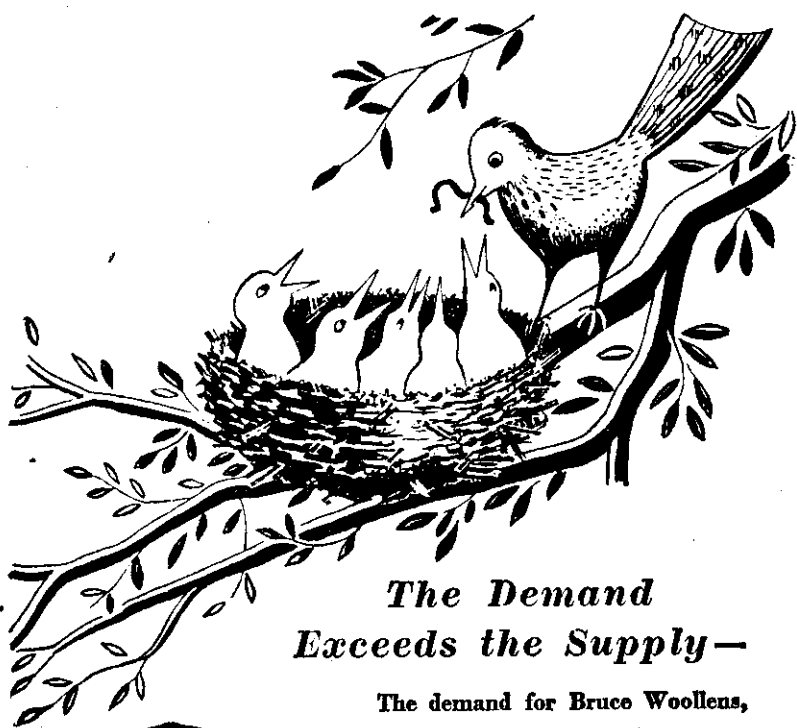


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## Film Reviews by G.M.

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

## WONDER MAN

(Goldwyn-RKO Radio)



[I]t is always rash for a critic to turn prophet, but after *Wonder Man* I am prepared to suggest that in Danny Kaye we have a comedian

who might become eligible to be mentioned in the same breath with the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, and perhaps even Chaplin, as one of the few truly great and original comic geniuses of the screen. I say "might," because from what we have seen of him in *Up in Arms* and now *Wonder Man*, the admission of Danny Kaye into this highly select company cannot yet by any means be taken for granted. Still, the promise is there: a liveliness of manner, a spontaneity of creative talent suggesting that he is not just a satisfactory vessel for somebody else's jokes, but that the fun is actually bubbling up inside him and welling over. He is able not merely to sustain a comic situation through a long sequence, but to play it crescendo: an ability seen most notably in his impersonation of a Russian tenor suffering from hay-fever, and in the episode where he masquerades as an operatic star and, with gunmen waiting for him in the wings, contrives to convey a message to the police during a hectic performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. This operatic burlesque business is not new, but Kaye handles it with the comic inventiveness which is the mark of the true virtuoso.

While few are likely to find it poisonous, Danny Kaye's style of comedy may not be everybody's meat. The frenzied, double-talk routine which he favoured in *Up in Arms* is less pronounced in this new picture, but his style of humour, though simpler, is still pretty abstract; far closer to the Marx Brothers than, say, to George Formby.

With better direction, *Wonder Man* could have made even more than it does of its comic possibilities. Nevertheless, for a farce the story is well above average and it has the considerable advantage of allowing Kaye to display his versatility as identical twins. As Buzzy Bellow, a self-satisfied nightclub entertainer, he gets himself murdered by gangsters for possessing dangerous information. As Edwin, Buzzy's shy bookworm of a brother, he becomes the instrument for avenging his twin's death when Buzzy's ghost, encountering him on the scene of the crime, insists that he replace the murdered entertainer at the nightclub. To assist and encourage Edwin in this Hamlet-like duty, the ghost demonstrates that he can possess Edwin's body at will. In the event, however, the ghost is not always on hand at crucial moments; and further complications arise through Buzzy's love-life (represented by an agile little actress named Vera-Ellen) becoming entangled with Edwin's (a pretty librarian, played by Virginia Mayo). If it had had a director as talented as its star, *Wonder Man*

could, with such a theme, have been a comic masterpiece. But though it is not quite that, it is certainly a first-rate entertainment.

## HOTEL BERLIN

(Warner Bros.)



[I] WISH it wasn't necessary, nearly every time I see a Warner Bros. film, to comment on the fact that it is out of date. But the fault is

too obvious in *Hotel Berlin* to pass wholly without notice. This is still a good, exciting melodrama, a fictional thriller with a political twist done just about as competently as these things can be; but if we had been able to see it soon after it was made at the beginning of 1945, instead of having to wait until now for its release (in Wellington anyway) it would have been a good deal more; the fiction would then have had the appearance of fact; there would have been a timeliness in this tale of Berlin society cracking up under the Allied blows which would have made the shadows on the screen seem like the shadows of coming events.

Making the best of it, however, we find that Vicki Baum, who is something of an expert on hotel life, has here given us a vivid and varied picture of the Nazi regime in process of disintegration. For dramatic effect, the picture is framed within the walls of a luxury hotel: this concentrates our interest while still allowing full scope for plot and sub-plot and a wide range of characters. Overhead the R.A.F. are regularly unloading their bombs, and Hitler's Reich is tottering to a fall; inside the human ant-hill of the Hotel Berlin there is feverish activity. The Gestapo (commanded by George Coulouris) are hot on the trail of a leading member of the German Underground (Helmut Dantine), who has escaped from Dachau and taken refuge in the hotel, disguised as a waiter; one of the generals (Raymond Massey) involved in the plot against Hitler has been given 24 hours and a loaded pistol and told what he is expected to do with it; a famous actress (Andrea King) wavers between love and duty and makes the wrong decision; the hotel hostess (Faye Emerson) balances the chance to get a new pair of shoes against the chance to save a life and finally chooses rightly; a liberal professor (Peter Lorre) is trying to make up his mind whether to be a man or a mouse; some of the high-up Nazi rats (led by Henry Daniell) are preparing to leave the sinking ship, by way of submarine to America; others, less important, are solacing themselves with champagne and Armagnac brandy in the lounge; the reception clerk grows more and more defeatist, the manager more and more harassed, while the main body of guests pack into the air-raid shelter or surge aimlessly but desperately around the foyer. This, one feels, may have been very much what life was like in those last days of Hit-