

Of Addicts and Angels

By A. H. WEILER

TYPING with tongue in cheek to a friend about the state of radio back in 1933, the late Fred Allen quipped sweepingly, "The people who are in power don't seem to know a great deal about it so your opinion and mine is as good as theirs . . . for argument's sake anyway." Judging by a fair proportion of the films that have come along this year, that great, funny man also could have been prescient and his opinion could apply to the powerful in picture-making today.

But the film business, in this corner's view, easily has realized its potential as often—if not more so—as the theater and television in recent years. It has regularly turned out worthy fare that surprised but certainly reassured the faithful. This product does not include the expensive, flamboyant block-buster calculated to capture millions of dollars and people by avalanches of promotion or the unsavory items dished out to titillate and exploit the prurient. Specifically what comes to mind are those serious and, occasionally, comic features

that in comparatively talented and honestly inquisitive style show an appreciation of the unusual and the important issues.

These attractions carefully and sometimes courageously explore facets of modern living that nourish the sense of discovery so endearing and fascinating to the discerning moviegoer. They may be in short supply from time to time but by the luck of the draw New Yorkers last week were exposed to two such newcomers, one from Hollywood and the other from Italy.

This should redundantly underline the obvious fact that dedicated moviemaking is universal. And, while an American observer may be accused of a trace of chauvinism, the Hollywood entry, "Synanon," which landed at the Capitol and other houses hereabouts, was superior to Italy's "The New Angels," now at the Carnegie Hall Cinema, simply because it was more successful in achieving desired results.

Admittedly "Synanon" is biased in its approach to its material but this is a decidedly unusual subject for the screen. Producer-director Richard Quine was attracted to the work being done with narcotics addicts and alcoholics at Synanon House at Santa Monica, Calif. Incidentally, the name "Synanon" stems from one addict's inability to pronounce "seminar" and, unlike many films such as the fine "Man With the Golden Arm," "Synanon" deals, in a large measure, with the seminars that are the core of the singular and reportedly gratifyingly successful group therapy at this center for the afflicted.

Synanon Sagas

Using a cast of professionals and some of the actual residents there, the stories involved naturally make a case for the real thing. There is the energetic Edmond O'Brien playing the role of Chuck Dederich, the founder of "Synanon" in muscular, no nonsense style. And there are interwoven tales of Alex Cord and Stella Stevens, the addicts whose love affair ends in tragedy; and the tales of Chuck Connors, Richard Conte, Eartha Kitt and Bernie Hamilton as residents with dope, prostitution and alcoholic backgrounds, who engage, in quick vignettes, in

the mutual sessions of candid talk that serve as catharsis leading to rehabilitation.

Filmed at the authentic locale, the picture evolves as uneven drama and occasionally uninspired melodrama including a stark scene showing Alex Cord giving himself a "fix." But there is no denying the sincerity and aims of Mr. Quine, his writers and his cast. One wishes for further explanations, a more artistic handling of some scenes but a moviegoer is equally impressed by the fact that "Synanon" is frank about failure in the case of Miss Stevens and Mr. Cord. This may be sympathetic treatment but it does not point to an easy road to salvation.

The Hard Life

Perhaps bias can be detected in "The New Angels," too. But Ugo Gregoretti, who helped write and also directed it as his first feature, tries to make plain that the nine sketches of contemporary youths are simply dramatizations of "reality." Shot in documentary fashion, the accent, despite a seemingly straightforward narration, (used together with subtitles), is largely on sex. Undoubtedly Italy's confused, disenchanted and lost younger set are involved with things carnal. But his camera, flitting swiftly from Rome, to Sicily, to Naples, to Rimini, the Tuscan farm country, Milan and Rome again, is most impressive when it is not focused on flesh. A Roman incident in which a girl is daubed with paint is shocking but vague. The bikini bunch at Rimini's beach are simply boy-hungry to an extreme, and Naples' rich youths are callow girl chasers.

But the unrest, the rootlessness of the young are strikingly portrayed by the anonymous nonprofessionals the director has used in episodes depicting strict, bizarre Sicilian matchmaking; a young father's pitiful inability to land a factory job which will free him from a miner's drudgery; the stresses among workers in a Milan auto factory

Comparisons are not in order, of course. "Synanon" is not as diffuse and makes its point more sharply than "Angels." But their pursuit of truth, however varied, is unquestionable and does credit, despite their shortcomings, to the movie medium.