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Speaking Candidly By G.M.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS

(M-G-M)



I WAS rather disconcerted at first to discover that all the younger people I discussed this film with were of the opinion that it was boring ("Couldn't see anything in it," "It had no story," and so on), whereas I found it a most agreeable entertainment. Then

I hit on a possible explanation, and at the risk of being thought about twice as old as I am must pass it on: none of the above-mentioned younger people was what you might call a family man or woman. Perhaps you need to be one to appreciate this film properly. For undoubtedly the most appealing feature of *Meet Me in St. Louis* is its strong sense of happy family life in an era that attached much more importance to family life than ours does. Admittedly there is not much story in the usual cinema sense: just a record of trivial, everyday events in a household of seven Americans named Smith (mother, father, four daughters, and a son) in the city of St. Louis during the year 1902-3. Yet Director Vincente Minelli and his colleagues have approached this period and this subject with such sentimental affection, coupled with such technical skill, that they arouse nostalgic memories of a way of living that was much more spacious and gracious and gentle than the present—particularly for people like the Smiths, whose domestic problems do not include that of money. My own memories do not go back nearly as far as this, let me hasten to say, but it is still possible to feel the nostalgia without having experienced the original. To see this film is like looking at the family photograph album and recalling things your parents told you about life at the turn of the century.

TWO of the girls in the Smith family are Judy Garland and the brilliant little Margaret O'Brien. The latter, as usual, walks off with the acting honours: as the youngest Smith she is an adorable little ghoul who periodically insists that her dolls have contracted fatal ailments so that she may have the pleasure of burying them in her backyard cemetery. She also tells the most whopping fibs with angelic candour. The Halloween sequence in which she carries through a preposterous practical joke is notable not only for her acting, but also for the feeling of childish terror and pathos with which the director has imbued it.

Judy Garland's presence in the cast indicates that there is some singing, but you could be deaf and still enjoy the film quite a lot, for what really matters is the warmth, naturalness, and gaiety of the atmosphere, the beautiful Technicolourings of the settings, and that sense of family unity which I make no apology for emphasising. I do not mean to decry the music; it is simply that it is so much less important and obtrusive than in the routine musical film. It is, in fact, given its rightful prominence, and on nearly every occasion arises spontaneously from the action—as, for example, when the two sisters sing while dressing for a party. The *Trolley Song* is likely to make the biggest hit, but the tune I liked best was the gay little title waltz, probably because it is the catchy and simple kind of tune which, when sung in the bathroom, even I can make sound something like the original.

STILL, it is what happens in between the musical items that counts. Nothing of course does happen, as I have

(continued on next page)

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