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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

HANGMEN ALSO DIE

(United Artists)



IT is a pity the cinema industry thinks it necessary for nearly every film about the war and about Occupied Europe to have a Message and point a Moral; or rather, it is a pity they don't leave the stories to deliver their own Messages and point their own Morals, as they are quite capable of doing, instead of interrupting the action every now and then while the characters make orations about democracy, sing songs about liberty, and apostrophise the soul of Undefeated Czechoslovakia (or Poland, Norway, Holland or France, as the case may be). It is especially a pity in the case of *Hangmen Also Die*, which is a pretty good thriller when it is allowed to get on with its job of weaving a melodramatic tale round the assassination of Heydrich, the Nazi overlord of Czechoslovakia, and a pretty dull lump of propagandist pudding when it isn't.

Still, this is a show to see if you are interested in studying the directorial technique of one of the screen's Old Masters—the German, Fritz Lang. He

uses the familiar materials of anti-Nazi melodrama: the refined brutality of Gestapo agents; the defiant populace and the slimy Quislings; the ramifications of the Underground Movement; plot, counter-plot, and hair-breadth escape. But Lang creates his best effects of terror and suspense with little details like the bowler hat of the Gestapo chief, which falls to the floor and gradually stops rolling while its owner is being strangled. It is a deliberate, almost ponderous, style of narration; rather irksome at times, but on the whole, well suited to this type of story, and especially so at the end. The climax in which the Quisling is saddled with the assassination is far-fetched, but it has a remorselessness which excuses its improbability.

I regret to say that, on the acting side, the Baddies (including Alexander Granach and Gene Lockhart), put it all over the Goodies (Brian Donlevy, Anna Lee and Walter Brennan).

BACKGROUND TO DANGER

(Warner Bros.)



IN which Peter Lorre bobs up again, in spite of Conrad Veidt's cold-blooded destruction of him in *All Through the Night*, to play one more of those ambiguous, which-side-is-he-on, sibilant secret agent parts that Warner Bros. keep in their ice-chest for him. And in which George Rhumba Raft makes an uncalled-for come-back after an absence of I don't know how long I don't know where. *Background to Danger*, they call it, the three Brothers Warner; and Turkey, turreted Turkey, is their happy hunting-ground. And to help in the hunt and the chase, to whoop things up and keep the danger cauldron bubbling, they have Sidney Greenstreet (practically direct from Broadway), Osa Massen and Brenda Marshall, besides various other people dressed to look suitably near-Eastern. The director is Raoul Walsh. In spite of all this, *Background to Danger* is a flop and a bore, and our little man was persuaded to sit and look simply because of the presence of Peter Lorre and one or two quaint touches.

Once upon a time I saw a film called *Crime and Punishment*. Not that I want you to think it was notably like the book of the same name; but still, it was a landmark film, and in it Peter Lorre played the part of the murderer Raskolnikoff in such a way that from then on I had to see him every time he appeared. This meant a dreary time for me, with Mr. Moto after Mr. Moto and only an occasional gleam (such as *The Man Who Knew Too Much*) to confirm me in my belief that Peter Lorre was brilliant. But at last I've got the stitch. I'm tired of these softly sinister parts he plays, the little spy who's just clever enough to shoot someone in the first scene and just careless enough to get himself shot in the last scene—the gliding walk, hands in pockets. . . O, Peter Lorre, O Warner Bros., weep for the shades of Raskolnikoff, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the Hairless Mexican!

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