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Kilchberg, 1964-04-30

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Erika Mann

Kilchberg am Zürichsee
Alte Landstrasse 39

April 30, 1964

Dear Kay, -

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this is somewhat belatedly but all the more cordially to thank you for your letter of April 10th. But in spite of your warning I am a little worried about what José and Joe might be doing to "Death in Venice". As I wrote you when I had read two thirds of the raw (very raw!) script, I felt the thing to be definitely overwritten. Which meant precisely what you on the one hand and Alec Guinness on the other have stated now, namely that there was far too much elaborate talk, far too much descriptive stuff, far too little concentration on the actual meat of the story, that is on its dramatic side. To give you but one example: When Aschenbach goes to Cooks at Venice to find out about the cholera, Thomas Mann puts in a short dialog between him and the British employee which is quite dramatic and very much to the point. In between utterances the author tells his leader all about the origin of the disease in question, an insert which makes excellent reading but should by no means be included in the film. In his first draft Ferrer had the man at Cooks tell the entire tale, thus robbing the scene of its dramatic impact and burdening it with an utterly uncalled for narration. He tried to undo the damage by showing a map and tracing the cholera way back to the deltas of the Ganges. He also shows a tiger. But who the hell wants to see either the Ganges-Deltas or a tiger when Aschenbach's fate is being sealed?

What worries me is the possibility that our authors might have approached the problem from the wrong side of the tracks. If so, they had better not go on fumbling but simply think anew and try again. I am still convinced that it is not only possible but quite easy to turn "Death in Venice" into a jewel of a film by utilizing what there is from the dramatic, optical, and musical point of view. And although I should have a chance to help and alter and correct even the finished screenplay, we all know, how much more difficult it is to do such a thing then to write something that is good from the start.

I am about to undergo another operation - this time at Oxford, England. I'll fly there on May 18th. My address for the weeks to follow will be: Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, Headington/Oxford, England.

There is no news as yet re "The Magic Mountain". I have had to put the matter into the hands of our lawyer.

All the best to you from
yours as ever cordially,

