

BRITISH FILMS IN U.S.

SEVERAL times in the past year or so it has been my pleasant duty to draw attention to the vastly improved, and still improving, quality of British films. This has not amounted to flag-wagging; the facts have spoken for themselves, but one naturally expects them to speak most clearly to British picturegoers. I was therefore interested the other day to come across an article by a writer in the New York Times which suggests that discerning American picturegoers are just about as much impressed with British films these days as we are ourselves. This writer (Bosley Crowther) says:

"Time and again this department has been requested by trusting folks to explain why it is that the British make their movies so much better than we make ours in Hollywood. The question is usually worded in just that way—as an acceptance of fact—and we find ourselves placed in the position of the fellow who was challenged for beating his wife. As loath as we are to admit it, the insistence of the questioners is generally such that the first thing we know we are searching just as eagerly as they are for reasons."

After mentioning a number of British films which correspondents have put forward as examples of high quality production, this writer points out that such a method of prior reckoning rather generously overlooks the fact that the British have also made a number of duds, a good many of which have been endured by American audiences. And it likewise neglects to mention that fine films have also been produced in Hollywood, a few of which might logically be quoted just to balance the record.

"However, we know precisely what it is that our questioners mean when they boldly enquire why British pictures seem to have a superior quality. In the first place, the questioners are obviously people who discriminate in their choice of modern pictures—and that must be taken into account. They are not the sort who go to movies with untrained or juvenile minds; they have had some considerable advantages in the cultivation of their taste. They know a good thing when they see it and react favourably to sense and style.

"Now . . . the best of British pictures do have a definite and distinct literary quality which pleases and stimulates the person of selective and cultivated taste. More than that, there is a manifest integrity of thought and imagery in the better-grade British productions that is uniformly sound. Where a high-priced production out of Hollywood may be as phoney and ostentatious as they come, a sizable British-made picture can be depended on for average honesty."

Bosley Crowther goes on to discuss in detail a trio of films—*Mr. Emmanuel*, *The Silver Fleet*, and *Colonel Blimp*—which he said have encouraged the idea among Americans that British productions are usually superior to those from Hollywood . . . There was no question that these three were eminent pictures: a literate quality, an honest restraint in visual treatment, and excellent acting were noticeable in all of them. They all "gave out an aura of genuine class."

"Maybe (he concludes) that is the word which tags most aptly the nature of good British films—theatrical class. And maybe they have it because they sprout their productive roots in an urban theatrical tradition and not in a hothouse colony (i.e., Hollywood). The only hitch here is: Why do the British seem to prefer American films?"

So far as New Zealand goes, that is not such a hitch now as it might have been once, because present experience here is that British films are more than holding their own with those from Hollywood. Yet they would not be doing so—or at least not to the extent that they are—if they were not of good quality, for New Zealanders have already made it plain that, when it comes to films, patriotism alone is not enough. That happened round about 1932, in the days of the regrettable "Quota quickies," when all-British theatres had to close down because of lack of sufficient good British films to compete with those from America.

This could be a subject for lengthy argument, but the sentence above which I have italicised is the best simple explanation I have come across of the essential difference between British and American films. And it seems to have been left to an American to notice it.

* * *

ONE very notable British film which American audiences may not be given the chance to admire is *Henry V.*, according to a news item which says that it has been banned by the Hays Office on the ground that it contains such words as "damn" and "bastard" as well as references to the Deity! All censorship systems contain elements of absurdity, and the Hays Office has always been sillier than most; but this latest move is so ridiculous that it gives point to another report that such leading independent producers as Samuel Goldwyn, David Selznick, Walt Disney, and Frank Capra have at last been provoked to join with Warner Bros. in the formation of a new organisation in direct opposition to the Hays Office. So the present banning of *Henry V.* in America may be worth while, if it helps to laugh the Hays Office out of existence.

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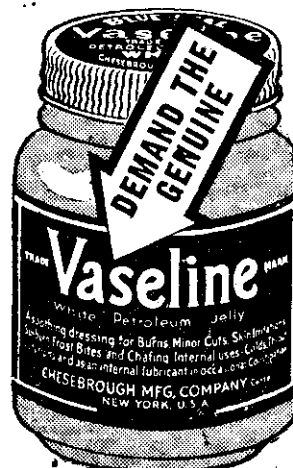
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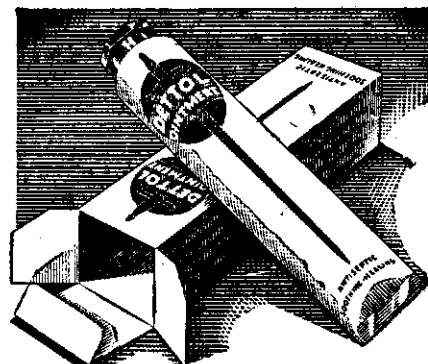
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