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Film Reviews by G.M.

## SPEAKING CANDIDLY

### GASLIGHT

(M-G-M)



AS a matter of strict principle, it might be no more than justice if this department were to refuse to notice the existence of this picture. For Hollywood's *Gaslight* was responsible for the untimely disappearance, almost without trace, of the British version starring

Diana Wynyard and Anton Walbrook (for a full account of the crime see *Listener* of April 27). But Hollywood's *Gaslight* would not be an easy film to ignore even if one wanted to (and anyway I am not certain that the film itself should be held accountable for the sins of the whole system under which the destruction of the British version was possible). So let us say that we accept the M-G-M offering under protest, and leave it at that.

What you may find less easy to accept, if you are wedded to the traditions of the stage, are some of the deviations from Patrick Hamilton's original play. The Victorian villain who deliberately sets out to drive his wife insane has been turned into a foreigner, and so has the wife herself—because these roles are played by Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman, and Mr. Boyer in particular has an accent which nobody could accept as London-grown. Miss Bergman herself is now the niece of a great foreign opera-singer and was actually in that horrid house in Thornton Square, as a little girl, when some unknown scoundrel crept in and strangled her aunt. Years later Miss Bergman has married such a dashing fellow in Italy, a composer, and has brought him back to the house in Thornton Square—and then things begin to happen; the gaslight burns dimmer night after night, while footsteps sound in the untenanted rooms above; and the agreeable husband is gradually revealed as a ruthless fiend who is corroding his wife's brain by insinuations, humiliations, and systematic mental torment of the subtlest kind.

Thus far the deviations from the original are mostly superficial, and permissible in the circumstances; it is not until the detective comes on the scene in order to unmask the husband as the man who, having murdered the opera-singer years before, has returned to the house to look for her jewels—it is not until then that you really notice the hand, or perhaps I should say the great paw, of Hollywood. For whereas the detective in the play was a shrewd but fatherly old fellow with few pretensions to culture, in the film he is a handsome young gallant, a product of the new Scotland Yard rather than of the old, who is on the friendliest terms with Lady So-and-so, and who, seeing the distraught wife, is immediately touched by the sight of so much beauty in such obvious distress. How M-G-M must have blessed the playwright for his forethought in including the character of the detective! Re-model him as I have described, make him be in love with the wife, give the role to Joseph Cotten, and you have everything that Hollywood imagines is essential for a popular success—romantic appeal and an implied happy ending. It only remains to add that few stage plays in recent history have been more successful than the original *Gaslight*.

For of course what *Gaslight* depends on for its attraction is not gallantry and a dawn-breaking finale, but sheer psychological horror; and the film has that too, and would have it whether Joseph Cotten were there or not, whether

(continued on next page)



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