

TWO WOMEN AT WAR

By DEREK HILL

Two Women. (Ritz and La Continentale) is an adaptation by Zavattini of a novel by Alberto Moravia, two strikingly incompatible talents. It is directed by de Sica, whose best work has indeed been with Zavattini, on *Umberto D* and *Bicycle Thieves*. But the attitude behind these films had little in common with the iron harshness underlying every Moravia plot. Their greatest achievements have been in revealing the drama and significance of the apparently humdrum. Moravia's stories are generally a peculiarly rigid form of melodrama.

The film is never quite the collision one anticipates. For a while it merely meanders, observing the attempts of a young widow (Sophia Loren) to protect her 13-year-old daughter (Eleanora Brown) during their war-time journey away from the bombing raids on Rome to the comparative safety of her native village. A shy young intellectual (Jean-Paul Belmondo) who is outraged by the ignorance and apathy which have brought the fascists to power seems likely to make the film's first firm point; but he eventually emerges as a rather callously employed decoy.

Story Begins

It is not until the brutal rape of mother and daughter by some Moroccan troops fighting with the allies that the real story begins. The child is so stunned by the experience that she seems set for a life of unfeeling amateur whoredom. Her mother uses the news of the death of the intellectual to jolt her back into emotional life, whereupon the camera steals away from the tearful proof of the survival of her finer senses and the film ends.

This climax is made cruder by the compression of all the essential action and reaction into the last quarter or so of the film, and the British Board of Film Censors have hardly helped by cutting the rape sequence and, still more vital a scene in which the mother pulls up her daughter's skirt to confront some allied soldiers with the evidence of her violation. Despite the film's X certificate the Board evidently feel that it



"Two Women."

must not be allowed to speak in too angry a voice and have accordingly muted its key moments.

The film's structure is against it from the start. For the first hour the script dithers around the subject of women in war, and de Sica's direction reflects a recognition of the woolliness of the theme and a willingness to settle for the widely varying potentialities of each sequence. A scene in which the mother shows her daughter how to carry a suitcase on her head before a trainload of applauding soldiers is handled with a grateful appreciation of the genuine human values involved.

Remoteness

But when two fleeing fascists hold up the intellectual at gun point de Sica poses the group against the sky and slumps down for an almost ironically heroic low camera angle. Ultimately *Two Women* seems far more Moravia's film than anyone else's, and the glowing performances of Sophia Loren and Eleanora Brown cannot warm his heroines into the kind of life his own remoteness denies them.

The only other new film press shown this week shows an oddly similar weakness in construction.

The Last Sunset (Leicester Square Theatre) dawdles along for a dreary 80 or 90 minutes before coming to life in a paroxysm of action that is not only overdue but absurd. Dalton Trumbo's script, from a novel by Howard Rigsby, optimistically hopes to absorb us with a grotesquely artificial triangle set against a cattle drive. A shock twist, self-consciously daring, reveals that the girl who has distracted one of the heroes is actually his own daughter, a situation which he promptly solves by letting himself be killed in the inevitable closing duel. Robert Aldrich's direction is less tricky than usual, though under the circumstances a dash of visual jiggery-pokery might have brightened things a little.

★ ★ ★

The National Film Theatre's current season of American films of the 'forties includes **They Live by Night**, a film which in 1948 seemed to promise great things from at least three unknown talents — director Nicholas Ray and the two young stars, Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell. To-day it seems a sad reminder of their decline and a rather more minor film than memory suggested.