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NZU24

## Film Reviews By G.M.

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

## HOLD BACK THE DAWN

(Paramount)

ON the evening when I saw *Hold Back the Dawn* there was an earthquake, sharp enough to make me conscious that my seat was high up in the back circle, but not sharp enough to make me consider for more than a moment the advisability of a discreet withdrawal. Either that or I was more moved by the picture than by the earthquake. Anyway, I'm glad that I didn't have to forgo the second half of what was to me, as you'll see from the behaviour of our little friend on the left, one of the best pictures of the year.

Since the title of *Hold Back the Dawn* hardly means a thing, I'd better explain that it deals with the hundreds of would-be immigrants into the U.S.A. who gather yearly in Mexico waiting for their turn, under the quota system, to cross the border. (In its emphasis on the hard lot of the man without a country in these

enlightened times, the film is somewhat reminiscent of *So Ends Our Night*). In particular it deals with the case of Georges Iscovescu (Charles Boyer), a Rumanian confidence trickster. Since the quota of Rumanian immigrants to the U.S.A. is small, M. Iscovescu's sojourn in a Mexican hotel seems likely to be protracted. But there are ways by which a clever man can dodge the law, and one of them is by marrying an American citizen. So M. Iscovescu quite cold-bloodedly picks on Emmy Brown (Olivia de Havilland), an innocent American school-miss visiting Mexico, sweeps her off her feet in one night, and marries her at dawn, intending to drop her once he is past the border. The spanner in these otherwise smoothly-running works is Anita (Paulette Goddard), a shady foreigner, who has herself tested out the advantages of an American wedding-ring, and has sold the idea to M. Iscovescu, but who speedily regrets the fact when her Rumanian colleague becomes much more sincerely interested in his American bride than in herself.

Put as baldly as that, *Hold Back the Dawn* sounds no more than a routine one man-two women melodrama; and I hope that my enthusiasm for this picture is not due solely to its rather novel method of presentation, which consists largely of Charles Boyer telling it in retrospect after having wormed his way into the Paramount Studios in order to sell a screen plot to a certain director. We jaded critics are perhaps sometimes too ready to throw our hats into the air at any suggestion of novelty; but in the present case, I feel that there is genuinely something more to it than that. I feel that *Hold Back the Dawn* does really tell a worthwhile story in an interesting fashion, and that both cast and director were conscious that they had much-better-than-average material with which to work, and so have given of their best. There remains, of course, the major improbability that a man of Georges Iscovescu's stamp would be converted by true love; but if one is going to take that uncompromising line, then Holly-

wood might as well shut up shop, since 90 per cent of all film stories are based on the thesis of *amor vincit omnia*. And within this accepted realm of improbability, both Charles Boyer and Miss de Havilland do behave like probable people—Boyer better than I have seen him for some time past (though his acting is becoming stylised to a rather dangerous degree), and Miss de Havilland with an insight and delicacy which gives real life to her difficult character of the innocent maid from Azusa ("everything from A to Z in the U.S.A."). Miss Goddard is more the routine siren, but even this character is treated with some freshness.

But principally, I would give credit to the script-writer and to the director, who have introduced several novel twists into the tale, much colourful Mexican atmosphere, and a variety of interesting supporting characters (including the little immigrant whose distant family connexion with the great Lafayette turns him unexpectedly from a man without a country into an honorary citizen of the U.S.A.).

(Note for students of social history and the cinema: Instead of the usual slim-waisted prodigy, this film marks the first appearance on the screen, in my recollection, of a pregnant woman who frankly looks her condition.)

## MAN HUNT

(20th Century-Fox)

IF *Man Hunt* had carried on and finished as successfully as it started, we (that is, me and the little man), would probably have been standing up to applaud, instead of merely doing it somewhat listlessly from seat-level. And I've no doubt that many picture-goers will think that *Man Hunt* is deserving of at least as much enthusiasm as *Hold Back the Dawn*, which I've reviewed above. Superficially, perhaps, they've got a case, for *Man Hunt* does not lack an exciting and original theme. What it does lack is sustained suspense and a director and script-writer who were able to withstand the temptation to be obvious and conventional.

As I say, it starts well. Through the closely-patrolled forests surrounding Berchtesgaden in pre-war Germany creeps a famous English big-game hunter (Walter

(Continued on next page)

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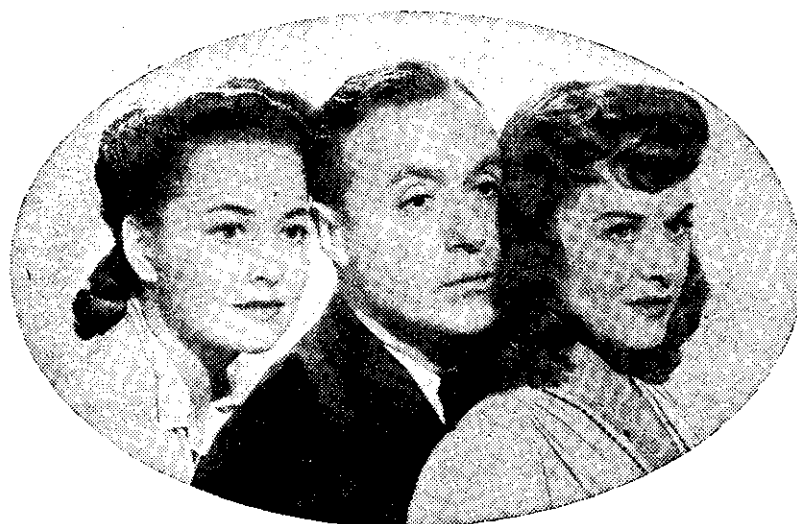
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Olivia de Havilland, Charles Boyer, Paulette Goddard — stars of "Hold Back the Dawn."