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Film Reviews by G.M.

## SPEAKING CANDIDLY

### PARIS CALLING

(Universal)

THIS is Elizabeth Bergner's first Hollywood film, and while I certainly cannot feel half as strongly about it as I did about Garbo's *Two-Faced Woman*, it did give me the same sort of impression that Hollywood has very little idea of how to make even a second-best use of its advantages. Miss Bergner is a most unusual and in many ways difficult actress; her strongly individual personality demands stories carefully selected or tailored to fit her *gaminerie*, her curious tragi-comic blend of childlike innocence and adult sophistication.

Only in rare moments does *Paris Calling* provide her with anything of the sort. It is a story in which almost any actress could star, and many have—another of those pseudo-realistic fairy tales which convince me more and more that Hollywood still regards the war mainly as an excuse to flood the screen with melodramatic fiction about International Ladies, Sinister Spy-Rings, Secret Ciphers (and, of course, Treaties), Well-Informed Quarters, and Love ver-

sus Patriotism. It's the "Boys' Own Paper" mentality, or its American equivalent. And maybe this is the alley down which the public wants to escape. Yet I'm inclined to doubt it, especially now that the war is on our very doorstep, in our homes, our factories, our camps, our daily lives. For every International Lady or Secret Agent there are a million worried housewives, a million ordinary men in private's uniform or dungarees. Here is the stuff of real drama. Why not use it in some films?

The trouble with a film like *Paris Calling* is that it builds its dream castles on such an arresting basis of fact that it is often not easy to detect the concrete from the gossamer, and this is one of the reasons, I imagine, why spy mania can so easily develop. After all, when nearly all your war films have a Fifth Columnist in the foreground, it is perhaps hardly surprising if you begin to suspect your neighbour because you have discovered that he is fond of Wagner and Beethoven. An obsession with codes, according to *The Times* correspondent on Tobruk, may even help you to lose battles. In this particular case we have a story about the fall of France and the resistance to the conquerors of a large section of the inhabitants. Now there is a theme for real drama if you like, but having keyed the plot to a factual background of human suffering and courage, the producers then soar upward into the realm of lurid melodrama, with a heroine who comes from one of the Best Families of France, who is engaged to a suave but obviously despicable Vichy politician, but who loves a Yank in the R.A.F. left behind when the British evacuated the country (sad to relate he got drunk and wasn't called in time next morning), and who works for Free France and Colonel Britton by broadcasting code messages from a secret radio station. She plays the piano in a café under the very helmets of the Gestapo, but by twiddling around on the B flat below middle C she gets the information out—an ingenious device for which Free France and Universal Films are indebted to *International Lady*. But her biggest achievement is in discovering the terms of the Secret Treaty which her fiancé, the suave but Vichious Basil Rathbone, is about to conclude with Hitler, and carries meanwhile next to his skin. She secures the Documents by the simple process of shooting her fiancé in the back as he ardently gathers her into his arms. Since I have already acquired the reputation of being tender-hearted, I think I'll add to it by saying that this struck me as a particularly dirty trick, however patriotic. Meantime the Yank who was in the R.A.F. is in trouble with the Gestapo, but by a most fortunate coincidence his jailer happens to be a young Nazi whom he had befriended. By another fortunate coincidence, R.A.F. headquarters in England are in possession of a German seaplane which they captured at Narvik, and this enables a British party to land unobserved right outside the secret radio station and res-

cue—or capture—everybody who really matters.

As a routine thriller, *Paris Calling* is good enough, but is Hollywood so bankrupt of ideas that this is the best it can do both with an actress of Bergner's rare quality and the theme of stricken France?

### A YANK IN THE R.A.F.

(20th Century-Fox)



WE'VE grown used to finding the Yank in all kinds of queer places, from King Arthur's Court to the Burma Road, so we are not greatly surprised to find one in the R.A.F., especially after *Paris Calling*. And this time the Yank is Tyrone Power, a tough ferry pilot who joins the R.A.F. because he wants to stick around somewhere near Betty Grable. Not that we blame him, for most of the other male characters in the film have the same idea. The only trouble is that Tyrone Power's idea of sticking around is sufficiently elastic to allow for moments of wishful contemplation of torsos other than the famous Grable one.

During the daytime Miss Grable does A.T.S. work which often takes her near the aerodrome where she becomes a target for the honourable intentions of John Sutton (Squadron-Leader Morley). And at night she sings and dances rather well at the Regency House Cabaret. And you will understand that what with all the dancing and singing and the spectacle of Miss Grable being torn between Sutton Chivalry and Power Push, there's really enough material for the average film without Producer Zanuck bothering to drag in the Bombing of Berlin and the Epic of Dunkirk.

However he does, and we're grateful. The R.A.F. sequences are indisputably the highlights of the film, even for those who find their Shangri-La in the contemplation of Miss Grable. The behind-the-R.A.F. scenes have the immediacy of a newsreel and the impressiveness and authenticity of the genuine documentary; and the fact that all R.A.F. fighter-crews chew gum and that Tyrone Power uses the pre-raid conference table to shoot glances of burning hatred across at Squadron-Leader Sutton doesn't detract from the audience's realisation that this is history as it more or less happens.

The action of *A Yank in the R.A.F.* covers the months from the war's beginning to the evacuation of Dunkirk. The first part therefore deals with those comparatively carefree days of the blitzkrieg when air-raid alerts merely provided opportunities for proposals, and when British bombers over Germany contented themselves with dropping leaflets, one at a time, so as not to hurt anybody.

But all this is forgotten by the time the film moves to the Dunkirk climax. And it is a climax. We've no way of proving that Dunkirk was actually like this, but if it isn't good history it's certainly good cinema.

So what with one thing and another it's rather a shock to get back to London and find that Betty Grable is still alive and kicking at the Regency and still wondering where her heart lies (of course she finds out pretty soon), that other things are going on in much the same way, and that Tyrone Power hasn't been chastened by his experiences. But after all that's Life isn't it?

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