then the war comes. The other three brothers go to the front and one by one are killed. There is no "war stuff," the war tragedy is enacted in the homely cottage of the lone mother. Joseph goes overseas in the A.E.F., leaving his wife to handle the shop. The story leaves him while the mother back in Bavaria is slowly broken as the war machine takes her three remaining boys - Franz, the handsome; Johannes, the strong, and, finally, Andreas, the beautiful.

Armistice Day finds her destitute of life and joy, while Joseph returns from France to America to find that his business had grown to a rich chain of stores.

His first move is to send for mother. From sombre tragedy the picture here takes on a tender and livelier quality. Mother has to go to school to learn her letters for American immigration purposes. Upon the Ellis Island examination she goes to pieces and is detained. But quite innocently she wanders out of the detention pen, reaches the city and meanders around under the care of kindly cops, who at length bring her safe to haven in Joseph's very modern apartment, where the frantic Joseph, returning from his search, finds her cuddling the baby before the fire.

Mrs. Mann's playing of the big role is a miracle of unaffected naturalness. Her Frau Bernle lives from the moment the film starts to its finish. She looks the part and she plays it with utter absence of effort or consciousness as a stately and white crowned old mother might go about her household tasks. And if this isn't art so much the worse for the trained and inspired acting profession.

Something of the same effortless simplicity has been communicated to the whole cast. The picture is rich in fascinating characters, such as the pompous but kindly old German letter carrier (Albert Gran) whose agonizing task it is to deliver the casualty notices to Frau Bernle; the Burgermeister of the village (August Tollaire), and the Innkeeper (Hughie Mack), besides a host of others.

The picture will be the making of James Hall, hitherto just a young leading man. As Joseph he creates a splendid portrait with a wide range of clean cut playing. Earle Fox makes a graphic study of the cold-blooded military officer type. One of the high lights is his suicide at the explicit invitation of his rebellious regiment upon Armistice day, dressing himself in all his decorations for it.

In a pictorial sense the production is a revel in beauty and significant detail, with camera shots that are arresting. Such are the views of departing soldiers seen marching through the gay village streets from the vantage point of the church belfry; the panorama of the farming countryside swathed in morning mists; the church steeple with the tolling bells reflected in the still mill pond and a myriad of such color shots. Happy character bits likewise go to the building up of eloquent atmosphere and bit by bit the illusion of reality in place and people is created and never lost through nearly two hours.

Movietone is again employed with excellent discretion. It supplies an appropriate score and interpolates a few sound effects. When the young villagers are bringing in the hay, snatches of their song are brought out; again in the only battlefield sequence a faint voice is heard through the mists crying, "mutterchen," and for one passage (where the stricken mother dreams her brood are again gathered about the supper board) a male chorus sings faintly as though at a great distance, or as though a choir were singing in a far off organ loft in church. The treatment follows closely upon that employed in "Sunrise," avoiding emphasis that might clash with the illusion.

There can be no question of the work's merit. There is only one bare chance for it to fall short of enormous popularity, the possibility that the screen public will shy off from a serious war picture at this time, when the subject has been pretty well exploited. That's quite remote, very remote, for a picture of this class and strength.

(VARIETY, February 15, 1928)

Even so essentially American a director as John Ford not only re-used some of Murnau's sets in his "Four Sons," but he even slowed his characteristically snappy pace to match Murnau's tempo. (Everson)