

## 'Ship' That Doesn't Float

SHIP OF FOOLS

produced by Stanley Kramer

The credits carefully note that Stanley Kramer's production is "a film based on" Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*. This may be nothing more than an attempt to forestall criticism of the liberties that have been taken with the book, but I suspect there is more to it than that. It is more probably an earnest of the high-mindedness that is to follow. It proclaims the sincerity, indeed the humility, with which its makers have approached the task of adapting to the screen a novel widely—and I think erroneously—believed to be a modern classic.

*Ship of Fools* is, pre-eminently, a correct movie—in its casting, direction, editing, photography and attitudes. It shares with the novel a flawless technical competence (although the sound-staginess of the film's settings is occasionally annoying). It also shares another, less desirable quality of the book—an air of doggedness, a feeling that the finished work is entirely too much the product of perspiration, instead of inspiration. The result, in both book and movie, is a *Ship* without buoyancy and with an alarming tendency to wallow in heavy seas.

But there the similarity ends. Miss Porter's vision is a black one and she seemed to relish the opportunity to lay before us and dissect a whole gallery of grotesques, inviting us to note the similarities between their hearts and our own. Mr. Kramer and his scriptwriter, Abby Mann, are not prepared to undertake so difficult and dangerous an operation. They claim, in prologue and epilogue, to be doing so, but they are more interested in antiseptic than in surgery. They are always cleaning things up, disinfecting their people, before letting us look.

While their discretion may be admirable, it leaves them with a rather serious problem. There is no plot, particularly in the cinematic sense, to *Ship of Fools*. The business of the novel was to show a desperate humanity imprisoned in the torturing embrace of the madness we call sanity. Its message, if such a crude term

may be used, was one of existential despair. But if you are unwilling to deal in such a term—and the movie gives it a wide berth—the rationale for the story disappears and it becomes impossible to see what the relationships between the shipmates are. Whereupon the entire effort of translating the story to the screen becomes meaningless.

Unless, of course, you invent a new basis for the relationships. Kramer and Mann try to have everyone relate to each other in terms of their response to Nazism. Since Miss Porter's ship sailed under German registry in 1931, she, of course, had included Nazism in its intellectual cargo. And Miss Porter made good use of it as a cloud darkening her entire scene, as the ultimate grotesquerie against which to measure the depth of her fools' foolishness. But her interest was clearly psychological and philosophical rather than political. Neither her story nor her theme turned on Nazism alone. Since history had conveniently presented it to her and Nazism suited her larger designs, she found it a useful symbol and so used it. But she could have said the essence of what she had to say without reference to it.

That is not the case with Kramer and Mann. Having retreated before the power of blackness, having rejected despair, they have no choice but to use Nazism as their controlling metaphor. This works well enough in illuminating their prototypical Nazi (José Ferrer) and their prototypical Jew (Heinz Rühmann), but it leaves a lot of very expensive talent drifting aimlessly around the decks wondering who they are and what they are doing on board. Cleaned up, and robbed of their symbolic functions, they are not Miss Porter's classic fools, but rather just a familiar collection of standard modern neurotics, dress extras in a sea-going *Judgment at Nuremberg* playing scenes instead of characters. Among them Lee Marvin, by the force of his playing, gives a fine, strong portrayal as a never-was ballplayer, and Oskar Werner, by the subtlety of his, makes a complex and unique individual out of the doomed ship's doctor. But they are the only ones who more than momentarily surmount the filmmakers' failures—the conventionality of their view of human beings and the human condition, their even more peculiar obsession with warning us against the danger of Nazism thirty years after the fact.

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by Richard Schickel