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Film Reviews By G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THE FLAME OF NEW ORLEANS

(Universal)

THOUGH in these days of Vichy it may sound strange to say it, *The Flame of New Orleans* is typically and most charmingly French. It has that elusive quality of insouciance which has made French comedies (and René Clair's in particular), the wittiest in the world, and the despair of critics who have tried to analyse them. As anyone who saw *Le Million*, *Sous Les Toits de Paris*, *The Ghost Goes West*, should endorse, this fellow Clair is a wizard when it comes to making bricks out of thistledown; and *The Flame of New Orleans*, produced by Clair in Hollywood after his flight from France last year, is just about the airiest fabrication of the lot. There is, as one says, nothing to it, and for that very reason there is, in this case, everything.

To dissect the story in search for the formula gets you hardly anywhere. Indeed, told briefly, it sounds almost banal, being the tale of Claire Ledoux (Marlene Dietrich), an international courtesan, who turns up in New Orleans about the middle of last century and, having decided to marry a wealthy, gouty bachelor (Roland Young), for his money, changes her mind at the altar, and marries (?) a poor but handsome sailor for love. This triumph of Cupid over cupidity involves a bit of gay deception by the lady, who poses as her own disreputable cousin in order to keep both suitors nibbling at the hook until her heart makes up her mind which one to land. But without René Clair's direction, the picture would be worth no more than passing attention, and I say this with due regard to the fact that La Dietrich, Roland Young, Bruce Cabot (the sailor-boy), and several others, all play their roles expertly.

This picture, I repeat, is invested with an airy charm and gaiety which defy analysis. Easy enough to say that it has an atmosphere—bouquet would perhaps be the better word. But why? I think I have one small clue, however. It is that the director makes absolutely no excuses for the behaviour of his leading character. She is quite frankly a beautiful, successful courtesan, and you just have to accept the fact. This is truly Gallic treatment and it must, I imagine, have been slightly disturbing to the high-minded Hays Office who would probably have liked at least some proof that Mlle. Ledoux was the innocent victim of misfortune and male wickedness at an early age and thereafter regretted her downward step. But no such proof is offered: on the contrary there is every evidence that she finds life most enjoyable. Admittedly she does finally redeem herself in the conventional way by eschewing riches for romance, but by ordinary Hollywood standards she gets off very lightly.

René Clair, in fact, is quite without any sense of gravity. His light touch is on every scene and is transmitted to all the acting. He has brought out



MARLENE DIETRICH
Did she disturb Mr. Hays?

that sense of comedy which has always been latent in Marlene Dietrich, but which Hollywood has so often obscured by heavy-handed tragedy, and he has surrounded his central portrait with vignettes by the other players which bear equally the imprint of the master.

Many people, I think, will come away from *The Flame of New Orleans* feeling that they have been most delightfully entertained but not quite knowing why. Being fully conscious that the explanation I've attempted here is inadequate I can only hope that you'll go along and see for yourselves.

SO GREAT A MAN

(R.K.O.-Radio)

TO praise without qualification is a luxury in which the conscientious film critic can rarely indulge. In fact it is one in which, in the interests of the cinema itself, he should conscientiously refrain from indulging. But he will on rare occasions encounter a production which will make any criticism sound captious. Of such quality is *So Great a Man*.

Knowing something of Raymond Massey's calibre as an actor, I anticipated that his portrayal of Abraham Lincoln would be worth seeing, but I will admit without qualification that it exceeded my most sanguine expectations. Massey does not play Lincoln, he simply *is* Lincoln, even more, I am tempted to say, than Arliss was Disraeli or Laughton was Henry VIII. And that submergence in the part seems to be characteristic of the entire cast. There are several factors which I think contribute to the all-round excellence of this picture. The first is that it is based on Robert Sherwood's Pulitzer Prize play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. In itself that would not be sufficient to guarantee quality. Many good plays are "adapted" so successfully for the screen that their original fire and vigour is completely ironed out of them. The second factor contributing to success in

the present instance, however, is that the adapting was done by Sherwood himself, and he has managed not merely to conserve the quality of the original but also to make fine dramatic use of the additional elbow-room the screen gives him. Thirdly, the principal parts are filled by the original stage cast, and there is no question but that an actor with good stage experience has an advantage over the purely screen player.

But despite the fact that *So Great a Man* has all-round excellence—of acting, of direction, and of dialogue—it will, I am sure, be regarded as a one-man show by the film public. This is, perhaps as it should be. It is the story of Lincoln's rise, and the great American must perforce occupy the centre of the picture. What is remarkable about Massey's performance is that Lincoln holds the centre of the stage whether he is visible or not. Almost one might say he holds the attention as Lincoln himself might have done.

I am not versed in *Lincolnia*. I do not know whether Honest Abe's honesty made him a poor store-keeper or not, whether his wife's vaulting ambition was ambition for herself, for her husband, or for the good of the American nation, but Massey showed me Lincoln as I had always imagined him: gauche and ungainly, warm-hearted, and pawkily humorous, but mistrustful of himself and latterly agonised by the need to decide whether the ideals in which he believed justified him in challenging the horrible threat of civil war. Other actors, with the help of the make-up man, might have been able to look as like Lincoln as Massey did, but few I believe could so surely have caught his spirit.

There are others in the cast to whom I should pay tribute. To Ruth Gordon for superbly handling the part of Lincoln's wife—as difficult and exacting an assignment in places as Massey's, and to Gene Lockhart who, as Lincoln's shrewd political opponent Stephen Douglas, ably revived a political type dead these many years. I should remember, too, the minor players in the cast—new faces many of them, which I hope will become more familiar, and the camera-men whose work materially enhanced the drama of many scenes. And that the director, John Cromwell,

(Continued on next page)



RAYMOND MASSEY
Submerged in his part