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## Film Reviews, by Jno.

### Mr. Stewart Sees it Through

CALL NORTHSIDE 777

(20th Century-Fox)

**C**ALL NORTHSIDE 777, somewhat curiously advertised in Wellington as "a story from life in the heart's blood of real pearls," is a good deal better than that would lead one to expect. Such pearls as it contains are occasionally a little more cultured than natural but there's no doubt about the reality of the foul oyster that produced them.

The film is based on fact, and for a Hollywood show it sticks remarkably close to its original. *Call Northside* is the story of Frank Wiececk, a young Chicago Pole (his real name was Joe Majczek), who was arrested in 1932 for the murder of a policeman, convicted on evidence cooked up by the investigating detectives, and sentenced to 99 years in the Illinois State Penitentiary (where the expectation-of-life statistics were apparently more encouraging than in Chicago). Believing, with some justification in those days, that it would take a lot of money to prove her son's innocence, Majczek's mother set about acquiring it the hard way. For close on 13 years she scrubbed floors as a charwoman, and saved 5000 dollars. Then she advertised in the agony columns of the *Chicago Daily Times*, offering her savings as a reward for information about the crime. Scenting a story in the notice, the *Times* began investigations which ultimately uncovered the whole corrupt affair and forced the release of the son.

I mentioned a moment ago that for a Hollywood show *Call Northside* sticks close to the original, but in point of fact there is not much of Hollywood in it. In a praiseworthy (and substantially successful) bid for realism in the settings, the director (Henry Hathaway) has stuck even more closely to the original locale than to the original story. Practically all the outdoor photography has been shot on the scene of the crime (or the scene of both crimes, if you want to be precise about it). Not that that made much difference to me in the general shots of downtown Chicago, where the topographical profile seemed, to my untutored eye, much the same as that of downtown Los Angeles. As if in anticipation of that criticism, however, the camera slides artlessly past the gilded windows of the *Chicago Tribune*, and the magic of the name, of course, leaves even the lesser breeds in no doubt about where they are.

But it is when the camera moves into the side-streets and back-alleys of the city that the wisdom of on-the-spot filming becomes vividly apparent. Some of the frowsty slums into which the camera-men follow James Stewart (who plays the reporter assigned to the Majczek story) are a lot more depressing than any sets that Hollywood could have contrived. This is not quite documentary technique—the sequences are a little too mannered, too facile, and the objective is, of course, different—but it

### BAROMETER

Fair to Fine: "Call Northside 777."  
Dull: "Behind These Walls."

reminded me in some ways of the *March of Time*, especially in the earlier sequences which recapitulate the history of the case. And some of the back-alleys looked as murky and threatening as those of *Odd Man Out*.

But though the direction and the photography are both commendable, most of the winning points in the picture are scored by the cast. James Stewart's is the only big name among the credits but all of the players can act. Mr. Stewart looks a little older and more serious these days, but his voice has still that slight nervous huskiness which goes over so well with feminine audiences, and his manner the half-apologetic air which gives his young-man characterisations their casual charm. In this instance, the script does not make excessive demands on him. It was the minor players who (for me, at least) gave *Call Northside* its vitality and reality. The star system is, in one respect, an obstacle to realism in films—Mr. Stewart, for example, is always Mr. Stewart—but the less familiar features of minor players lend themselves to no such division of interest. Kasia Orzazewski, for example, is splendid as old Mrs. Majczek, and Betty Garde as the frowzy speakeasy proprietress whose false testimony sent Majczek to prison plays a thoroughly unglamorous part with sense and just the right amount of restraint. Restraint is, in fact, characteristic of all the minor players.

I could have wished that the script-writers had shown a little of that restraint when contriving the climax of the picture; in arranging what can only be termed a photo-finish they put a slight strain on my credulity. The real Joe Majczek was ultimately cleared by the speakeasy owner, who confessed to having given perjured testimony at the original trial, but in the film James Stewart gets all the glory. The speakeasy woman won't speak at all and finally the discrediting of her as a witness depends precariously upon the date on which an old news-photograph of her was taken. Providentially, there is a newsboy in the background of the picture and the date, of course, is on the paper under his arm. So efficient have the Chicago police become (since 1932) that they are able not merely to enlarge the newsboy far enough to read the date on his papers, but they keep it legible enough to transmit as a wire-photo and thus clear Majczek in a sort of stop-press session of the Parole Board. So satisfied is everyone with this crime-does-not-pay climax that a friend of Majczek, sent to prison with him as an accomplice (and according to the film, equally innocent) is completely forgotten and is presumably left in the pen to serve the balance of his 99 years.

But though newspapermen are likely to find the climax a bit overdone, most filmgoers will have less inclination to be critical, and a loose end here or there doesn't spoil what is, after all, a fairly competent picture.