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Film Reviews by G.M.

## SPEAKING CANDIDLY

### THIS HAPPY BREED

(Two Cities - G.B.D.)



THIS new Noel Coward production—new? Well, it's only about one year old—is closer in form and content to his *Cavalcade* (1933) than to his much more recent *In Which We Serve*. For, like *Cavalcade*, it is the story of a London family told against a background of social, national, and in-

ternational history, in this case covering the years between the two World Wars. This was the period that Graves and Hodges so aptly described as the Long Week-end, and the film is almost as evocative of memories of a not-far-distant but already dim past as their book was. The return of the troops in 1918 to an England "fit for heroes to live in," the Wembley Exhibition, the General Strike, Rudolph Valentino, the "Charles-ton" craze, the coming of broadcasting

and the ritual of fiddling around with the crystal set, the first talkies, the rise of Hitler, the invasion of Manchuria, the death of George V., the abdication, Mosley's black-shirts, Neville Chamberlain's return from Munich—all these events are presented to the audience, not as they appear to the historian now, but as Mr. Coward imagines they appeared at the time to the people who were experiencing them. And in the finale there is a Coward device very reminiscent of *Cavalcade* (for those whose memories go back so far) when, in 1939, the heroine goes off to join her sailor-husband in Singapore. Remember that shot of the honeymoon couple leaning against the lifebelt with the name "Titanic" on it?

But in its spirit and its outlook, *This Happy Breed* is more like *In Which We Serve* than *Cavalcade*. Noel Coward (who, by the way, does not himself appear in the film) seems to have managed somehow to get a little closer to the true heart of Britain. He is no longer so class-conscious; no longer pre-occupied with the Best People and the Smart Set of Mayfair. His characters in *This Happy Breed* are the Gibbons family of No. 17 Sycamore Road, their relatives, and their neighbours; and they are what is usually described as Lower Middle Class. Indeed, they are even described unequivocally as "common" by the Gibbons daughter, in revolt against her humdrum existence. It is a true description, but one of the virtues of the film is that no stigma, no hint of condescension, is attached to this "commonness" of the characters: on the contrary, it is recognised as the chief ingredient of their cheerful fortitude. To make ordinariness interesting, amusing, touching, and even exciting is about the toughest task any dramatist, and especially a film-dramatist, can tackle. But Mr. Coward has, to a large extent, succeeded. He does not laugh at these people, but with them; they are real people, and their house at No. 17 Sycamore Road looks as if it is lived in.

\* \* \*

IN some ways, however, Coward is still class-conscious. Or at any rate his artistic sense is much more mature than his political sense. One might be excused for thinking that the chief reason why this happy breed of English men and women is happy is because they can drink everlasting cups of tea. The "cup-per tea" is the panacea for all the ills that befall the Gibbonses in the course of the story. And possibly this is accurate social reporting. But what about the General Strike? Mr. Coward dismisses it as rather a lark, with Father Gibbons and his neighbour enjoying themselves as strike-breakers. His son, led astray by a hot-headed young radical, is on the other side and gets beaten up for his enthusiasm; but the young men "mellow" rapidly, are soon convinced of the error of their ways, and settle down to respectable domesticity. Apart from this, the only upsets suffered by the Gibbonses are domestic ones: the great economic storms of the period pass by without disturbing them. In this they are fortunate—but are they typical?

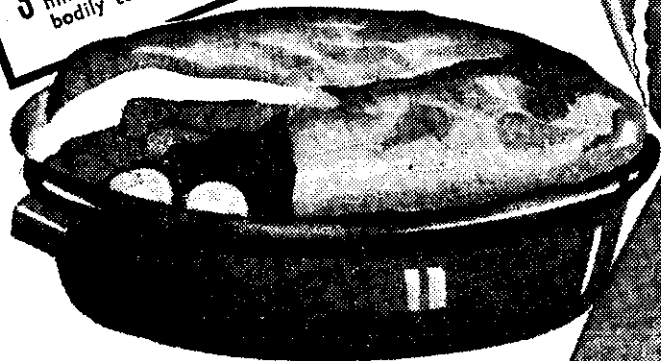
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THE acting in *This Happy Breed* is varied. Some of it is merely competent; much of it is very good; and in one case at least it is superb. I am referring to the performance of Celia

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