

IS THIS AMERICA?

THE HUMAN COMEDY

(M-G-M)



THE most searching comment on Anglo-American relationships that I have yet encountered, was made by C. A. Lejeune, of the London *Observer*, when she was reviewing this film. She said that "probably the worst obstacle in the way of Anglo-American solidarity has been the delusion of a common language," and that "if our Allies had spoken Cherokee, or we had customarily conversed in Hindustani, we might have made an effort to understand each other long ago." Just because Americans talk like us, we have assumed that they must also think like us, and it has sometimes given us a jar to discover, on closer acquaintance, that there is, in fact, a wide difference in many respects between the two English-speaking peoples. To say that is not to imply that one is either superior or inferior to the other; but if we really desire true understanding between the Americans and ourselves, it is just as well to realise that there are differences.

Because it reveals these differences in a way that few other films have done, and may therefore pave the way to better understanding, *The Human Comedy* is an important as well as an interesting production. I can well believe that Hollywood, in translating William Saroyan's novel to the screen, has somewhat emphasised the sentiment and the preaching. For that is in the nature of Hollywood. At the same time, Saroyan is recognised as one of the most competent observers of the American scene, and since it is plain from the Saroyanesque treatment of the film that the author had a good deal of say in the production, one may reasonably assume that *The Human Comedy* is a pretty authentic picture of life in a typical American town.

The film is much more interested in people than in narrative: it does not contain a story in the usual sense. Its chief characters are the Macaulay family of Ithaca, in California. To be in keeping with the classic name of their town, they have names like Homer, Marcus and Ulysses. Homer (Mickey Rooney) is about 14 years old and is still at school, but works after school hours as a telegraph messenger. Marcus (Van Johnson) is in the Army, and is about to leave for active service. Ulysses (Jack Jenkins) is four years old, freckle-faced, and is known as "Useless" to his playmates. He steals the picture even from Mickey Rooney, who acts much more and shows off much less than he has for a long time past. There is also Mrs. Macaulay (Fay Bainter), and a daughter, Bess (Donna Reed). Father Macaulay has been dead for two years, but keeps on popping in and out of the picture, explaining details and making comments. For one of the most interesting things about this production is that it knows no limitations of time, space, or even of eternity. It calls in characters as it wants them, moves backwards or forwards in time, and passes from one location to another without any fuss or by-your-leave.

But Ithaca is the centre of the universe to the Macaulay family, and so it remains the centre of the picture. And Ithaca is a land full of honey-sweet sentiment and over-flowing with the milk of human kindness. Pollyanna would have been regarded as an amateur there. Everybody is so strenuously trying to look on the bright side, and so ready to seize on the least opportunity to preach and moralise and make patriotic speeches, that the effect is often acutely embarrassing. The general impression is of adolescence; there is a lack of reticence which is strange to British audiences, and which reveals itself in the tendency of the characters to grow emotional (and often completely maudlin) over even the most commonplace experiences. Is this an American characteristic? Probably not to the extent which the film suggests, yet I believe that for the most part Saroyan has been a faithful reporter of his countrymen's social behaviour and attitudes of mind.

However, although *The Human Comedy* consistently wears its heart on its sleeve, its sentiment sometimes does achieve the force of real drama. The

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