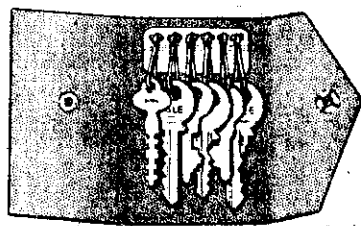
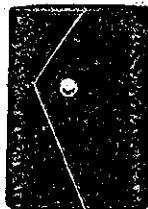


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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

RHAPSODY IN BLUE

(Warner Bros.)



AMONG the screen biographies of famous composers which Hollywood has produced, this life of George Gershwin occupies a relatively high place; it compares more than favourably, for example, with that parody on Chopin's life entitled *A Song to Remember*. And a well-merited place, too. I did meet somebody the other day who said she had never heard of Gershwin, though she knew a lot about Beethoven, Mozart, and Handel; but there cannot be many such. Gershwin was not one of the Great Masters, but he was a considerable composer, and few would deny him a seat somewhere in music's hall of fame.

This film, however, is more successful as a two-hour concert of Gershwin compositions than as an attempt to interpret the life and genius of the composer himself. What made Gershwin the "voice of his generation," that restless, frustrated generation sandwiched between two World Wars? Why was he better able than anyone else to put the spirit of modern America into music? Why did he hurry himself on from success to fantastic success until he killed himself from overwork at the early age

of 39? What was the fountain-head of his creative urge, the source of that deep spiritual unease which made him a man under compulsion, driving him to compose ambitious symphonic works when the entertainment world already worshipped him as the unrivalled exponent of *le hot jazz*?

These are the sort of questions which it is the proper function of a biography to attempt to answer. The answers are not to be found in this picture, except in so far as they are contained in Gershwin's music itself. As you listen to the "Rhapsody in Blue," "An American in Paris," the "Concerto in F," and many of the composer's lesser works, all lovingly and often brilliantly rendered—frequently by the very artists, Paul Whiteman, Oscar Levant, and Al Jolson, who originally helped to make the music famous—you may get a much clearer hint of what the film should have revealed than you will by looking at the story, or by admiring the starring performance of Robert Alda.

* * *

AS the Jewish boy who climbed from poverty to riches along a piano keyboard, Alda will undoubtedly satisfy box-office requirements with his dark good looks and his skilful pretence of piano-playing (actually most of it is done by Levant off-screen). But it is, in fact, a fairly superficial and tepid performance: it does not really suggest the consuming fires within. Curiously, next to the music it is Levant who comes closest to giving us an insight into the true Gershwin; a case perhaps of a man being known by the friends he makes. For in real life Levant was the composer's close companion. In re-enacting that role for the screen, he was entrusted by the producer with the job of supplying the film's comic relief; and with his caustic, cocksure wit he does provide it. Yet Levant does more than make us laugh: somehow he manages to convey to the audience something of the emotional response which Gershwin aroused in those who knew him well and shared his musical life. In the technique of acting, Levant is not the equal of Albert Basserman, who plays Gershwin's old music-teacher, or of Morris Carnovsky, who plays his father; but this note of intimacy in Levant's performance, sometimes angry and almost defiant, but always sincere, makes him stand out above all the others in the cast.

* * *

IT is, of course, always a supremely difficult task to take any artist apart in order to discover what makes him tick. The task is not necessarily beyond the cinema's powers, but on this occasion it was. And here the problem of translating genius into cinematic terms was further complicated by the fact that Gershwin's real life was, to outward appearances, singularly devoid of picturesque incidents. There was, for instance, no spectacular romance such as highlighted the career of Chopin. So in *Rhapsody in Blue*, Warner Bros. have been content to interpret spiritual conflict and creative impulse by means of

Wild Flowers of Speech

Building A Nest Egg

A BUILDER am I and good at my trade,
There's no sort of building that I haven't made,
I know all the arts, from roof to foundation,
For villa or bungalow, theatre or station;
The palace, the cottage, the bank or the hall,
The church and the chapel, I've builded them all;
I know about spouting, I know about bricks,
I know about drains, I know all the tricks;
I've met and surmounted each obstacle till
I was faced with a problem which baffled my skill,
I simply can't make it, however I'm skilled,
That "nest-egg" the Government tells me "to build."

—Arnold Wall.

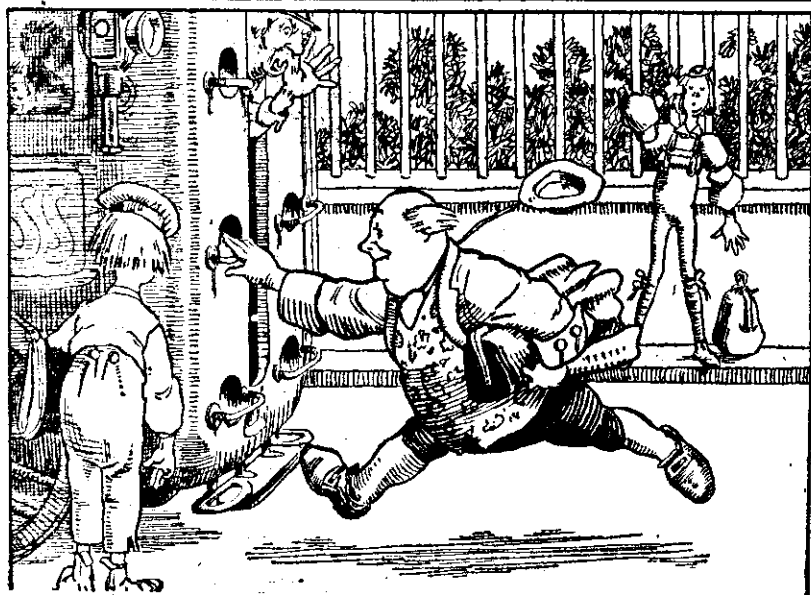
the conventional symbols of the success story and the romantic triangle. What was really the matter with Gershwin, says Hollywood, was that he was a lonely bachelor who couldn't make up his mind whether to marry Joan Leslie (a simple showgirl) or Alexis Smith (a sophisticated painter), so he got it all out of his system at the piano. And when he died he went to Heaven as all good Hollywood heroes do and looked down through a break in the clouds on the concert being performed in his memory.

For a film such as this, especially a film as long as this—if it takes two hours to dispose of Gershwin who died at 39, what's going to happen when they tackle Verdi, who lived to 88?—this sort of treatment isn't good enough. Fortunately the music is, and it is the music which really counts.

THIS LOVE OF OURS

(Universal)

THIS is a very tender romance; so tender that it is almost mushy. The mechanics of the plot, and the sentiments expressed therein, belong properly to the mid-Victorian school of moral melodrama, even though the story is fashionably and even luxuriously dressed in the modern manner and attributed to no less a playwright than Pirandello. Though the title might suggest love of another kind, mother-love is the main-spring of the action, the chief characters being a wronged wife (Merle Oberon), thrown out into the cruel hard world by her husband, under false suspicion of infidelity; their little daughter Suzette, who worships the memory of her supposedly dead mother; and of course the remorseful husband himself, a famous doctor (Charles Korvin). There's another character, a night-club artist who wanders in and out of the picture tossing off lightning caricatures and epigrams but who has little direct relation to the plot. However, since this role is played by Claude Rains, I'm glad



"I saw you, quite recently, run for a bus
In spite of the Dust and the Heat,
Jump onto the platform, and climb up the Steps,
To the top where you filled up a seat."

"Ah Well!" Father William replied to his Son,
"Some men at my age could not do it.
How much slyer they'd be if they acted like me
And took Andrews. They never would rue it."

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