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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

STUDIO "SHOP TALK"

THE PRINCESS AND THE PIRATE

(Goldwyn-RKO Radio)



THIS technicoloured gambol depends for its considerable fun on two main devices. It presents Bob Hope in his accustomed role of lily-livered

coward—the cringing scapegoat and butt for all the skullduggery that the other characters can think up for his discomfiture. And it allows him to fire off a barrage of up-to-date wisecracks and personal allusions amid the pseudo-historic settings of the 17th century Spanish Main.

The plot of the picture, which is dripping with gore as well as witticisms and is loaded to the Plimsoli mark with Goldwyn girls besides pirates and other dirty sea-dogs, receives very unceremonious treatment at the hands of the quaking comedian. But the rough idea is that Hope is Sylvester the Great, a dud actor ("I'm known in every capital in Europe. That's why I'm going to America") who runs foul of a bewhiskered cut-throat of the Caribbean named "The Hook" (Victor McLaglen), rescues from his clutches a beautiful princess in disguise (Virginia Mayo), and finds himself in possession of a treasure-map which the pirates will wade through blood to get. Saddled with these two unsought responsibilities, he makes some pretence of playing the hero, but leaves no doubt in anybody's mind that he is by nature more mouse than man.

Thus at a time when courage is the most acclaimed of human virtues, it is of some interest to note that the screen's most popular comedian should have attained that eminence by consistently playing the poltroon. In *The Princess and the Pirate*, Bob Hope is quite unashamed about his cinematic lack of valour: he even pops his head through the credit titles at the beginning to announce that he portrays not a hero but a coward. I leave to the psycho-boys to explain why this should be so; but it certainly is so—and, indeed, when one thinks back on Eddie Cantor, and Stan Laurel, and Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton, it always seems to have been so.

* * *

THE other trend in *The Princess and the Pirate* is perhaps more significant: I mean the way in which Bob Hope plays for laughs all the time by means of what can only be described as studio "shop talk"; by sidelong references to other films, other producers, and other actors. For example, when forced to walk the plank, he is asked if he has a last wish, and replies, "Yes, I wish I was back at Paramount." When a character says something to the effect that he remembers having seen Sylvester the Great in Morocco, Hope suggests that that must have been the time he was there with Dorothy Lamour. But the final scene is the most esoteric of all. The princess has been rescued from the pirates and has been told by her father the king that he waives his objection to her marrying a commoner. She announces that the man she loves is aboard the ship. While Bob advances

hopefully towards her with arms outstretched, she rushes past him and embraces a sailor who, slowly turning towards the camera, reveals the countenance of Bing Crosby. "That fellow always gets the girls," grumbles Bob Hope, addressing the audience. "This is the last time I ever make a picture for Sam Goldwyn."

* * *

NOW jokes like these depend wholly on the assumption that the audience will have the required inside knowledge to understand and appreciate them. There is another instance of the same sort of thing when a pirate declares, "We shall sail south. To the south is safety; we are always certain of friends in the south," and Hope ironically comments, "Oh, a Democrat!" But the allusion in this case, though it is likely to be too deep for most of our New Zealand audiences, is, I think, more legitimate than the others I have mentioned which do, after all, presuppose that everybody who sees the film will be conversant with the intimate details of the star's studio career; will be more interested in Bob Hope the actor than in the character he is playing on the screen at that moment.

* * *

WELL, in a film like *The Princess and the Pirate*, which is just an elaborate leg-pull from beginning to end, this type of ragging is perhaps defensible. But *The Princess and the Pirate* is only a spectacular example of a rather disquieting tendency that is becoming more and more apparent in Hollywood pictures: a tendency for the studios to wash their domestic linen in public, to make private jokes for the benefit of the readers of fan magazines rather than for the general public; to obtrude the personality of the player too much into the character he is playing and so vitiate that atmosphere of make-believe upon which most screen entertainment ultimately depends.

When we saw Maurice Chevalier turn and address the audience directly in one of his early films with Jeanette MacDonald we thought it was very smart; then Groucho Marx did it in, I think, *A Night at the Opera*, when he assured the customers that "any similarity between the character I portray and myself is purely coincidental." The same device was used, with more justification, in *Our Town*, and just recently Joan Davis took us personally into her confidence in Eddie Cantor's *Show Business*. It isn't smart any more.

Similarly, we quite frequently find these days that actors and actresses are given the same Christian names on the screen as they have off it. And the practice doesn't stop at that. Perhaps the most remarkable example of this domestic familiarity occurred in *His Girl Friday*, when Cary Grant, wishing to identify his ex-wife's fiancé (Ralph Bellamy) to his henchmen, explained "You'll easily recognise him. He looks like that guy in the movies, Ralph Bellamy." In the same film Cary Grant observed that he hadn't felt so bad since Archie Leach committed suicide—an allusion wholly beyond the reach of

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