


SPEAKING CANDIDLY

SARATOGA TRUNK

(Warner Bros.)

 **SARATOGA TRUNK** is packed so full of all the rich stuff of Hollywood box-office entertainment that it is surprising the producer omitted the one detail which would have made the contents completely irresistible to the average screen consumer — Technicolour.

This film, an adaptation of a novel by Edna Ferber, reminded me a little of a René Clair effort called *The Belle of New Orleans*, starring Marlene Dietrich — perhaps because both have the same skilful and evocative atmosphere of life in the old French capital of Louisiana in the post-Civil War period. It also reminded me rather of Bette Davis's *Jezebel* and of *Gone With the Wind* — in the latter case possibly because the character of Cleo Dulaine in *Saratoga Trunk* (played by Ingrid Bergman) is a half-sister under the skin to Scarlett O'Hara, and because the Texan cowboy, Clint Maroon (played by Gary Cooper) seems to have gone to the same school of gambling and love-making as Rhett Butler.

SARATOGA TRUNK marks possibly the crucial point in the screen career of Miss Bergman. I don't mean that her popularity with the public is in any doubt: her performance here will be rapturously acclaimed by most picturegoers. But Miss Bergman, who once announced that she would never submit to the Hollywood "glamourising" process which has turned many highly individual artists into "just so many decorative zombies," has now, in this picture, put herself within range of that very process. She has gone half way to becoming a Hollywood cutie: it remains to be seen if she will go the full distance. I think she is still fairly safe. It may be that she merely wanted to demonstrate her versatility, after a succession of high-minded roles, by proving that she could play a sexy adventuress as alluringly and intelligently as anybody else in Hollywood. If this is what she wanted to prove, she undoubtedly does it — her Cleo Dulaine is a provocative and bewitching wench, and there are sufficient touches of individuality in the performance to indicate that Ingrid Bergman is still the mistress of her fate. But she will need to be careful.

As for Gary Cooper, he has possibly got beyond the stage of needing to be careful: his screen personality as the shy but rugged squire of dames is already sufficiently well established. At any rate, all the qualities which have endeared him to millions are well to the fore as he dances attendance on Cleo and bashes his way to fame and fortune. Since he seems to have the right of entry to her apartment at any hour of the day or night, the relationship between the cowboy and the lady remains morally rather dubious until the final scene in which Cleo discards her plan for hooking a millionaire husband and decides (as everyone knows she must) to marry the Texan instead.


THOUGH the heroine is a baggage, the title of the film, it should be explained, does not refer to her. *Saratoga*

Trunk is the name of a valuable railroad line, for the sake of which plots are hatched, trains are wrecked, and heads and hearts are broken. But it does not come into the story until about half-way through: the earlier and better part of the film is set in New Orleans, to which city the heroine has come from Paris in order to avenge herself on fashionable society for the wrong which that society once did to her dead mother. She gets what she wanted in New Orleans; and later in *Saratoga* she gets rather more than she bargained for. I think the audience will also get what they want; they may even conceivably get a little too much — they may feel towards the end that the love-making, though expert, is a little too protracted, and the dialogue a trifle long-winded.

But in spite of the mild sense of surfeit that it leaves, *Saratoga Trunk* is an impressive, if scarcely great, period picture. Some of the best things in it are, curiously enough, only incidental to the plot. There is, for example, the dwarf who attends the heroine throughout and who is such a merry little fellow that, for once, exaggerated physical deformity is far from being repulsive; and there are the performances, both excellent, of Flora Robson as a mulatto servant, and of Florence Bates as an engagingly wicked old dowager. But perhaps best of all there is the cheerful little signature tune which weaves in and out of the story and helps greatly in keeping the entertainment lively.

MR. SKEFFINGTON

(Warner Bros.)

 **THE** first point to be made about *Mr. Skeffington* is one which I expect most critics of the picture have made already, since it is so obvious. This is that the film will certainly come to be remembered — indeed, is probably remembered already — as *Mrs. Skeffington*, and that a movie producer would for once have been fully justified in changing an author's original title (*Mr. Skeffington* is from the novel by "Elizabeth").

This predominance of the film's distaff side is no reflection on Claude Rains, who plays the role of Mr. Skeffington: it is due entirely to the emphasis which the script lays on his empty-headed, viciously vain wife, Fanny (Bette Davis). I am, in a way, sorry that this should be so, for Job Skeffington is, by all counts, much the more interesting, more worthy, and more human character. A really good story could have been developed round this kindly Jewish financier. It would have been interesting to know much more about those early struggles of his which brought him from the New York gutter to a dominating position on Wall Street. There is, in the *Mr. Skeffington* we see, just a trace of the financial ruthlessness and opportunism which alone could have made such success possible: but would he have been

able to remain, in spite of these qualities, still the endearing, devoted, self-effacing character we meet here? Again, it would have been interesting if something more than a few vague hints were supplied about the racial theme; if the antipathy encountered by Job Skeffington in New York society because of his Jewish blood were given precise treatment (this might well, indeed, be used as the central theme of a whole picture — but would any producer have the courage to make it?) And above all, it would have been fascinating to know a lot more about what happened to Mr. Skeffington when he went with his young daughter to Germany on business in the early 1930's, was embroiled with the Nazis, and finally escaped from a concentration camp, returning blind and broken to New York and a wife whom he still loved, even though she had driven him from home in the first place by her callous selfishness.

Yes, the character and the soul of Job Skeffington would, I feel, have been infinitely more worthy of detailed study than the character and soul (if any) of Mrs. Skeffington. As it is, all we get is a sketch of the little Jew which lacks definition but which, thanks largely to the skill of Claude Rains in drawing it, makes us wish that we could have had the complete portrait.

IT is, for that matter, little more than an outline we get of Fanny Skeffington herself, in spite of the fact that more than two hours are spent in showing it to us. The fault in this picture is the fundamental one which I have drawn attention to before: the inability of the average producer to make up his mind about the mood in which he wishes to develop his theme and, having made his decision, to stick to it. *Mr. Skeffington* should have been, and in fact sometimes is, a sharply-etched satire on the taste and manners of this century. Some of the early sequences in particular are very good, with Miss Davis as a vapid society beauty, closely modelling herself on early film star types. But the audience, having been put in the mood to regard as good fun the coquetry with which she accepts the tributes of her many admirers, is abruptly switched into near-tragedy by the discovery that her equally useless brother has been embezzling from Job Skeffington. So she marries the Jewish broker to save the beloved brother from jail (would any woman as selfish as Fanny is made to appear be capable of enough affection to make even such a sacrifice as this?) And then we watch her through the years as she devotes herself single-mindedly to the task of defying age and remaining perpetually young and beautiful. As she uses all the cosmetician's skill to combat the threat of growing old, and surrounds herself with younger and younger admirers to convince herself that she is still attractive, the film merges from satire into caricature, and finally from caricature into semi-burlesque. Miss Davis's concluding make-up as an over-painted, over-perfumed, and over-dressed old harridan is too exaggerated to believe in: so is the behaviour of her ex-admirers. If the film were consistently a

(continued on next page)

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