

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

SANTA FE TRAIL

(Warner Bros.)



IT is perhaps unfortunate that I happened to have read Thoreau's two essays in defence of Captain John Brown just before seeing *Santa Fe Trail* and so was unable to accept Raymond Massey's interpretation of "old Ossawatimie Brown" in this picture at its grimly unsympathetic face value. It might be more correct to say the author's interpretation, for it seems fairly plain that the man who wrote the screen play of *Santa Fe Trail* was a Southerner with no very high opinion of John Brown, the anti-slaver whose soul went marching on to the climax of the Civil War. According to this version, Brown was simply a murderous fanatic whose only redeeming quality was his obvious sincerity (and Raymond Massey excellently), but I prefer to accept Thoreau's word for it that Brown was a greater man than that.

Another criticism I would make of *Santa Fe Trail* is that it attempts too much. There are a number of inter-linked themes and with the possible exception of that dealing with Brown's part in bringing about the Civil War, none is able to be developed properly within the compass of the one picture. American audiences may more readily recognise the tragedy inherent in the fact that the five young officers who graduate from West Point in 1854 and who remain firm friends throughout the story are named J. E. B. Stuart, George Custer, Phil Sheridan, James Longstreet, and George Pickett; but if I hadn't chanced to have been reading a bit of American history recently I probably wouldn't have realised that these were all the names of real persons, all destined to become generals on opposing sides in the Civil War. There is real tragedy in this, that their activities in line of duty throughout the story, in pursuing and bringing John Brown to the gallows, are unconsciously helping to precipitate the war that will make them enemies, but I doubt if that fact gets over properly. And it was unnecessary to obscure the exciting account of Brown's exploits in Kansas while smuggling slaves out of the South by super-imposing a conventional theme about pushing the frontiers westward on steel rails along the old Santa Fe Trail. Though this pioneering theme just gets left in the desert, it is enough to confuse the dramatic issue. More obvious, and therefore rather more successful, is the motif of romance between the gallant Captain J. E. B. Stuart (Errol Flynn) and a prairie flower (Olivia de Havilland), with the handsome Captain Custer playing second fiddle. I must say I found Errol Flynn much more convincing than usual, even though there was too much of the ours-not-to-reason-why spirit for my liking in the character of the man he had to portray ("It isn't our job to decide what's right or wrong about this, any more than it is for John Brown to decide about slavery"—surely a servile philosophy!)

The film's big sequence is Brown's capture of the arsenal at Harper's Ferry and the counter-attack by Government troops (in which Captain Stuart really did play a prominent historical part). This is followed by the very realistic hanging of Brown, but the emotional effect, the sense of destiny and John Brown's soul on the march, is almost completely ruined by a silly orange-blossom fade-out.

On the whole, the dramatic structure of the film is thrown so much out of plumb by conflicting stresses that I came away feeling I'd like to sit through *Gone With the Wind* just to get the background of the Civil War into proper perspective. Yet in spite of its several unsatisfactory aspects this is a film that is well worth seeing — the kind of film that Hollywood makes better than almost any other. It is particularly worth seeing because of Raymond Massey. If I have perhaps seemed unduly critical in this review it is only because I was so much interested.

ROAD TO ZANZIBAR

(Paramount)



FROM the *Santa Fe Trail* I got on the *Road to Zanzibar* and found it much lighter going. The first thing to be said about *Road to Zanzibar* is that Bing Crosby sings only two or three times in the whole picture, which may be good news to people who dislike crooners (see recent controversy) and sad news indeed to people who admire Mr. Crosby's style of singing. But *Road to Zanzibar* is only very incidentally a musical picture, and Crosby's singing is little more than a lazy accompaniment to the more sentimental moments.

Comedy is the predominating note, crazy comedy in very much the same manner as in *Road to Singapore*, the previous Crosby-Bob Hope-Dorothy Lamour picture. *Zanzibar* is just as amusing as *Singapore*, probably because it is the same place. At any rate, if the natives look different, the scenery is the same.

Crosby and Hope are the itinerate proprietors of a circus act which consists of a series of daring exploits by Hope, who is billed successively as Fearless Frazier the Human Cannon-ball, Fearless Frazier the Human Bat, and Fearless Frazier the man who wrestles with octopuses and gorillas and anything else that comes along. Crosby, for his part, thinks up new ideas and pulls the trigger in the Human Cannon-ball act.

In a slave market in Zanzibar, funnily enough, they run slap bang into Dorothy Lamour, who is up for sale. Naturally enough, they buy her, not pausing for a moment to realise that her American accent is, to say the least, peculiar in the circumstances. Then, before you can say Dr. Livingstone, Hope and Crosby are both in love with their purchase, and the party is wandering around in circles in Darkest Africa on an insane safari.

"Safari so good," says Crosby, and then, presto, he and Bob Hope take the wrong turning and are captured by cannibals who decide that they must be gods. To make sure, they pitch Hope into a cage with a gorilla and stand back to see what happens. Fearless Frazier wrestles ferociously and has the gorilla in trouble with a pile driver and a couple of short arm scissors, but the gorilla retaliates with a headlock and an aeroplane spin and then . . . but be reassured, the fade-out is quite conventional, and once again Crosby gets girl.

It's a lively farce, with some first rate gagging by Crosby and Hope, who are a clever pair of comics. Dorothy Lamour, who wore an abbreviated version of her famous sarong in *Road to Singapore*, this time appears fully clad. Heigh ho!

GONE WITH THE WIND UP

(20th Century Fox)



THE Crazy Gang join the crew of a barrage balloon, and when the wind comes up, blowing the balloon away, it blows the Crazy Gang with it. Naturally it lands in Germany—there wouldn't

be a story otherwise—and the Crazy Gang get the wind up properly. They are bundled into a concentration camp and there remain until one of them takes the place of one of Hitler's doubles, who have all gone on strike. He hates being a blackleg, but has to do it so that the rest of the Crazy Gang can find employment as his bodyguard. In their spare moments, between foiling attempts to bump off their own particular Hitler and dodging irate Gestapo G-men, they locate a secret tunnelling machine. They jump in, and after putting the wind up the whole neighbourhood by their molish activities, cross the Channel and arrive home literally just in time to hear the News from London.

It is a common enough story these days. The supporting actors are stilted, stiff, unnatural. But don't worry too much about that. The direction in most cases is excellent. Even though the mole is a little tinny and the sky does look sometimes like a painted piece of cardboard, you laugh when you're meant to laugh, and, crowning achievement, even the sadism of the Nazi troopers is made to be not bitter, but amusing.

To The Editor

NATIONAL SELF-CRITICISM

SIR,—That editorial of yours the other day about a collection of criticisms of Germany by Germans suggested several lines of thought. One is that it is exceedingly dangerous to plan campaigns and anticipate success solely upon a study of your opponent's weakness. Another is that the English (or the British) are one of the most self-critical of peoples, and through this habit have again and again deceived their enemies. Years ago I read a story of Kipling's called "The Mutiny of the Mavericks," and a passage in it made a deep impression upon me. The Mutiny was what a band of Irish conspirators tried to start in an Irish regiment called the Mavericks. Kipling describes them as dwelling on the weaknesses of their enemy, England, until there seemed to be nothing but weakness, and he remarks that this is a common practice. It is. How many times in those intervening years have I heard political party men (and women) feel quite certain that they were going to win elections, only to be confounded? They had counted up all the mistakes (or what they considered mistakes) of their opponents, and relied upon all the signs they had observed of their unpopularity until, in Kipling's words, it seemed a miracle that the hated party held together for an hour. What they had not done was to sit down quietly and reckon up the strength of their opponents, and then reflect that they themselves had been mixing almost entirely with supporters of their own party.

I am convinced that we won't get a durable peace until there is a change of heart in Germany. There is something fundamentally wrong with the German, and it's got to be rooted out somehow. But you are right in saying that one could match this collection of nasty German things said about Germany with a collection of nasty English things said about England. Criticism of England is

one of the major industries of England—and of the Dominions. Mr. Bernard Shaw has made a world-wide reputation out of it, to say nothing of a fortune! And in sixty years or so how many words has he ever written in praise of his adopted country? The bright young things of the Left lived on this industry for years. There simply wasn't anything right with England. Everything was rotten, from social conditions to diplomacy. But surely commonsense shows that a country cannot be wholly bad or weak that (1) came through the last war as England (or Britain) did; (2) has stood up to so much in this war; (3) has planted settlements overseas so successfully that they have all come to her aid in two wars. I mention only three points; there are many more. Britain was greater in the last war than ever before, but she is still greater today. Unfortunately this continual window-dressing with the unwashed family washing has had a very deceptive, and in the outcome a disastrous, effect abroad. Foreigners have read the things that have been said by Englishmen about England and come to the conclusion that John Bull is old and feeble and corrupt.

But don't let us confine ourselves to England. Look at the United States. Suppose you had judged America solely by American satirists. Suppose you had added up all the scandals and weaknesses noticeable in the United States in the last generation — graft and crime and lynchings and exploitation by capital, all the evident fruits of a conscienceless materialism. What an indictment you could have made! But would it be a true picture of the United States and its people? Of course it wouldn't. If we didn't realise this then, we should realise it to-day. Let us bear in mind the old saying that while a divorce suit is news, a happy marriage isn't, and keep both social conditions in their proper proportion, both in themselves and as symbols.—A.M., (Wellington).