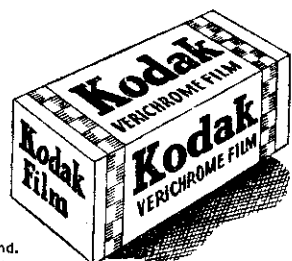




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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

BLITHE SPIRIT

(Gaumont British)

PROBABLY the most damaging thing one can say about Noel Coward's new film is that it is a good deal closer to the stage, for which it was written, than to the screen, for which it was adapted. In spite of the camera tricks which conjure ghosts up without difficulty from nothingness; in spite of the Technicolour which dresses the principal spook in misty green ectoplasm to look like an "animated acid-drop"; and in spite of sundry other devices possible only with the aid of a camera or of the Devil himself—in spite of all this, *Blithe Spirit* is really just a photographed stage play. But this criticism isn't so very damaging, after all. Though I hold strongly as a general rule to the view that the cinema should be the cinema, on this occasion I am delighted to acknowledge the exception and to recommend *Blithe Spirit* as a thoroughly civilised and thoroughly enjoyable movie entertainment.

The only people who, I suggest, should look twice at this recommendation are those who take spiritualism so seriously that they dislike jokes at their own expense, and possibly also those who take the view, not so much that marriages are made in Heaven, but that marriages made on earth will be continued in Heaven. Such persons are likely to be mildly shocked, since *Blithe Spirit* does raise the interesting and possibly embarrassing point, which theologians have presumably argued for centuries, as to what may happen "on the other side" when a man dies and finds two or more wives awaiting him.

But this is to treat Noel Coward and his film a great deal more seriously than he intends. A theme such as this is offensive only when it is handled crudely: when it is treated with all the wit and sophistication for which Coward is famous, when it is acted with the finesse and verve it is given here, the result, as I have said, is wholly civilised and wholly funny. There has been only one other film in my experience to compare with it—Sacha Guitry's *The Cheat*, which outraged the conventions with equal subtlety and wit.

THE acting, I think, is a trifle uneven—or perhaps it is merely a style of acting, particularly in the case of Rex Harrison and Kay Hammond, which is peculiar to the West End theatre, and therefore rather unfamiliar to us. At the outset I was not at all impressed by Kay Hammond, as the amorous and mischievous ghost of Harrison's first wife who returns to earth during a seance to complicate Harrison's happy marriage to Constance Cummings: and even though I eventually became accustomed to Miss Hammond's exaggerated drawl and her cultivated mannerisms, I think Coward might have found a better player for the part.

Nobody, however, could have improved on Margaret Rutherford, as

Madame Arcati, the medium who is responsible for all the funny business. Margaret Rutherford is an actress whose rough-hewn face is only part of her fortune: she has a wealth of high spirits and a fund of energy which enables her to dominate every moment she is on the screen; and fortunately for the film she is on the screen about half of the time. Her portrayal of the robust, cussing, face-pulling, deep-breathing old creature who goes in for spiritualism as if it were all-in wrestling, is an outrageous caricature which leans perilously towards slapstick but never quite slips over the brink.

YET the real quality of *Blithe Spirit* lies in the sound-track. Every overseas critic has commented on the debt which the film owes to its dialogue; in other words, the debt which it owes to Noel Coward. I can only add my own tribute to the skill with which he creates his characters almost wholly by their conversation, and to the ease with which he can pack a wealth of witty innuendo into a single sentence. Think for example of the effect of that breathless "Oh, sir—thank you, sir" uttered by the maid when she is tipped by Harrison on recovering from a hypnotic trance. It takes genius, of a kind, to draw the laughs so effortlessly yet so surely.

THE ROAD TO UTOPIA

(Paramount)

THOUGH its brand of comedy is poles apart from that in *Blithe Spirit*, this new effort by the team of Hope, Crosby, and Lamour is, in its way, just about as funny. If the one is a product of Mayfair, the other is just as plainly a product of *The New Yorker* and its characteristic style of humour, with some borrowings from the surrealism of *Hellzapoppin'* and even (as Wellingtonians may recognise) from *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

The story, which involves Bob Hope and Bing Crosby in a search for a gold mine during the Klondike strike, serves no other purpose than to provide a series of pegs on which hang a preposterous array of gags and quips. The surrealistic touches include a talking fish, a talking bear, a shaggy dog with a stick of dynamite in its mouth, an encounter with Santa Claus in his sleigh amid the Alaskan snows, a vision of Dorothy Lamour in a sarong in the same setting, and frequent interpolations by the late Robert Benchley, who tries to explain the plot and the technique of the film as it proceeds. There are references to previous pictures in the series, and to the producing studio (an Alaskan mountain is suddenly transformed into the Paramount trademark); and there are also plenty of far-fetched puns (*Lamour*: "Don't be facetious." *Hope*: "Let's keep politics out of this.")

Many of the jokes are good; some miss fire, but they come so thick and fast