

The State of the Union

THE WORLD AND HIS WIFE

(M.G.M.)

UNDER the much more meaningful title of *The State of the Union*, this Howard Lindsay-Russel Crouse political satire was first produced on Broadway in November, 1945, and remained topical until November 4, 1948. I saw it on November 5 (the Hollywood version) and it was still funny. In a sense, it was probably funnier than it would have seemed on November 1, just as leading articles, in these enlightened times, are usually much funnier the morning after an election than the evening before. But topical humour suffers severely from the law of diminishing returns, and Mr. Truman's gallop to the top of the poll, which monopolised the headlines the day I saw the film and which gave a fresh edge to much of the dialogue, will be half-forgotten by the time this appears in print—and as entertainment *The World and His Wife* cannot but suffer in consequence.

In any case, in spite of the undoubted wit and ingenuity of the Lindsay-Crouse team, *The World and His Wife* could not in the nature of things enjoy the same popularity as, for example, their earlier *Life With Father*. By and large American fathers pursue much the same way of life as fathers elsewhere and the fun of watching Mr. Day derived in large measure from the anticipation of his inevitable reactions to fairly standardised domestic situations. But to enjoy *The World and His Wife* fully it is necessary to have a fairly intimate knowledge of contemporary American politics—a knowledge which not many New Zealanders possess. Those who follow the *March of Time* newsreels, or who are regular readers of the two weekly magazines associated with them, will no doubt understand and appreciate the barbed references to political and industrial personalities in the United States—Drew Pearson, Mayor Hague, Sewell Avery, Philip Murray, *et hoc*—but if this rather specialised knowledge is absent most of the wise-cracking goes for nothing, and if the wisecracks are lost there is not much left to salvage.

BAROMETER

FAIR: "A Man About the House."
MAINLY FAIR: "The World and His Wife."
OVERCAST: "Letter From an Unknown Woman."

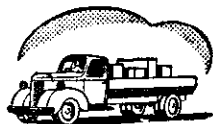
As political comedy, the play falls short of the Kaufman-Hart *Of Thee I Sing*, as socially conscious satire it was fairly innocuous even before Hollywood got its hands on the script. To snipe indiscriminately at everyone—Republicans, Democrats, the C.I.O., the A.F. of L., the farmers, the industrialists, the Solid South, the Golden West—is to come as close as one can to pleasing everybody, and that doesn't demand much courage.

The World and His Wife is the story of a rugged but honest individualist (Spencer Tracy)—a sort of airborne Wendell Willkie—who is persuaded to make a speechmaking tour to test his chances as a possible Republican candidate for the presidency. No sooner is he involved with the politicians, of course, than he begins to compromise with his conscience and he is eventually rescued in the nick of time from moral ruin and political success by the intervention of his wife (Katherine Hepburn). In the early stages the film follows the play with almost painful fidelity (several of the scenes could have been photographed from the front row of the stalls) but

the climax is pure Hollywood. In a last-minute eruption of sentiment and general capra-ra-boom-de-ay, Mr. Tracy attacks the corruption of the political machines and over a coast-to-coast hook-up announces his retirement from politics. And, of course, as events have proved, it was just as well that he did.

Of the cast, Spencer Tracy is not the actor he once was (*Captains Courageous*, *Fury*), but against that the part is certainly not what he once got. Miss Hepburn's performance seemed uneven to me—she had some good lines, and did not waste them, but she does get rather intense in emotional passages and seems to suffer from what the French call tears in the voice. I found Angela Lansbury's performance more refreshing, but the most successful member of the cast is Adolphe Menjou. As Conover, the astute campaign manager, the old maestro is in his element. Of course, since I last saw him he has had a bit of real political experience, testifying before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and no doubt he acquired a lot of useful background there. Van Johnson is also in the cast, as Spike McManus, a Washington political reporter. He seemed to me to meet the original stage specifications admirably—"pudgy and genial, and with a rough charm." He is not otherwise distinguished.

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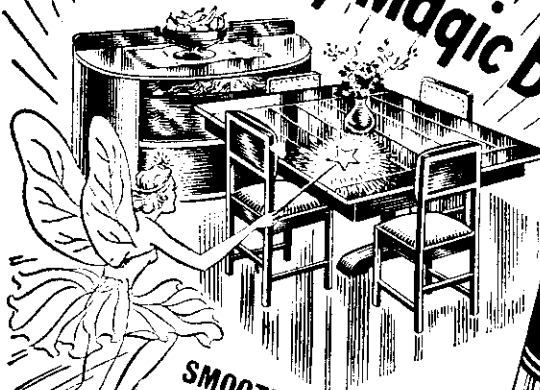
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