

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

## THE BLUE DAHLIA

(Paramount)

WHATEVER I say about it, I am afraid I shall get myself involved in a sort of intellectual gang-war over this picture. A number of the connoisseurs and critics (including C. A. Lejeune and William Whitebait) are hailing it as something 'extra-special' in the way of crime melodrama, a very model of exciting action and crisp dialogue, while others regard it as nothing more than a slightly-better-than-average thriller. At the risk of being written off as a mere clod, I must align myself with this latter group.

The film was written by Raymond Chandler, but is not in the same street as his *Murder, My Sweet* (seen here as *Farewell My Lovely*). Or maybe it is just that my appetite for complicated criminality is a trifle jaded. *The Blue Dahlia* carries the present-day worship of violence (which in the cinema has now become a cult of sadism infecting even our cartoons) to new extremes of bashing-up and bumping-off. There have,

of course, been innumerable films in which the mass effect of violence and sudden death was much greater; but in pictures of *The Blue Dahlia* type the knocking-about is done on the personal, intimate level, with deliberation and even gloating. It may all be a sign of these times we live in: nevertheless I'm not going to hang out flags about it and call it great art.

Quite apart from this possibly old-fashioned moral objection there doesn't strike me as being much to enthuse over in *The Blue Dahlia*. The title in itself means little, being simply the name of a nightclub which is largely incidental to the story; and many of the events which occur when a navy flier (Alan Ladd) returns from service and gets involved in the murder of his wife, strike me as being equally obscure. The plot is chock-a-block with tough guys and in the end with corpses; Mr. Ladd gets slugged unmercifully, but finds strength enough to take Veronica Lake into his arms for the finale (she also is married, but a slug from a gat puts that right, too); the trail followed by

the cops and by Mr. Ladd, who has to find his wife's killer to save himself, is strewn with red herrings and flowing with gore; and one or two of the characters are so sinister that those who are merely guilty of blackmail and adultery seem almost virtuous by comparison.

The picture, I would be among the first to admit, has considerable surface competence and even brilliance; there are striking camera angles, and a general air of cynical nonchalance in the acting of the principals which is effective to watch if rather illogical, considering the jam they are in. The dialogue often resembles the conversation of human beings, but is sometimes so elliptical and casual that you just have to imagine what is being said—and with as complicated a story as this, that is rather a strain.

Indeed, when one gets through picking all these petals off *The Blue Dahlia* one arrives at the conclusion that almost its only redeeming feature is the performance of William Bendix as the hero's faithful friend, a big, simple ex-soldier with a piece of shrapnel still in his head. He can't stand modern "monkey music" (who blames him?) and under its influence forgets what he is doing.

The whole cast is highly efficient, but Bendix strikes me as being the only member of it who manages to create a character which is really alive.

## I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING (G-B-D)



THE trouble with this film is that, like its heroine, it doesn't really know where it's going, I mean. It set off, one may assume, to be a story on the theme that having no money is not at all the same thing as poverty, and by following that line it could have been a pretty good story; but it gets bogged down somewhere between a simple woman-meets-man romance and a travelogue about Scotland, after a brief deviation into the realm of the supernatural in order to investigate a family curse.

Though the ending is pure hokum, to describe the romance as being of the novelettish boy-meets-girl type would not be fair, and you will notice that I haven't done so. For it is one of the film's greatest advantages that both Wendy Hiller (ex-Pygmalion and *Major Barbara*) and Roger Livesay (the ci-devant Colonel Blimp) behave much more in the manner of normal, natural people than one expects of screen characters in such circumstances as are encountered here.

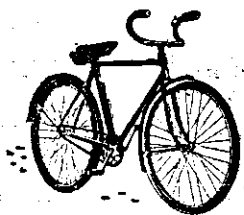
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