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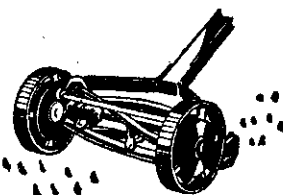
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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

DEMI-PARADISE

(Two Cities-G-B-D.)

THERE are by now comparatively few studios which have failed to react to the Soviet alliance by producing films designed to dispel the Bolshevik bogey and cement friendship with the U.S.S.R. This British production, which is by far the best of them, might easily have missed the bus so far as New Zealand is concerned, since it has taken nearly two years to reach us. But as it has turned out, the film is just as apposite now, and the need for it just as great, as it would have been if we had seen it in 1943. Such a film, coming at this moment, may do a very great deal to make New Zealanders more warmly inclined towards those strange and sometimes disconcerting fellows, the Russians.

Whether it would have the corresponding effect if shown in Leningrad, or Taganrog I am not sure, though it might possibly be a very good thing if the Russians, who have a strong sense of fun themselves, could see this convincing proof that the British also are by no means lacking in that quality. However, since this isn't likely to happen, the question is of academic interest only, and I fail to understand, therefore, why certain agitated English critics have declared that we should keep *Demi-Paradise* to ourselves as a private, unexportable joke.

THE film is, of course, rather more than just an exceptionally good joke. Yet although it has an underlying serious purpose, it succeeds far better than other films in the friendship-cementing series for the very reason that it isn't pompous or self-consciously propagandist. There is about it the same witty and whimsical flavour as we found in *Quiet Wedding*. This is perhaps not surprising when one notices that the story was written by the same man (Anatole de Grunwald) and handled by the same director (Anthony Asquith). De Grunwald, I am informed, is Russian-born, but I suspect that French blood also figures somewhere in his ancestry, for the note of social satire which runs through the whole piece, ironical and even faintly malicious at times, derives more from the Gallic school than from the British.

This witty, satirical commentary is present even when the film is most shamelessly burlesquing the English character and the English way of life. While the author is banging his victim over the head with a rubber bladder, he is at the same time tickling his ribs with a stiletto. But the Russian character in the story, Ivan Kouznetsoff, does not receive this kind of treatment—or at least not to anything like the same extent. It is important to realise this differentiation, for the whole ingenious conception of the film depends on it. The idea, you see, is that we are supposed to be looking at England as

seen through the eyes of a Russian visitor. Naturally his vision, from our standpoint, is a trifle out of focus; what he notices mostly are the nation's foibles and idiosyncracies, exaggerated to the point of caricature. But the Russian himself, the foreign observer of this apparent British mad-house, is drawn almost straight. It is only on much closer acquaintance that he discovers that the English, while still perplexing, are a great deal more rational and satisfactory than he had at first supposed—and therein, of course, lies the moral of the tale.

THE film is in two parts. It is in pre-war 1939 that Ivan, a serious-minded Stakhanovite engineer from Nijni Petrovsk, first visits England, an England which, although suspicious of most things Russian, is not loath to earn Soviet gold by making an icebreaker for which the hero has invented a revolutionary propeller. Everything the English do is incomprehensible to him. They appear to spend their working hours drinking tea and talking about golf and cricket; the millionaire manager of the shipyards prefers discussing train time-tables to business; their views on economics and empire are archaic; they laugh immoderately at feeble jokes and grow solemn during such an uproarious absurdity as a village pageant; silly old women scuttle away from him as if he were verminous. ("By dear, those Russians—they spread things.") Even the shipping magnate's grand-daughter (Peneiope Ward), the only person with whom he finds anything in common, disappoints him finally by resenting his well-meaning criticism of her faults and his severely practical approach to matrimony. He returns to Russia confirmed in his impression that the English are as smug and hypocritical as they are crazy—and on the evidence presented that view is not unjustified.

Inevitably this first portion of the film is both more caustic and more entertaining than the second. I say "inevitably" because the second part, dealing with the Russian's return in 1940-41 to collect his troublesome icebreaker, has to be treated with some sobriety, and also become a trifle propagandist, in order to vindicate the English. Ivan soon realises that England at war is not quite the same place as England at peace, and that even his first impressions were not strictly correct. By the end of the picture, Anglo-Soviet accord could scarcely be closer.

Not even such an unconventional film as this can resist that time-honoured device of achieving a climax by bringing up the relief party to save the day at the last moment. This time it is the factory hands who rally round and work overtime to get the icebreaker launched on the due date and thus justify the factory-owner's boast that Britain always delivers the goods. But the technique is the same whether it is a propeller that is at stake or a garrison besieged by the Redskins. However, the change in the film's mood from satirical farce to semi-serious melodrama is very smoothly managed; and even in the wartime episode

(continued on next page)

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