

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE HUCKSTERS

(M.G.M.)

THIS is a film that could be rather upsetting, if one were still capable of feeling annoyed or disgusted by anything that Hollywood can do. For *The Hucksters* catches a major Hollywood studio in the unedifying act of licking its own sores in public. Or, to be a little more polite, we are here treated to a remarkable example of the pot calling the kettle black—the kettle in this case being commercial broadcasting in general and radio advertising in the U.S.A. in particular.

The Hucksters, in its original form as a novel by Frederic Wakeman, is as blistering an indictment as one could find of 20th Century commercialism. Though it lacks the depth of characterisation and the fierceness of indignation, Wakeman's novel has, in fact, a good deal in common with Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* which attacked exactly the same qualities of rabid money-worship and cultural harlotry as they manifest themselves in the movie business. It, therefore, ill becomes Hollywood to be found, as it is here, in the public act of drawing its skirts self-righteously aside and casting the first stone at its sister industry.

Yet even in one's disgust, one can admire Hollywood for its effrontery. Both the novels I have mentioned would, as it happens, make admirable films—but only if they were produced in absolute honesty by a film-maker with a private fortune who was prepared to lose it and commit professional suicide. *What Makes Sammy Run?* we can be quite sure, will never in any form see the screen light of day. On the other hand, a film which calls itself *The Hucksters* and which does in many respects resemble the original, gets itself made—but because it is made by certain people in a certain way becomes a film imbued with most of the very qualities which it is supposed to be satirising. Yes, indeed, here is a very clever and a very effective technique for suppressing unfavourable criticism and dangerous thoughts, acquiring a halo of spurious virtue—and making money out of the double process.

SO we find *The Hucksters* being sold quite blatantly to us now as a "comedy"—a good-natured chuckle, one may suppose, over the whimsical ways of the commercial radio sponsors, the soap-opera kings, the tyrants of the air-waves and their slaves who suffer from the excruciatingly funny complaint of stomach-ulcers induced by worry about their "accounts." Call a thing a comedy when it is close to being a tragedy, emphasise the element of burlesque, and there's not much danger that anybody will take it too seriously. In any case, to divert attention from the satire and strengthen "box-office appeal," the love story can be played up until it almost swamps the screen. And since it wouldn't do to have a quite amoral love affair between the advertising hero and a married woman, make her a general's widow and a duke's daughter; in that way her English accent can be explained away and

M.G.M. can use the selling line that Clark Gable's New Star is Deborah Kerr (pronounced Carr). Keep on that tack, stress the romantic angle, sell Deborah Kerr for all she's worth (after all it cost a lot take her to Hollywood and groom her into good-looking nonentity); pull all the punches in the plot and sweeten up the dialogue, and nobody much will notice—or if they notice won't care—that *The Hucksters* as a film is just a wishy washy imitation of Wakeman's novel. The only characters and situations retaining any real flavour of the original are some of those set in Hollywood and those featuring the monstrously horrible Evan Llewellyn Evans, the "Beautee Soap" tycoon, and his entourage of sycophants. But as played by Sydney Greenstreet, Evans is so monstrous and so horrible that the truth which is in the character has become submerged. Similarly, the role played by Adolphe Menjou, as the terrified head of the advertising agency, is not strictly speaking a funny one—but that is the stress given it here. Slickness, sentimentality, high-pressure huckstering, and utter lack of taste—these, the chief attributes of commercial radio in its most highly-developed form, are the chief attributes also of M.G.M.'s film. So its finale, the big renunciation scene in which the hero turns his back on Mammon, is notably unconvincing.

The person for whom I feel sorriest in *The Hucksters* is Deborah Kerr, one of Britain's most intelligent actresses, who is here saddled with a role which could have been taken by almost anybody in Hollywood and who must, in addition, submit to being wooed by Clark Gable. This is Gable's first appearance for some time; it may be the effect of his role as the go-getting Victor Norman, but he seems to me more offensive than ever. That anybody of Miss Kerr's stamp would be seriously attracted by such a creature seems to me so preposterous that it represents a major fallacy in the film.

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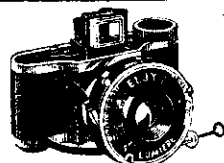
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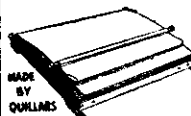
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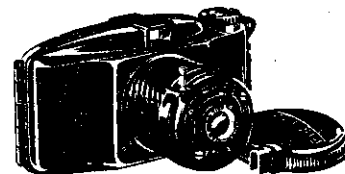


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