

# A MASTER WORK

FILMS MARGARET HINXMAN

It has been a heady fortnight for film critics. Last week, the best of Losey in "The Go-Between." This week, the best of Buñuel in Tristana (Academy One: A). Who says the cinema is not, or cannot be, a great art form!

Both films are, I believe, the confident summation of a lifetime's work from which all the stylistic extravagance and excess have been pared away. But Joseph Losey is a younger man and will make many more films: Luis Buñuel is over 70 and may not. I'm inclined to see "Tristana" as his testament: through this spare, deceptively simple tale, based on a story by Benito Pérez Galdós as was Buñuel's "Nazarin," one feels that the director has reached a personal state of grace.

For many years one of the most celebrated of expatriate Spaniards, he has baited the Roman Catholic Church, the tyranny of piety, the established authorities and the

restrictive quality of Spanish life, with a humour sometimes impish, sometimes cruel and sometimes merely shocking. In J. Francisco Aranda's introduction to the screenplay of "Tristana" (published in the Lorrimer Modern Film Scripts series and good value at £1.5), Buñuel is quoted as saying that the subjects he most enjoys filming are "religion and eroticism" and that pretty well sums up his canon of work for the cinema.

But, while admiring, I have often felt that the brilliance and the bitterness rule out warmth. Mostly, Buñuel's characters were instruments through which he expressed his passion and purpose. He was either impatient with their sloppy religiosity or appalled at their hypocrisy. In "Tristana" though, the brave radical has developed what looks surprisingly like tolerance, which shouldn't be mistaken for acceptance of the political-religious status quo he has so long opposed. He was able to make the film in Spain after much dickering, but he remains a rebel, a difficult customer quite likely to smuggle a subversive idea into the blandest of scripts.

Tristana (Catherine Deneuve) is an innocent young orphan whose guardian, Don Lope (Fernando Rey) is an impoverished aristocrat, a liberal and atheist in the nineteen twenties before the Civil War pushed loyalties to extremes. He is also something of a libertine and a hypocrite in his relationships. The girl becomes his mistress, at first resigning herself to being used in turn as lover, skivvy, wife, daughter, according to the old man's whim. Eventually she goes off with a dashing painter (Franco Nero), but when she becomes ill some years later, Don Lope (having inherited the wealth of a hated dead sister) takes her back into his house and nurses her after her leg has been amputated.

While despising him, Tristana agrees to marry him, exacting her revenge in the destruction of her husband, now a rich but spineless creature who has abdicated all his once proud principles to keep the peace. It doesn't take too much cunning to perceive that, for Buñuel, Don Lope represents a Spain hamstrung by the forces of reaction (the increasingly implacable Tristana). One can add endlessly to the metaphor (the pain of the amputation which trans-

formed Tristana may be equated with the horrors of the Civil War, for instance) and it would be folly to ignore it.

But the film is so full of riches, so perfectly constructed to gain the maximum effect with the minimum of fuss, that it can be enjoyed on many levels. As a melodrama, it keeps you guessing. As a fraught emotional relationship, it is equally mesmerising. As a portrait of Spanish life it is a storehouse of fascinating observations: the kitchen arrangements dominated by the all-seeing housekeeper and her deaf-mute son, the sly, toiling workers and the prim family processions to church, the idle pontificating of Don Lope and his friends at the local coffee house and, his ultimate surrender, the ritual bean-feast he hosts for hungry priests.

With the exception of Franco Nero, who isn't quite on Buñuel's wave-length, the cast—Fernando

wholly the result of Barney Platts-Mills's second, Private Road (Gaumont, Notting Hill Gate: X): the story of a young writer who wants to do it his way but is eventually forced to conform by society, the middle-class parents of his girl and the need to earn a living. It is certainly not a conventional anti-everything protest.

What it is about are the clichés which insulate people when they stop being flexible and they apply as much to the committed revolutionary and hippie as to the ad man and the stockbroker belt householder. It's a gasp-out effort, though the lack of polish which helped "Bronco Bullfrog," tends to work against this one. But the young writer-director is undeniably a considerable talent and the film surely deserves better than the limited release it is currently getting.

★

Rey, Catherine Deneuve, Lola Gos as the housekeeper and Jesus Fernandez as her son—can't be faulted.

Despite a callous finale, one can see how "Tristana" is acceptable to the Spanish Government, where his dazzlingly anti-religious "Viridiana" was not. It is very restrained, apparently unobjectionable: yet in the end it is the most woundingly acute of all his films. Mustering a very real compassion for Don Lope and Tristana (and, thus Spain), Buñuel seems now to see their destinies as sadly inevitable, shaped by traditions and responses seeped in history: where before he looked back in anger, here he appears to look forward, if not with hope, certainly with charity.

★

AFTER his most promising first feature film "Bronco Bullfrog," I am much impressed by the ambition if not

FOR fans—me, too—of TV's "Monty Python," no need to recommend And Now For Something Completely Different (Columbia: AA) which is nothing more than lots of antic fun and anarchic jokes strung along by one of my favourite writer-comedians John Cleese. Graham Chapman and all the other jolly, versatile lads. Not so much a film, more a long giggle: some gags sag, but not too many.

A worthwhile trip to the New Victoria uncovered the best Hammer horror film in years, Hands of the Ripper (X), in which Eric Porter gives a thoroughly admirable performance as the psychiatrist who tries to make an honest woman of the homicidal daughter of the "Ripper." Peter Sarsy directs with imagination and an insidious sense of period (late Victorian) as if it really matters. And, after all, why shouldn't it?

'A Master Work' by Margaret Hinxman

The Sunday Telegraph—October 3, 1971