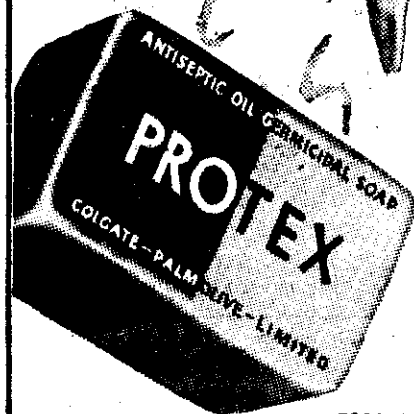


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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

CASABLANCA

(Warner Bros.)

EXCEPT that the deadlock over Warner Bros. films has caused *Casablanca* to be generally released here about two years too late for it to be topical, this melodramatic tale of love, politics, and intrigue in French Morocco contains everything else necessary for good entertainment: in particular, the performances of Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, Claude Rains, Sydney Greenstreet, Paul Henried, and Conrad Veidt, and the swiftly-paced and suspenseful direction of Michael Curtiz. The time-lag between the date of production and the date of release is emphasised not only by the fact that refugees are no longer on the run from the Nazis in North Africa and that Vichy officials belong to a past era, but even more pointedly by the fact that Conrad Veidt, who is very much alive in the film, has now been dead a good many months.

Casablanca (pronounced Casablonka by one foreign character at the outset, but thereafter by everybody as Casablanca) may not greatly excite the devotees of Orson Welles and the fine arts, but it will probably excite ordinary filmgoers sufficiently to keep it running for extended seasons wherever it is shown. And it deserves to, in these days when the average picture is either so crammed with "messages" and propaganda as to be boring, or else is so irrelevant as to be puerile. I suppose you might unearth a "message" in *Casablanca* if you cared to dig for it, and propaganda and the dear old love-versus-patriotism theme are not by any means totally excluded; but the important thing is that they are never allowed to get in the way of the exciting narrative. "Escape," by refugees from persecution, is the theme of the film, and "escape" is what it offers the audience—to be able to get away from the very real fact of war by watching the consummate skill in love-making of the entrancing Miss Bergman (whom I here elect as my favourite actress, pro tem.); the tough, silent manliness of Mr. Bogart; the French polish of M. Henried; the suave and mountainous villainy of Mr. Greenstreet; the masterly technique of Mr. Rains as an utterly amoral Vichy chief-of-police; and the superb nastiness of the late, great Mr. Veidt as the leading Nazi. Peter Lorre also has some good moments of terror as a passport-racketeer, but he is fairly soon liquidated. So, in the outcome, are most of the other disagreeable characters except Mr. Rains, who saves his reputation in the last minute by revealing anti-Axis sympathies. It does not matter that this representative of Vichy has, up to this point, accepted bribes and extorted graft from all and sundry, even forcing beautiful girls to sell themselves when they cannot sell their jewellery; by a lie which puts him on the side of the Allied Nations, he walks into the fade-out as a hero.

The main setting is Rick's Café Américain, the hub of *Casablanca* society, where Rick the proprietor (Bogart) sits in cynical isolation, secretly lamenting the girl (Ingrid Bergman) he

left behind in Paris. Round him revolves a crowd of European refugees trying to beg, borrow, buy, or steal the passports which will take them to Lisbon and safety. Mixed up with them are spies, members of the French underground, black-marketeers, and agents of the Gestapo. The intrigue in Rick's Café, in short, is as thick as the atmosphere, and it is added to considerably by the arrival of the girl from Paris and her husband (Henried), a super-heroic Czech who has already escaped from three Nazi concentration camps and is still running. Rick has the passports which alone can save him. Will Rick do the decent, manly thing and hand them over to his rival in love? Ah, will he?

Well, Rick's an American, and he once fought for the Loyalists in Spain, so you don't need me to tell you the answer to that. But Miss Bergman is an actress of such fine quality that even the noveletish romance becomes genuinely moving; and playing with a full hand of ace actors, Director Curtiz misses no tricks with the rest of the story. The result is a grand slam in popular entertainment.

THE NORTH STAR

(Goldwyn-R.K.O.)

THIS is Sam Goldwyn's "tribute to Russia." We have already had M-G-M's *Song of Russia*, Warners' *Mission to Moscow*, and R.K.O.'s *Days of Glory*. That leaves only Paramount, Universal, Columbia, Fox, and United Artists to fall into line. But patience! They'll be coming.

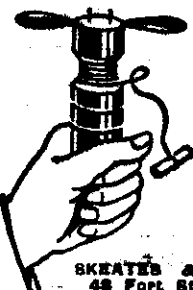
Sam Goldwyn has gone all out here to combine his "tribute" with a thoroughly lurid atrocity story about Nazi bestiality in a small Soviet border village which feels the first full impact of German invasion in 1941. But the trouble about atrocity stories is that when they are too atrocious we don't believe them: we remember what happened in the last war, and it may of course be argued that the Axis nations know this and exploit it.

However, I doubt if this valuable critical check on atrocity-mongering extends to the same extent to the cinema as it does to the printed word. At any rate, Hollywood, which has been growing increasingly unrestrained in its propaganda, has lately lifted the lid right off. My own opinion of a film like *The North Star*, quite apart from the fact that piling on the agony is always bad art, is that it is not only unnecessarily embittering the present but is also poisoning the future. But such a long-term view does not appeal to the average film producer; anything goes so long as he can get away with it, and so long as it is likely to make money at the box-office. It doesn't do to forget that the profit-motive is usually pretty well mixed up with patriotism in Hollywood.

So in *The North Star* Sam Goldwyn not only breaks a Russian woman's right arm and leg as a Nazi matter of course, and bleeds small children to death, but he also expounds the theory that those Germans who dislike and despise the Nazis are really much worse than the

(continued on next page)

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