

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE ROARING TWENTIES

(Warner Bros.)



BY far the most successful literary panorama yet achieved of the American 1920's has been John Dos Passos's trilogy "U.S.A."; this in spite of the fact that not all of "U.S.A." is concerned with the 1920's.

The technique adopted in the piecing together of "U.S.A." was a novel one and remarkably effective—the story of fictitious but representative and significant Americans developed against a background of actual history, the impact of contemporary events being heightened by "word-newsreels" and biographies of contemporary Americans like J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Veblen, Eugene Debs.

The effect in the book is almost cinematic. Now comes a film "The Roaring Twenties" which tackles its theme in very nearly the same way. It is not the first time this sort of thing has been done, but I am pretty sure it is the first time this technique has been used to deal with this particular phase of American life.

"The Roaring Twenties" is the story of prohibition and the bootlegger. To tell it, Warner Brothers have taken a representative bootlegger (James Cagney) and told his story against a background of newsreel shots with a voice (double of the "March of Time" voice) plugging home the swift sequence of events during those roaring days. It succeeds admirably.

With the social consciousness that one has come to expect from Warner Brothers, the film starts off with the premise that soldiers returning from the First World War had no alternative to crime, because there were no jobs left for them. Cagney, a "demobbed" soldier, who is accidentally drawn into

the bootleg game, soon decides to make his own liquor, then blossoms out into a "big shot," with the inevitable accompaniments of graft, corruption and "hijacking."

Reaching the height of the bootlegger's career, the story then sweeps on through the stock market crash, to repeal, to depression. For Cagney it is the full turn of the wheel, and depression finds him driving a taxi, ill-kept, ill-fed, tortured by his humiliation, but refusing to admit that the days of the big graft king are coming to an end and that there is no more place for him and his sort in society.

In detail "The Roaring Twenties" is also the story of Cagney's love for Priscilla Lane, Priscilla Lane's love for Jeffry Lynn, and of Gladys George's love for Cagney.

All the usual accoutrements of a gang picture are here—shootings, bludgeonings, raids, tough talk. But because of the significance given to the story and because of the fine acting, of Cagney and Humphrey Bogart especially, it is easy to forget that it has all been done before.

It is Cagney at his best—taut, high-pitched, brooding, menacing, pathetic. Bogart's part is just plain rat, the purpose being, naturally, to throw sympathetic emphasis on Cagney. Typical shot: Cagney making finest imported dry gin in his bath. Best scene: Cagney, disappointed in love, apologising for knocking down his friend and rival, Jeffry Lynn.

ELIZABETH AND ESSEX

(Warner Bros.)



HOLLYWOOD'S experiments in English history are almost always irritating, if they are seen from the point of view of the historian. On the other hand, from the point of view of the cinema fan, they are usually at least magnificent, and periodically stupendous. History, if it is nothing else for Hollywood, is always an excuse for a crowd scene or a period pageant, or a taffeta bustle, or something equally quaint and spectacular.

For those readers who please go to see "Elizabeth and Essex" with a firm and fixed resolve to forget that prejudicial label: "Historical Film."

No doubt it is based on history. There was an Elizabeth. There was an Essex. And that really is all that bears upon the matter under consideration: a film that contrives to be entertaining in spite of its pseudo-historical background, and interesting in spite of the clutter of male star-names around the woman who makes it a one-woman picture.

The film is certainly Bette Davis from first to last. Her study of the royal hysteria is so good it does not matter that her make-up is bad.

The story covers the royal love of Essex. Essex (Errol Flynn) is young, handsome, impulsive, brave, in love with Elizabeth, and ambitious. Understanding his ambition and coveting the love of this man younger than herself, Elizabeth has to decide between the throne and the arms of Essex. She decides for the throne, but not before the plotting of her court and the blind



PIONEERING MAN AND WIFE: Bob Pollard and Una Weller as they appear in the Centennial Film "One Hundred Crowded Years," which will shortly be released for general exhibition throughout New Zealand

pride of both herself and Essex have created one intensity of situation after another.

Essex comes home successful from a raid on Cadiz. Elizabeth rates him and insults him to curb his pride. Essex retires to the country. Elizabeth regrets him, and is glad when trouble in Ireland gives her an excuse to recall him to her assistance without offence to vanity. She pleads with him to stay by her side, but Essex is goaded by his rivals into accepting command of the army in Ireland. His letters to her are intercepted, and hers to him. He is left unsupported. Tyrone traps him, and he is forced to surrender. He returns, with his army not disbanded. Elizabeth finds that he would betray her love for his ambitions. He wants the throne of England. The Royal retaliation takes the form of a betrayal of Essex in his turn, and retribution for loving comes to the woman when Essex refuses to renounce his ambition and goes unpardoned to the block.

This is history through technicoloured glasses. But forget the history, and you are left with Bette Davis doing a job of work as a dramatic artist so splendid that all the many faults in the picture are forgotten in the reality of the emotion she creates. Flynn is little more than a pretty boy, and even that little more is pleasantly surprising in one whose choice for the part was, in itself, an accurate indication of Hollywood's inability to distinguish between such regal drama and the boy-meets-girl-romance which we see so often in the twisted Hollywood mirror. The rest of the cast are even more innocuous. The direction is fairly good, but the speed of the film is patchy and as usual, at the end, there is that inevitable Hollywood over-emphasis that spends three or four precious minutes turning good art into the tinsel of sentimentality.

Those are the faults. The virtues, mainly because one of them is Bette Davis, are sufficient compensation. "Elizabeth and Essex" is worth seeing. It is good—by accident, indeed—but still, good.

THE WORLD IN FLAMES

(Paramount)



THE past ten years, the average man in the street is surely ready to concede, have been pretty grim. Just how grim they have been is punched home with quite a lot of force by "The World in Flames," which is 5000 odd feet of newsreels which have been pieced together and presented for the specific purpose of tracing the events which culminated last year in world war. It is a task which Gunther, Sheean, Miller and a dozen other competent newsgatherers have been able to perform only superficially, but it must be, conceded that Paramount have done a good job.

While "The World in Flames" is naturally unable to trace any underlying surges and trends of world events, and can only occasionally lift a warning finger, a straight-forward presentation of the headline news of the past decade is significant enough in itself.

The beginning of the present era of power politics, the first acts of aggression, the comings and goings of liberators and dictators and appeasers, the militant fever of the countries which had not, the complacency of the countries which had, the lazy indifference of the beginning of the decade, the nerve-taut horror of the end of it, are all plugged home in a staccato series of newsreel snippets.

It must have been a perplexing task selecting the material used; it is remarkable that what has been used presents such a coherent picture.

Two significant shots: Bearded Count Dino Grandi, on a visit to Washington in 1931, announcing that "Italy wants a peace—a Italy—a wants—a — co-operation—a and—a understanding—a among — all—a the nations—a of the world—a"; Haile Selassie, a sad, dignified figure pleading his case before the League of Nations to the whistles and catcalls of the Italians.

SIXTY CROWDED MINUTES

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costumes, preserved in camphor for many years.

After the ship-board and landing scenes had been filmed at Mount Maunganui, the party shifted to Oropi, inland toward Rotorua. Here were filmed the sequences showing the pioneering man and wife carving their little farm out of the bush.

The gold rush sequence was shot in the actual location of some of the greatest gold discoveries of the last century, most of the scenes being taken round Arrowtown and on the Arrow River. Residents of Arrowtown, some of whom took part in the film, still remember the gold rush days.

Acting honours must go to the Maoris who assisted in various scenes. As in the recent talking version of "Rewi's Last Stand," they prove born actors.

"One Hundred Crowded Years" has its faults and some merits. But at this stage of our emergence as a nation, any attempt of this nature is to be commended, and in any case, if the thought is not too preposterous, our next Centennial film is bound to be a lot better. —J.G.