

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

Film Reviews

By G.M.



JUAREZ

(Warners)

In 1864 Archduke Maximilian von Habsburg of Austria entered Mexico and was proclaimed Emperor. It was a title in theory rather than in fact. The Mexicans had voted him the crown in a national plebiscite, but even in those days a national plebiscite could apparently mean as little as it has since meant to Hitler. The mass of the Mexican peasants were illiterate: had not the slightest idea what was on the voting papers they were putting their marks to. In any case, their real allegiance was to a man of themselves, a half-Indian named Juarez, who, hunted from one corner of the land to another, still carried with him the ideals of the Republic of which he was President.

Here, in this colourful, little-known chapter of history, was a suitable subject for the pageant-makers of Warner Bros.

But more than that, it was an opportunity to express modern American ideas on modern European problems in terms of portentous entertainment. According to Hollywood (and also for the most part, I think, to history) Maximilian was the dupe of the French Emperor, Napoleon III., who wanted to have a finger in the American pie. French troops had been sent to pull out a few plums in the form of French debt-charges in Mexico. The Americans were too busy fighting a civil war at the time to worry much about this violation of the Monroe Doctrine; but when, contrary to what Napoleon expected, the Northerners won the war, he had to think up some way of getting his finger out of the pie before it became too hot to be pleasant. The Emperor Maximilian was the way out—a puppet ruler apparently chosen by the Mexicans themselves would stop American quibbles about the Monroe Doctrine



When Mexico had an Emperor: Brian Aherne as the ill-fated Maximilian and Bette Davis as his Empress. Inset: Paul Muni as the man who caused their downfall, in the title role of "Juarez"

and foreign interference, and still enable the French troops to finish their debt collecting.

In fact, the film "Juarez" presents Napoleon III. as a very nasty fellow, with all a dictator's nasty ways. But it is very kind to both Maximilian and Juarez. Maximilian is represented as a well-meaning, sincere, and fearless man who is deeply distressed when he learns of the deception practised on him and, through him, on the people of Mexico. Juarez, the disciple of Lincoln, is shown as equally courageous, dogged, and high-principled. Between them there was, so the film insists, only that little word "democracy": But it was enough to keep them forever apart, to plunge Mexico into revolt, and turn the country into a shambles until Napoleon treacherously withdrew his troops and left his puppet to his fate. It is the tragedy of the film, whether or not it was the tragedy of history, that Maximilian and Juarez never met and talked things over. For all the play that Hollywood, with an eye to topical appeal, makes about democracy, monarchy, and republicanism, their differences do not seem irreconcilable. But the deserted Emperor goes before a republican firing squad as a warning to other European Powers to keep their noses out of American affairs; and President Juarez, sadly looking down on his dead face in the last scene, murmurs, "Forgive me, I had to do it."

Though Juarez gets the better of Maximilian in the story, I'm inclined to think that Brian Aherne as Maximilian gets the better of Paul Muni as Juarez in the acting. Muni has nearly all the big important speeches, but Aherne takes more of the total footage, and more of the sympathy by managing to be a human being as well as an Emperor. Bette Davis, I was almost going to say, heads the supporting cast as the unfortunate Empress Carlota, but she is rather more important than that.

Warner Bros., who have probably done more than anyone else in Hollywood to bring the contemporary American scene to life, have again managed—as they did in "Emile Zola"—to present the past

with an air of fidelity. The dialogue is remarkably well written, and the moral—that history had better not repeat itself—is seldom too obtrusive.

THOU SHALT NOT KILL

(Republic)

Charles Bickford, to everyone's surprise, appears as a Protestant Minister. Another surprise in the story is the appearance of someone for him to reform in that brusque but effective way at which practice is making him so proficient. Owen Davis, jr., is the boy. He's well on the way to discarding the last stains of a dissipated young life when Sheila Bromley, barmaid in a dance hall, is found murdered. The boy is arraigned. Only Reverend Chris. can save him, but Reverend has heard the real murderer's confession under the bonds of the Confessional. He finds that he cannot break the silence imposed upon him by the constraints of a church other than his own. However, in the end Doris Day gets her man with a clean sheet. This is the ordinary mass-produced film, and good enough in that class, but there is little in it to justify the risk it takes of offending religious susceptibilities.

AMAZING MR. WILLIAMS

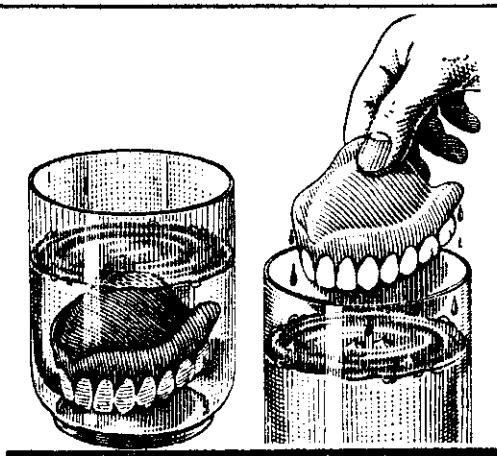
(Columbia)

To fans of Melvyn Douglas, Joan Blondell and American comedy-thrillers in general, this will be welcome. Douglas, as a slick cop, shows that his wit is as sharp and his brain as agile as his feet should traditionally be large. In the intervals of solving murder-mysteries, he turns his love-lorn gaze upon the comely figure of Joan Blondell, who, however, thinks he is far too much married to the Police Department.

Miss Blondell's features may be a shade too homely for my liking, but her wit coruscates like Great Aunt Esmeralda's jewel case—and you'll have to go and see the show to appreciate the way she finally handles her man.

Supported by a good cast and aided by an intelligent director, Blondell and Douglas mould this into an entertaining handsome-is-as-handsome-does picture.

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