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Film Reviews by G.M.

## SPEAKING STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

(Rank--The Atchers)



THIS is the film that was made in Britain under the title of *A Matter of Life and Death*, that was given a Royal Command Performance, and that was, with few exceptions, roughly handled by the English critics. I can appreciate their reasons for this treatment, but I cannot subscribe to them. Perhaps that is because I have a soft spot for fantasy, and this film is nothing if not fantastic. It is, of course, by no means the first story about a heavenly messenger who returns to earth and a mortal who is supposed to be dead but who is given a new lease of life. *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* was one such in fairly recent memory; and there was another—I forget its name, but it starred Spencer Tracy—which even dealt specifically with the arrival of dead airmen in the hereafter. Yet no other producer has tackled this awkward theme with such all-out enthusiasm, or carried it through with such imaginative zest and technical proficiency, as Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell do in *A Matter of Life and Death* (I prefer the English title, though the film will be shown here under the American one).

Possibly they did attempt a bit too much; and not everybody will appreciate their "stratospheric joke" about an English airman during the war (David Niven) who causes consternation in the courts of heaven by refusing to die. This airman, Pilot Peter Carter, is flying a burning bomber back across the Channel, the rest of the crew all dead, the landing-gear and his own parachute shot away. Having shouted some delirious, poetically-amorous "last messages" by radio to an American WAAF named June (Kim Hunter) who is on duty at the airfield, he jumps off, convinced that he is going to certain death. The authorities in heaven are under the same impression and have made preparations to receive him, but thanks to fog over the Channel there is a hitch in the celestial arrangements, and Peter emerges from his jump apparently unscathed. Heaven, however, is by no means willing to let him go so easily, because its accounting-system has been thrown into disorder and something must be done to balance the ledgers. So a special messenger (Marius Goring) is sent to collect him. But Peter, having been ready to die, is now determined to live, especially because, through the heavenly mistake, he has fallen in love with the American girl. He is given the chance to plead his case before a tribunal of the immortals—and in the outcome, of course, even cosmic justice acknowledges the claim of Young Love.

ONE of the cleverest aspects of this grand-scale fantasy is that, though it may, to some people, seem to trespass on sacred ground, it can be regarded throughout as nothing more than a weird hallucination in the mind of the airman between the time he escapes miraculously from his plane, but with a serious head injury, and his recovery from a dangerous brain operation.

Yet hallucination can seldom have been made to seem more palpably real

## CANDIDLY

or fantasy more logical. It is the very boldness of the producers' conception, plus the imaginative skill with which they and their cast and technicians have conducted this experiment with time and space, which excuses the film's manifest shortcomings. Leaving aside the debatable proposition that a matter of life and death is never a joking matter, one might perhaps criticise the film on the ground that it can't make up its mind whether it is intended as a farce, a tragedy, or a sermon. My answer is that it is a bit of all three. The mood of the story is, in fact, quite inextricably mixed: it swings from one point to another on the emotional compass as freely as the story itself ranges between heaven and earth. Thus there is grim tragedy in the opening sequence in the bomber, and a clinical realism later in the scenes in the operating theatre; there is boy-meets-girl romance in the episodes between hero and heroine; whimsical



TO PLAY OPHELIA: Jean Simmons, 18-year-old English actress, has been chosen by Sir Lawrence Olivier to play Ophelia in his screen production of "Hamlet." She has already been seen in "Mr. Emmanuel" and "The Way to the Stars," and takes the role of the Young Estella in the forthcoming "Great Expectations."

comedy in the hero's encounters with the heavenly messenger and in the scenes which depict heaven as a sort of colossal filing-system; spectacle on an almost awe-inspiring scale as the camera traverses space; and a great deal of ironical (and slightly verbose) philosophising on such diverse subjects as Anglo-American relationships, the future of the British Empire, and survival after death. When the story remains down to earth, all the scenes are photographed in brilliant technicolour; when it goes up to heaven, everything is pearly-grey—and that is just part of the fun.

I DON'T know that there is anything very comforting about the vision of the hereafter thus presented, and some may perhaps find it actually offensive; but I don't imagine it was intended to be either. It is, however, certainly stimulating; and it seems to me also that if one accepts the proposition that the whole thing is supposed to be the sick fancy of a brilliant and poetic young man, then the contrast in moods can be

(continued on next page)