

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

BLUE SKIES

(Paramount)

AS regular readers of this column may have realised, the musical-comedy type of film is not, generally speaking, the one in which I am most interested. At its worst it is unparalleled as a medium for cheapness, fatuity, and boredom; on the average it is merely tolerable; and it is, in my opinion, only very rarely seen at its best. But when it is at its best, I am quite ready to admit that it can be vastly entertaining.

Blue Skies is one of the rare ones. Here we have Bing Crosby, who is an enjoyable singer and a better comedian, in partnership with Fred Astaire, who is a good comedian and a better dancer; the music consists of a couple of dozen old and new melodies by Irving Berlin; the heroine, Joan Caulfield, is a very pretty girl; the technicolour director has held himself in check, and so has the man responsible for arranging the decor (it is spectacular without being lush); and the dialogue contains a good deal of wit. The only aspect of the production which does not measure up to the

high standard of these others is the plot. There is not enough of it in one sense and far too much of it in another.

The story is told, supposedly into a microphone at a radio session, by Fred Astaire, who assures us that the people in the film are real. I disagree. They are exceptionally good artists, each an expert in his own craft of entertainment, and giving us full measure of it with spirit and discernment; but they are not, in terms of the story, real people. One, Astaire, is a Broadway star; the other, Bing Crosby, is a night-club proprietor who is constitutionally incapable of staying in the same 'spot' for more than a few months at a time: each of his clubs apparently makes money, but as soon as it does he sells it and speculates in another. Both are in love with the same girl; she prefers Bing and marries him, but soon finds that her desire for security conflicts with her husband's peculiar method of earning a living. She divorces him and is on the verge of marrying Fred when she changes her mind again. Thereafter, it is just a question of the scriptwriter deciding which of her changes of mind should be regarded as permanent.

THERE is, in fact, only one basic situation in the whole story, and in the words of one of the Irving Berlin numbers featured in the film, it keeps coming back like a song—so much so that, some time before the 104 minutes of *Blue Skies* were over, I found myself wishing that they would change the record. There is a similar tendency to spin out a few of the individual items; particularly Billy de Wolfe's impersonation of a middle-aged woman having her first fling at a cocktail-bar. This is a delicious piece of fun, but it lasts too long and loses its edge.

Yet I don't wish to crab my commendation of this picture by putting too much emphasis on these faults. Even if you do occasionally get rather too much of a good thing in *Blue Skies*, what you get is still a very good thing. And if this really is, as announced, Fred Astaire's last screen appearance, he could hardly go out in a brighter blaze of glory.

("I've had a long, long career," Astaire is reported as saying when announcing his decision to retire. "There comes a day when people begin to say 'Why doesn't that old buffer retire?' I want to get out while they're still saying that Astaire is a hell of a good dancer.")

THE KILLERS

(Mark Hellinger-Universal)

IF only the crisp suspense of the opening sequence could have been sustained throughout; if only the atmosphere of casually sinister purpose could have been spread over the whole film and not confined to those first scenes; if only Ernest Hemingway had written all the dialogue; if only But it is useless to regret, for what I am asking for is a film quite other than what we are given here. I am asking, in fact, that instead of writing a short and simple story which is a brief masterpiece of terror-by-suggestion, Hemingway should have written a long and equally good one, and that Director Robert Siodmak should have been equally as diligent and successful in transferring it to the screen as he has been for the first ten minutes of *The Killers*. That is an unreasonable request, because the essence of Hemingway's story is that it is short and inconclusive, terminating with a large and horrible question-mark.

WITH characteristic abruptness Hemingway launches us into a night-marish yet matter-of-fact situation in which two professional killers casually walk into a restaurant and with cool deliberation prepare to shoot a regular customer known as "The Swede" who is expected at six for his evening meal. Their manner is detached and impartial; it is just a job to them, this killing. With off-hand thoroughness they hold up the horrified proprietor and the few customers already in the place, arrange the scene to suit their purpose, and then sit down to wait patiently for their victim. When finally convinced that he won't be showing up that evening, they just as casually walk off again into the night, leaving the onlookers with the impression that they have plenty of time and plenty of patience. And that is exactly the attitude adopted by their intended victim when one of the customers rushes over from the restaurant

(continued on next page)

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