

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

Film Reviews
By G.M.



STANLEY AND LIVINGSTONE (20th Century-Fox)

"Stanley and Livingstone" is a far, far better thing than Producer Darryl Zanuck has done for a very long time, and a far, far better thing than I had ever hoped he would do with this particular subject. If we critics were sceptical, it was not without some justification, for we have seen too often in the past what Mr. Zanuck has done to other great historical events; and when it was originally announced that Tyrone Power would be starred in "Stanley and Livingstone," we had no reason to believe that Mr. Zanuck had reformed.

But let us forget all that, now that the film has arrived, not with Tyrone Power but with Spencer Tracy as the star (and there's a power of difference)! Let us acknowledge, in fact, that Mr. Zanuck has turned out one of the best films of the year, whatever he may have done to history. I say "whatever he may have done to history" because I just don't know, and this time I doubt if it matters much anyway. In presenting the Stanley-Livingstone episode, Mr. Zanuck has caught the spirit of the thing, and of the men involved, and something of the vastness of Africa. The girl whom Stanley leaves behind him when he sets off on his long, lonely safari may be just Mr. Zanuck in box-office mood; but as against that there are moments of great drama.

For instance, we critics, being annoying fellows, have all been speculating for months past on how any actor, even Spencer Tracy, could say "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" and get away with it. Myself, I thought I'd laugh. I didn't: Messrs. Tracy and Zanuck saw to that (after they'd rehearsed it 25 different ways, so I'm told). When Tracy faces the audience in close-up and says "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" with a long pause at the comma, there's nothing funny about it. You wonder why on earth you thought there would be. It's the most natural thing in the world for a man to say after he'd trekked for months through the jungle, beset by disease, beasts and warlike natives, and by a last lucky chance had reached his goal.

That historic line is Spencer Tracy's big moment, but it's not the only occasion in the film when you sit admiring his faultless technique of acting, his sincerity and restrained power, far more

than the African landscape, or the giraffes, or any of Mr. Zanuck's mob scenes. There's another such moment when Stanley learns from Dr. Livingstone that his quest has been partly in vain, that he is not to "bring him back alive," because the old missionary is perfectly happy with his work, God's work, among the savages, and refuses to be "rescued." And another when Stanley, back in England, is branded by the august Royal Society of Geographers as a fake, and replies with a withering four-minute speech which ranks with that delivered by Muriel in "Emile Zola" as the finest piece of eloquence in screen history.

This film is the story of Stanley rather than the story of Livingstone. That is not only because Sir Cedric Hardwicke, good as he is as the indomitable man of God, is no match for Tracy, but also because the whole emphasis of plot and direction is placed on how Livingstone came to be found, not on how or why he came to be "lost." But Hardwicke has two scenes all his own: when he rebukes Stanley for striking a native and when he leads his savage "children" in a jungle version of "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

Yes, indeed, Mr. Zanuck, you have made amends, and we would be a poor lot if we weren't grateful.

CALLING ALL MARINES

(Republic)

It's just wonderful what you can cram on to a few thousand feet of film. In the first thousand, the tough-guy hero lays into Uncle Sam's Marine Corps; in the second he pulls some dirty espionage work with a bunch of crooks; in the third thousand he again runs amuck with the navy; in the fourth he meets the fragile heroine and is so violently rude to her she falls in love with him at first sight; in the fifth, the tough guy (who does reform — we hate telling you platitudes), gets on a burning ship which explodes... But enough; we nearly exploded three thousand feet back.

RIO

(Universal)

This is a very ripe melodrama, with romance, and horror, and grand tragedy laid on in equal thickness by Director John Brahm, and with Basil Rathbone, Sigrid Gurie, Victor McLaglen, and Robert Cummings making the picture a little more than a thriller, pure and simple.

Paul Reynard, financier, collapses, and the world of stocks and shares goes with him. He is arrested (in Paris) and transported (in a specially chartered ship) to Devil's Island, near Rio de Janeiro (hence the film's title). To Rio follow



SPENCER TRACY, WE PRESUME?: Correct, and the other is Sir Cedric Hardwicke in the 20th Century-Fox film "Stanley and Livingstone," which is reviewed (most favourably) on this page. Tracy takes the hurdle of the year's most difficult line like the brilliant actor he is

Irene Reynard, wife-for-a-year, whose sensuous singing for Paul has been interrupted by the police at their wedding anniversary celebration, and Dirk, a faithful soul who calls Paul "The Chief," in anything but McLaglen-like tones.

While Rathbone agonises in chains, Sigrid Gurie sings for a living, McLaglen, between serving drinks, watches with some disapproval while Robert Cummings (as Gregory, engineer, failure, drunkard), brings about the inevitable. More love follows, more burning of hearts, more agonising for Paul, more troubled looks in Dirk's dutiful eyes, more swamps, brutality, ants, forests, and a stabbing from behind. Reynard escapes, but is believed dead. Irene now sings for Bill and is more than a little shocked when Paul re-appears (very dramatically, with a light going on and off across his haggard face). Universal don't explain why, but we imagine that Paul has somehow been recognised, although officially he's ants' food. At all events, the police appear, gunshots punctuate the final searing of souls, and, among others, Dirk most regrettably dies, dog-like devotion shining to the last out of his faithful eyes.

It is more than a twice told tale, but "Rio" tells it well, with the standard of acting to be expected from such players, and really good photography shining out with other details of slick production. It is extravagant to the point of being flamboyant, but not flamboyant enough to make the spit and polish given to this old theme seem other than superfluous. "Rio" is expertly filmed, but even the best of rehashes can hardly be anything but fair to good entertainment.

THREE SONS

(RKO Radio)

This might be a good film if it were not for the amount of talk and the paucity of action, and for the fact that the theme is unlikely to interest many

people. Actually, it is the story of the growth of a bazaar, from the days of the Chicago fire to the early part of this century. Built by one man's ambition, the bazaar becomes a landmark in the rebuilt city. The man has three sons, and a daughter. None of them see in the bazaar the fascinating thing that captivates their father, and several thousands of feet of film are taken up with father getting older and older trying to persuade the boys to come into the business. The picture ends on a note of regeneration of the youngest, prodigal son. The fastest action is a shop-assistant fainting; but if you like wordy pieces, you may go and discover that one or two of the individual performances are good—Edward Ellis's portrayal of the father especially.

FLIGHT AT MIDNIGHT

(Republic)

Out of Republic's card index come such cracks as this:

"Why do you call him waffle-tail?"

"It's an occupational disease. Comes of sitting too much on cane-bottomed chairs."

First impression is that they have gone too far in building Phil Regan into the crack-brained, cock-sure, boloney-peddling merchant of a mail-plane pilot. Second impression, when the hero is discovered singing in a fluty baritone to a waitress, is that Hollywood is out to astonish itself and the rest of us by satirising its own methods. Third impression is that the laughs in the first half are well worth while, but Republic got serious too soon. Last impression: that a grand opportunity to be different in an aeroplane film went begging by a hair's-breadth. There is, however, no baby in the picture.

But there is still the impossibly slick Mister Regan, spins, crashes, Jean Arthur, the esteemed Col. Roscoe Turner, and other dramatic bits.

Story: The puffed-up Regan is deflated.