

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

SALUTE JOHN CITIZEN

(British Empire Films)

 THIS might be described as the *Mrs. Miniver* of the lower-income groups, showing how a very ordinary family in a London suburb stood up to the big blitz. Many of the situations that happen to the Buntings of Laburnum Villa, Kilworth, are the same kind of situations as happened to the Minivers in their charming country village—the night in an air-raid shelter, the service in the bombed church, and so on—but since they happen at the level of £6 a week instead of £30, and since this film was made in England, whereas *Mrs. Miniver* came from Hollywood, *Salute John Citizen* is probably a more truly representative picture as well as a more genuine tribute to the spirit of England.

This does not mean that it is a better-made picture. The family life of the Buntings will remind many on-lookers of their own, whatever their income group; but the propaganda is too obvious, while some of the acting is so crude, and some of the sentiment so naive, that several scenes are actually embarrassing (I refer particularly to the "tender moments" between the daughter of the house and her boyfriend, and the philosophising of the Bunting sons). Still less does it mean that it will be more popular entertainment: the gentry almost invariably have stronger box-office magnetism than people of such common clay as the Buntings.

Mediocrity is, indeed, the dominating quality of the residents of Laburnum Villa and their neighbours, and it is focused in Bunting Senior. He has worked for 48 years at Brockley's Stores and is head of the ironmongery department. He hates "new-fangled ideas"; he can't stand that music fellow Bee-toven; he muddles placidly along in his same old rut, almost glorying in his lack of imagination. But because of all this, rather than in spite of it, he is able to "stick it out and see it through" when Hitler's bombs begin to fall.

Any faults which *Salute John Citizen* has are not to be found in the performance of Edward Rigby, who holds the whole story together and gives it point and meaning. There is no subtlety in the character of Mr. Bunting, but there is much in Rigby's portrayal of him.


Looking at it from one angle, of course, it is perhaps not very inspiring to find a glorification of John Citizen, the average man, expressed in these terms, especially as one cannot help feeling that the Buntings of Britain, with their aversion to change, are just as likely to clog the wheels of post-war progress as to grease them. Yet if Bunting really does represent the average man, we might as well recognise the fact. Though it may be natural to prefer a thoroughbred racer to a plodding draught-horse, the draught-horses are in the majority, and do most of the work, and are therefore entitled to an occasional tribute. Because this film offers them one, it is to be welcomed. As a picture of courage and blind endurance,

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, MAY 12

I think you will find *Salute John Citizen* moving—even if you are sometimes moved to impatience that the Buntings of this world should be so complacent, and wooden, and stolidly good-natured.

THE CONSTANT NYMPH

(Warner Bros.)

 A STAND-UP CLAP for Joan Fontaine but a sit-down clap for the rest of *The Constant Nymph*, lush with the starry presence of Charles Boyer, Alexis Smith (she's good; perhaps she should share in the stand-up clap), Brenda Marshall, Jean Muir, Montagu Love, Dame May Whitty, Peter Lorre, old Uncle Charles Coburn and a few more. And a special sit-down clap for Eric Korngold who wrote the music.

You will notice that the film is advertised as being "from the book that made Love Story History." Which is not to say it is the story that Margaret Kennedy published in 1924. Nevertheless, here are the Sanger sisters, a bare-footed, hatless, musical four; here is Lewis Dodds, not the original Englishman with his heart locked away in cynicism, but someone called Lewis Dodds, composer; here is Sanger for a scene or two before he dies, an individual, an original, with Montagu Love very adequate in the part; and here is Florence, the careful, conventional Englishwoman, watching carelessness and spontaneity rob her of Lewis Dodds; and here is her father Sir Charles, bewildered by his runaway sister's daughters. This is material for a director to bite his teeth on. But I don't think Edmund Goulding bit very hard: I think the real biting was done by Joan Fontaine and Alexis Smith—I mean figuratively.

First we see Tessa bare-footed, and wet-haired: "I've been swimming in the lake and my hair's all wet and Lewis is coming." Her outbursts of adolescent excitement, her sudden onslaughts of shyness are charming and perfectly timed—even if they are tricks. I know they are tricks, but I don't mind. I'm quite happy to watch Joan Fontaine being the young, the gracefully gauche, the tremulous Tessa.

And I'm quite happy to watch and listen as Joan Fontaine sings her part in the music which Dodds has written for the sisters to perform. The theme of the music is later worked into the Lewis Dodds concert success—he won't be successful until he has suffered, old Sanger said.

So Lewis Dodds suffers.

But first Tessa suffers. Lewis marries the English cousin Florence, who loves him dearly (in her stiff English way, of course), and Tessa is packed off to boarding-school to suffer.

And so it goes on to the end, with Tessa having heart trouble, Dodds being slow to suffer, Florence in a panic about her marriage going on the rocks, and Dodds becoming aware at last of his love for Tessa, hers for him. Just another triangle, I feel, with some fine acting, some good music, and some choice lines used up but not wasted on it. Not quite an A-grade film, but almost.

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