

## FILM REVIEWS

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against the venture from the start. It was possible to operate on *The Grapes of Wrath* and still leave enough of its guts for it to be a potent social document. With *Tobacco Road* the disembowelling process has just about proved fatal. Only the brilliant acting of Charley Grapewin, playing his original stage role of old Jeeter Lester, and of one or two others, and some of Ford's directorial touches, keep a small flame of interest alive.

*Tobacco Road* is a drama of degeneracy in the backwoods of modern Georgia, where a handful of farmers, their women and their children, inbred over generations and grubbing for starvation rations in soil that is played out, lead lives worse even than those of animals—for there is some reason to believe that animals enjoy life and are healthy. With a few sidelong hints, the film vaguely suggests what the play apparently made clear—that depravity and vice are rampant, and that the moronic behaviour of most of the characters is no accident. Yet these unfortunates still cling to their land, though sloth has taken such a hold that nobody can find the energy to work it properly.

To New Zealand cinema audiences (though presumably not to American theatre audiences of the past eight years) it may seem incredible that such a cancer spot could exist on the modern social structure of the U.S.A., and this feeling that the whole situation is at least slightly exaggerated is strengthened by the method of treatment to which Hollywood is committed by the screen's canons of censorship. Unable to put the right degree of emphasis on sordid realism, it has placed the emphasis instead on comedy. So that, in spite of everything Ford can do to prevent it—and here and there he and his cameramen do a good deal—the film develops an air of burlesque. Sentimentality replaces bitter tragedy, and a half-baked happy ending completes the air of falseness.

Indeed, having passed through the censor's operating room and fumigating chamber, *Tobacco Road* emerges most ludicrously as a kind of Dad and Dave farce—rather more serious than the rustic buffoonery of *Snake Gully*, but still mainly farcical. What has happened to the theatre's longest-running play was brought home to me most forcibly by the audience's reaction when, old Jeeter Lester having asked the whereabouts of a piece of harness, he is told quite simply that "Granma's ate it." They laughed like anything at that! I don't blame them, but it should have been obvious that this was very far from being a joke.

### TILLY OF BLOOMSBURY

(B.E.F.)

THE story of *Tilly of Bloomsbury* is probably familiar to many readers from the stage play and the original screen version which appeared some seven or eight years ago. Tilly is a Cockney girl who bumps into a member of the

unemployed when walking home from work. After such a romantic introduction, the two quite naturally decide to get married. But complications supervene when Tilly discovers that her friend is a Scion of the Ancient House of Mainwaring, and when the Ancient House of Mainwaring itself descends in a body to interview her parents in their shabby Bloomsbury boarding house.

The comedy element in the story reaches its climax when Sydney Howard, re-playing his old role of the bailiff's man, is inveigled by Tilly's brother Perce into playing butler to impress the visiting Mainwarings with the vanished pomps of Bloomsbury. For the greater part of the film, however, the comedy rests on the Cockney antics and accent of brother Perce, excellently played by Michael Wilding, and upon the characters of the boarders in the household. Yet there is throughout a quality of pathos in the story which is hard to define. Even though Howard as the butler is supremely funny, you remember that he is really the bailiff's man and every time he makes a *faux pas*, Tilly is a step further from marriage. There is, even in the minor characters, a pathetic determination to be respectable at all costs which makes the film something more than merely a comedy.

In short, the theme is such that our little friend's palms were itching to clap. If the hero had been a little more attractive, if every member of the cast had played his or her part as spontaneously and with as much polish as Henry Oscar (as Tilly's father), Sydney Howard, and Michael Wilding, if the director had been able to overcome the staginess of some scenes—then he would be clapping vigorously.

### THE RICHEST MAN IN TOWN

(Columbia)

IN the original stage production of Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* the part of the narrator around whom most of the action revolved was taken by the veteran Broadway actor, Frank Craven. When Sol Lesser transferred the play to the screen, many of the stage actors went along with it, Craven included. Having received a large share of the critics' praise for his work in the picture, something about the Hollywood atmosphere would seem to have attracted Craven, for he has since appeared in several more pictures of the homespun *Our Town* type. I won't say that *The Richest Man In Town* is one of his best, but in its own quiet, sentimental way it is pleasant. It moves along slowly, taking its own time over everything, springing no surprises, and eventually arriving at a perfectly obvious and logical conclusion. The story concerns a banker and a newspaper editor in a small country town who have exchanged recriminations since youth, but have remained friends. When crooks turn up and start a racket in town there is nearly a split between the banker and editor, but they are reunited in the end. From this very unoriginal and filmy material the direc-

tor has salvaged enough originality to make the story presentable, mainly by playing down the romantic interest, and at the end by leaving rather more than usual to the imagination. By so doing he almost lifts a C class picture into the B class.

ARRANGEMENTS are being made, I was reliably informed last night, to exempt domestic servants from the industrial call-up for women. The decision has been taken because certain highly-placed people realised that they would be servantless if their household staff were to be drafted into the war factories.—*Sunday Pictorial*.

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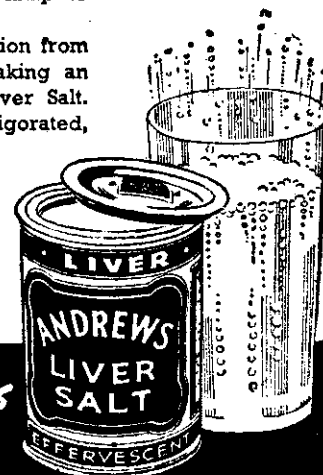


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