

SEPARATE TABLES

Directed by Delbert Mann
Produced by Harold Hecht
Distributed by United Artists
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'S in' is an ugly word of unmitigated power. It hasn't been watered-down, just vociferously savored. One of the reasons the word is not used in daily conversation is because it is difficult for everyone to own up to, and acknowledge the seriousness of, his wrongdoing. And while a person understandably tries to avoid self-evaluation and tends to minimize his own wrongs, he can be scathing in his denunciation of others.

At a quiet seaside hotel nestled on the English coast, an eclectic group of non-conformists, societal rejects, and poseurs negotiate their days with fastidious regularity, each soul lost in its own broken sphere. These residents are familiar with each other, and unfailingly cordial, but nothing much happens and little is shared.

Then two events shake this little world. First, an extraordinarily beautiful and glamorous woman, a model of some renown, takes a room. She is Ann Shankland, on a secret mission to win back her ex-husband, the irascible drunkard-writer John Malcom. Second, a rather ebullient stuffed shirt known as Major Pollock is exposed as a pervert who has run afoul of the law in a nearby cinema. Over an approximately 16-hour period the residents are forced to confront their pride and fears. There's pride in class, rectitude, and beauty. The fears are multitudinous—fear of loneliness, fear of aging, fear of exposure, fear of confrontation, fear of sex, fear of mediocrity, fear of failure.

Separate Tables isn't about sin as much as it's about human weakness, our need to empathize, to examine ourselves first before scrutinizing others, and our need to belong.

The story makes clear that the first necessary step to a happy life is simply being real with each other. Stop playing a game—mean what you say, say what you mean; don't put up a false front of perfection as did Ann Shankland or revel in cynicism and self-pity as John Malcom did.

At first, Pat Cooper is chagrined that her fiancée's former flame is there to visit him. But she soon realizes that if John hasn't put his ex-wife behind him, he'll never be good as a husband to her. Ms. Cooper shows Ann Shankland great kindness and lets John go once he realizes that his anger toward Ann reveals more about his current feelings for her than about her ill-treatment of him years ago. Ann, for her part, waltzes into the hotel with a story about being engaged, but she is soon revealed to be very much alone, aging against her will.

Then there's Sibyl, who must stand up to her mother and learn to accept her love for the Major. But his whole life is a charade. And yet he is not alone—she shares his fears. His fellow tenants, led by Pat Cooper and John Malcom, recognize that the Major is weak. He's been caught in his wrongdoing while they have been spared exposure. They realize he is no threat, but a kindred spirit; and at the picture's conclusion the tenants of the Beauregard Hotel are closer than they've even been. Honesty and compassion have produced unity.

It's fine for everyone to forgive as long as the intent isn't to condone further wrongdoing for the forgiver. That's something worse than hypocrisy, for at least hypocrisy allows for the possibility that a person knows what the right thing is to do, but proves incapable of managing it. We should not dismiss wrongdoing in others, but, instead, forgive. And we must hold ourselves to a high standard. Even if we think little of morality, we do not live our lives in isolation. Should we add callousness to our litany of sins? The Major, after being discovered and crushed by Sibyl's disappointment with him, said it best: "You know, one's awfully apt to try and excuse oneself sometimes by saying, 'Well, what I do doesn't do anybody else much harm.' But one does, you see. That's not a thought that I like very much."