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Film Reviews by G.M.

SUGARPUSS AND THE PROFESSOR

BALL OF FIRE

(Goldwyn-RKO)

 IN another place (to wit, page 6) you will find something about the difficulties of understanding the American language. But after seeing *Ball of Fire* you may feel something of what Professor Bertram Potts (Gary Cooper) felt when, having just completed a learned treatise on slang for an encyclopædia, he encountered Sugarpuss

O'Shea (Barbara Stanwyck). For until then, Professor Potts had got all his ideas on slang from text-books, and they were just about as up-to-date as his ideas on love—another subject in which Sugarpuss was not unversed.

For nine years, Professor Potts and seven professional colleagues had been labouring in academic seclusion on the Totten Encyclopædia—that vast contribution to human knowledge sponsored and endowed by one Totten, the late inventor of the electric toaster, who had been peeved that other encyclopædias acknowledged the achievements of Edison and Bell, but omitted his. In the Totten volume, he was to have almost a page to himself. In nine years, the professors had got as far as "S" (slang and sex). It would take them another three years to reach "Z" but their schedule was rather upset by those two "S"s. For Sugarpuss O'Shea, besides being colourful in looks as well as language, happened to be the "lambie-pie" of a particularly nasty gangster and was badly wanted by the police as a material witness in a case of "bumping off." Hence Professor Potts's desire that she should contribute her expert knowledge on the flowers of the American language happened to coincide with her own anxiety to find a quiet hide-out. So she moved into the bachelor establishment of the eight professors and, with some interruptions from an irate and impatient underworld, not only explained to them (and particularly to Professor Potts) the meaning of such vital terms as "snooze," "schmalzando," "a slight case of Andy Hardy," "hoytoytoy," "the Ameche," "loose tooth," and "cooking with gas," but also gave them a clear picture of what is signified by "yum yum." And if you don't know what yum yum means, you big dopes, it's time you got wise to this jelly-bean jargon and stopped being suckers for succotash, or squares from Delaware. Sez me!

Apart from offering a liberal education to students of living languages, *Ball of Fire* provides many a laugh and many a chuckle, and not a little excitement from gangster sources. It may also provide a mild headache for those who attempt to absorb its whole vocabulary of slang at one sitting, and possibly a slight case of apoplexy for those purists who are still hoping to keep the wells of English undefiled against the challenge of the American nation. On the other hand, our linguistic die-hards may succumb as easily to the high-kicking vitality of the new American argot as do the frowsy academicians in the picture to the effervescent, youthful vigour of Sugarpuss and her lingo. Which is not to deny that much of the slang in *Ball of Fire* is ugly, forced, and self-conscious—a wanton mutilation of the language for the sake of cheap witticism. But, after all, the picture is to be taken as a joke; and the joke is as much against that kind of slang as against anything else.


At the age of one, Professor Potts confesses to Sugarpuss, he could recite "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright." At the age of two he could read anything. Small wonder, then, that by the time he reached man's estate, dust had collected

all over his heart—until she blew it off—and into his eyes. (Now do you know what yum yum means?) From this you will gather that the role of Professor Potts is exactly in the tradition of Mr. Deeds, with perhaps a tinge of Sergeant York's earnestness, and Gary Cooper naturally carries it off with ease. No less at home in their roles are the seven other encyclopædists, and Barbara Stanwyck as Sugarpuss. (After *The Lady Eve* and now this Goldwynner, I sincerely hope Miss Stanwyck will stick firmly to comedy). She is, of course, the ball of fire of the title, who rolls into Potts's hermitage and eventually up to the altar. The kind of girl, as someone aptly remarks, who makes whole civilisations topple. And lest you are wondering about her name, I had better explain that "Sugar" means "sweet" and "puss" denotes the countenance (c.f., "Sourpuss," "Drizzlepuss," etc.).

Well, patch my pantywaist! if it isn't time for me to amscray, and mosey along to my next review. . . .

THE FARMER'S WIFE

(Pathe-B.E.F.)

 THERE was a time, 'way back in the pre-Korda era, when good English films were like angel's visits, short and far between (I hope my literary critics will concede that I have got that quotation right anyway) and a Grade A show was something for the reviewer to throw his hat in the air about. Then Alexander the Great came along and Good English Films became, if not a commonplace, at least familiar enough for one to accept them more casually. To-day, the critic feels again a return of that pristine enthusiasm, for while one can no longer be surprised at the good work which the English studios are capable of turning out, one must concede that the appearance of a film at all is itself something of an achievement these days. That, in part, is why our little friend above has been brought to his feet, but if he weren't a phlegmatic Anglo-Saxon he'd be standing on the seat, with his hat in the air.

The Farmer's Wife (which will never be confused with *The Farmer Takes a Wife* by anyone who has seen both) is a sheer delight from the first shot, showing the village constable free-wheeling down-hill on his bicycle, to the final fade-out—and I'll be hanged if I don't think it's better even than *Quiet Wedding*. For one thing it has Wilfred Lawson (remember the howling success he made of Doolittle in *Pygmalion*?) and such other fine players as Basil Sydney, Michael Wilding, and Enid Stamp-Taylor and, like all other Good English Films, the minor characters are a non-stop variety show in themselves. (Somebody, someday, will write something about the influence of Dickens on the English cinema). Most important of all, the cast has, thanks to Eden Philpotts, plot and dialogue appropriate to their talents. I might add that the dialogue in many places reminded me of *Cold Comfort Farm*, so those of my readers who know their Stella Gibbons will appreciate how delightfully earthy it is.

The photography, which is at times (but not always) excellent, is almost

(Continued on next page)



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