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BEST FILMS OF 1944

THE time has come round again (in fact it is a week or two overdue) to make a selection of the Ten Best Films of the Year. The number is entirely arbitrary, and so is the choice itself. It is also, of course, an entirely personal selection and cannot be regarded as reflecting public taste as demonstrated at the box-office. All it does perhaps is to suggest what I think public taste ought to be!

There were 14 occasions during the past year on which our little man was sufficiently enthusiastic to rise from his seat to applaud. The following is a list of our A-grade pictures for 1944, together with the dates on which they were reviewed in *The Listener*, and it should be made clear that they are in alphabetical order, not order of preference:

Casablanca (December 1).
In Which We Serve (March 24).
Journey Into Fear (April 28).
Lifeboat (September 29).
Lost Angel (September 1).
The Magnificent Ambersons (April 28).
The Moon is Down (July 14).
The Ox-Bow Incident (November 3).
Phantom Lady (August 4).
San Demetrio, London (July 28).
Seventh Victim (August 11).
Shadow of a Doubt (March 31).
Squadron-Leader X (July 28).
World of Plenty (December 15).

IN the previous year, if I remember rightly, there were altogether 12 stand-up claps, and it was necessary only to delete two of them to arrive at the Ten Best. This time, four have to be discarded. It is not particularly easy, for although there were one or two particularly outstanding films in 1944, the A-grade group were of a fairly general quality. However, I have not much hesitation about removing *Phantom Lady*: it was a good thriller, but in my opinion not up to the standard of *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Seventh Victim*, or *Journey Into Fear*. The thriller class was, in fact, more strongly represented than any other. This may mean that more good thrillers were made in 1944 than any other type of picture; on the other hand it may simply indicate my personal preference for this kind of entertainment. Because the latter may be the case, I am prepared to delete Orson Welles's exciting melodrama *Journey Into Fear*. This still leaves Welles represented by *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and retains two outstanding thrillers among the Ten Best—*Shadow of a Doubt* and *The Seventh Victim*.

Squadron-Leader X was a jolly good British spy melodrama, something on the lines of *49th Parallel*, but avoiding the propagandist back-fire of that picture. However, it was not absolutely first-class—so out it goes. I am reluctant to discard *Lost Angel*, because it contained that delightful performance by little Margaret O'Brien and was such a charmingly sentimental piece, but I would rather remove it from my list than any of the remainder.

So that leaves the following as my final choice for the First Ten of 1944 (again not in order of preference):

San Demetrio, London.
Casablanca.
In Which We Serve.
Lifeboat.
Shadow of a Doubt.

Seventh Victim.
The Moon is Down.
The Ox-Bow Incident.
The Magnificent Ambersons.
World of Plenty.

I DO not propose to elaborate on my reasons for selecting those ten pictures. If anyone is really interested he may perhaps turn up the issues for the dates given and read the whys and wherefores in detail. But briefly, *San Demetrio, London* is there as the best picture of the war to date and one of the best sea stories we have ever seen—a completely successful demonstration of what the cinema can do when it deals honestly with real life. *Casablanca* is there for the acting of Ingrid Bergman and the performance of Claude Rains as the rascally but charming Vichy police-officer, and because the story, although conventional, was treated in such a way that it was a perfect example of screen journalism, slick and fascinating. *In Which We Serve* is there for Noel Coward's acting and direction in a production that ranks next to *San Demetrio* as a story of war at sea; *Lifeboat* is there because it was provocative and grown-up entertainment; *Shadow of a Doubt* because it was as neat a thriller as Alfred Hitchcock has ever handled, with the emphasis on psychology rather than on incident; *Seventh Victim* because it was a little gem of a thriller with a genuine literary flavour, a classic among shockers; *The Moon is Down* because, in spite of some faults, it was one of the very few films dealing intelligently with Occupied Europe; *The Ox-Bow Incident* because, although it passed unnoticed and almost unsung, it revealed Hollywood in one of its rare moods of courage and was the kind of picture that makes cinema history; *The Magnificent Ambersons* because it gave us another taste of Orson Welles and particularly his extraordinary photographic ingenuity and his remarkable sense of "period"; and *World of Plenty* because it was a fine example of the straight documentary technique, which has been seen all too seldom in this country: in other words, because it had a high scarcity value.

NEXT comes the task of selecting from among the Ten Best the picture that was, in my opinion, the very best of all during 1944. It is not quite such a difficult task as in some previous years. There are, I think, only two films in the running—*San Demetrio, London* and *The Ox-Bow Incident*. But when all things are considered, I doubt if it would be proper to give the vote to the latter. For one thing, it was much too narrow in its appeal. So *San Demetrio* it is. And I have a feeling that, for once, this is a decision likely to be endorsed by a very large body of average picturegoers as well as by a good many of the "intelligentsia."

AS a glance at the dates will show, the good pictures of 1944 were pretty evenly distributed over the whole period. It is impossible now to discuss the gen-

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