



ANSWER TO CORRESPONDENT: Joel McCrea seems to be making a cutting retort to his fellow-newspaperman, George Sanders, in this scene from "Foreign Correspondent." Laraine Day is the cause of the argument

(Continued from previous page)

## FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

(United Artists)

WHEN Johnny Jones's boss gives him the job of foreign correspondent in Europe it is because he is a good reporter and not an economist, politician or soothsayer. "I don't want sages or oracles to tell me what they think might happen," says the newspaper magnate. "I want a crime reporter—because there's a mighty big crime cooking up in Europe." All newspaper readers who have longed for more facts and less prophecy will applaud this sentiment at the beginning of "Foreign Correspondent," but the story which Johnny Jones thereafter uncovers is as much a piece of colourful fiction as anything that has appeared in the papers—and as exciting as only a Hitchcock-directed movie can be.

"Foreign Correspondent" was, at the beginning, to have been based on fact—on Vincent Sheean's "Personal History." Walter Wanger bought the rights for 10,000 dollars, but history moved too fast for Walter Wanger. By the time three writers had worked on producing a story with a Spanish Civil War background, the Spanish Civil War was over. Wanger started again, but this time Hitler caught up and passed him and went on into Poland. Finally Wanger turned it all over to Alfred Hitchcock, who engaged a new team of writers (including James "Mr. Chips" Hilton, Robert Benchley, and Ben Hecht). The result is not at all Vincent Sheean but very much Hitchcock.

To my mind it is not quite Hitchcock at his very best, as he was, for instance, in "The Man Who Knew Too Much" and "The Lady Vanishes." His technique is less clear-cut and leaves a good many loose ends to the plot which, if they care to be critical in retrospect, may bother people with tidy minds. What, for example, was that secret clause to the treaty which the German agents spent so much time kidnapping, murdering and torturing in order to discover? And it would have been interesting, for future reference, to have been told just how the Universal Peace Party imagined it could avert the war two days before it broke out. If I am inclined to criticise the vagueness of some of the purely imaginary details of the plot it is because the

director has been at such pains—and with very considerable success—to create an atmosphere of topicality and authenticity for his background of Europe on the eve of war.

Johnny Jones, as played with ability by Joel McCrea, is the American newspaperman of screen tradition, and the adventures that befall him are, in essence, those that commonly befall newspapermen on the screen, whether they are covering gang warfare in Chicago or the effects of gangsterdom on a large scale in Europe. He has the usual good luck—when he bumps right into his "story" on his first day in London—and the usual bad luck when his quarry vanishes.

Yet, as always, it is not so much Hitchcock's basic material that counts as how he treats it. In "Foreign Correspondent" he has geared his tale of German agents using a "Peace" organisation as cover for their plotting to such a pitch of suspense that, in several parts the action is almost breath-taking. There are the familiar Hitchcock tricks of technique—the innocent little details that are really so sinister, the unexpected flashes of comedy, the prolonging of climaxes (as when Edward Gwenn is about to push the hero from a tower, and when an air liner is crashing into the sea) and the early ticketing of the villains (though my companion at the preview with me did find it hard to believe even at the end that such a nice man as Herbert Marshall could be a German spy). Best of all perhaps is the way Hitchcock places his cameras

As usual Hitchcock is the star of his picture; but he has not, for that reason, neglected to provide a cast that has no weak members and several very strong ones. New faces well worth watching are Albert Bassermann as Van Meer, the kidnapped statesman who, somehow, was going to save Europe from war and who knew all about that vital treaty (very secret), and Laraine Day, who is seen as Herbert Marshall's daughter, as innocent and idealistic as her screen parent is ruthless. The round-eyed Miss Day ranks with Joan Fontaine (of "Rebecca") as a Hitchcock triumph in discovering unsuspected talent. And a final hand-clap for Robert Benchley who, as "Time" puts it, "is to the life what Robert Benchley undoubtedly would be if he had been a foreign correspondent in London for 25 years."

## "LONDON CAN TAKE IT"

### Five Documentaries from England

(Reviewed for "The Listener" by E. S. ANDREWS)

IT isn't often that a "short" in the first half of a movie programme can hush an audience into tense silence, but it has been happening these past two weeks. "London Can Take It" performed this miracle, assisted by the calm voice of the neutral commentator, Quentin Reynolds, of "Collier's Weekly." As Reynolds begins his story the rustle of lolly-bags dies away and one can feel the tension grow in the theatre.

The film is done entirely from the viewpoint of the civilian onlooker, with no technical details of guns and planes. The bombers drone overhead unseen, guns crack, and the darkness is split open momentarily by gun flashes. And down below people sleep in shelters or go about their business. "No Hollywood sound effects" says Reynolds: "This is the nightly music played over London, the awful symphony of war." Interested only as a man and not as a participant, he goes on quietly to tell of people killed, of buildings wrecked, of a community that cannot be beaten because every bomb that falls toughens its resolution to fight on.

"London Can Take It" is one of five films sent by the British Government through the United Kingdom High Commissioner (Sir Harry Batterbee), to tell New Zealanders what the war looks like in human terms. The other four were recently previewed at the Regent Theatre, Wellington, by an audience so large and so enthusiastic as to leave Sir Harry in no doubt as to the eagerness of New Zealanders to see for themselves some of the comradeship, the realities of service and suffering, and the fighting spirit of the British people.

#### "Squadron 992"

Of the four, "Squadron 992" is the best film, both as a piece of entertainment with a purpose, and as an example of how exciting the other fellow's everyday job can be when presented in the right way. With one minor exception, there are no actors in it: the men of the balloon barrage are shown as they look, as they work and, strikingly, as they speak. Overnight, Squadron 992 transports itself from London to Scotland to guard the Forth Bridge, and the greater part of the story is taken up with an account of how that was done, not as a piece of tidy organisation, but as it affects the men who are the organisation.

#### Incidents En Route

The incidents that flavour a soldier's journey are there large as life; the pretty girl just glimpsed as the convoy of lorries winds down a country road; eloquent gestures as the convoy passes a pub; a pathetic little tramp with a huge brown paper parcel; high spirits toned down to sleepy acquiescence as the journey nears its end; and, under the shadow of the Forth Bridge, a private's reply to a sergeant who makes a joke

about "earning your keep"; "We've built the bloody bridge since we came up here," as pat as you like, when the wheels have scarcely stopped turning.

As for excitement, few things out of a studio could compare with the reconstruction of the raid on the Forth Bridge, shown largely in terms of its effect upon children and women and men—this sheer unbelief, for instance, that at last it has happened, pointed by a worker on the bridge, who says casually without looking up, "something wrong with his engine" as the bomber opens fire with a machine-gun. And the parallel action of poachers' dog chasing hare, and Spitfire chasing hedge-hopping German bomber, reaches considerable dramatic heights that are not let down by the poachers' comments as they scramble out of a ditch.

#### Behind the Guns

"Britain at Bay" and "Men Behind the Guns" are more conventional in treatment, and not perhaps so effective. In the first, J. B. Priestley's commentary, uninflated but compelling, speaks of Britain at war, illustrated by striking pictures. It goes right to the heart of the subject at once without much in the way of sidelights, but it depends for its effect on the voice and the unseen presence of one of the best narrators of modern times. Priestley speaks for the British people but even he is not so eloquent as those people themselves.

"Men Behind the Guns" is not, as one might think, an army film, but a film of armament industry. It has the unusual virtue of dwelling on each section of the topic, whether it is the manufacture of Bren guns or the building of ships, long enough for one to get a fairly clear notion of what is going on. The necessary explanation is made in a voice which suits the industrial motif very well—altogether a much more effective spur to action, and source of pride, than the last of the five, "Call to Arms."

This is a completely "studio" presentation of two very attractive chorus girls who give up work in a night club for jobs in a munition factory. The whole show is a prettily made as anyone could wish, but again most people will feel that the real eloquence of the call to arms comes from the people themselves, in factories and the balloon barrage and the shops and the farms, and that nothing else however slick can be substituted for it.

#### Two Conclusions

Those who are interested in such matters, will draw two main conclusions from the official release of these films. The first is that the British Government is concerned to make full and direct use of films as a method of promoting morale at home and in the rest of the British Commonwealth. The second is that by far the most effective method of telling the heroic story of the people of Great Britain at war is to help them tell that story themselves, in their own everyday language and through their everyday work.