

THE CRITIC CRITICISED

TWO recent letters to "The Listener" about our film reviews open up the question of what is the critic's function; to say what he thinks or to say what some people might like him to think? Here is a condensation of these letters, together with G.M.'s reply.

To The Editor

Sir,—I'll give G.M. his due—he can pen a readable column, but does he, each week, have to try and show the people of New Zealand that the men who produce the pictures know nothing regarding their trade? The mere fact that pictures are grossing more these days must, besides the fact that the war usually ups the entertainment world, show that Louis Mayer, Schenck, Ned Depinet, B. G. De Sylva and Nat Blumberg all know how the public's pulse is going. Louis Mayer's company, M.G.M. has a standard of high-class entertainment, while Buddy De Sylva's organisation, Paramount, always fetches the fans to the ticket box.

Now out of the two companies mentioned, how many pictures of *entertainment* value, warranted those many smart-alec quips of G.M.'s. Maybe one or two, but why does he insist on panning so many good shows, as he must admit quite a number of people read the magazine and may be swayed by his seemingly bigoted opinions? Why doesn't he say, well this show will appeal to those who like frothy comedy, but the drama fans had better stay away; not just, this picture out-smarts the smart guys who made it—it should have stopped in the can! Does this get you anywhere? If you ask, as I have done, members of the industry their opinion on your column, they laugh and then some.

I enjoy reading G.M.'s column, but would he please, in future, remember that the men who make these shows, the like of Orson Welles and Walt Disney, are not being smart. A cool million dollars a head isn't being smart. It is being sensible and giving the public what it wants, which I sincerely hope he'll do!

"JOHN DOE" (Whenuapai).

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"All Is Not Well"

AFTER "making it clear" that he "much appreciates the work G.M. is doing, though he nearly deserves manhandling on occasions," AVON G. TODD (Kelburn), wants to know why G.M. has "such a crush on Warner Brothers, and why does he so ruthlessly condemn the pictures produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. A survey of the last 30 or 40 films G.M. has reviewed makes it evident that "all is not well in the film world." He wonders what G.M. will have to say about M.G.M.'s *Mrs. Miniver*.

This correspondent adds that "several thousand people must have writhed and spluttered" when they read G.M.'s comments on *Blossoms in the Dust*, though he "rehabilitated" himself with his review of *Remember the Day*.

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G.M. Replies

BOTH these letters, and particularly that from John Doe, reveal a surprisingly intimate knowledge of film-trade organisation and phraseology for laymen. But there are, for a start, one or two contradictions in John Doe's

letter. For instance, how does he reconcile his statement that my reviews may influence "quite a number of people" with his subsequent statement that the reaction of members of the film industry is just derisive laughter. Having had some inside experience of the industry, I can say that its members, like other businessmen, are seldom likely to treat as a laughing matter anything which may adversely affect their takings. Not that I would agree that my reviews are in the long run likely to have such an effect: anything the movie industry may lose on the swings from candid criticism, it more than makes up on the roundabouts. People who may stay away from a film that is unfavourably reviewed, are quite likely to go out of their way to see one that is commended—provided they know that the reviewer is honest in his opinions. A bad review of a big picture with popular stars doesn't keep many of the mass of regular picture-goers away from it: on the other hand, praise of a good but insignificant show without much obvious "popular appeal" may often help it at the box-office.

Yet the box-office, I assert, is not the chief concern of the critic. There was a time, I'll frankly admit, when I did believe that a reviewer could accurately estimate in advance the box-office reactions to any film, and should base his comments accordingly, but I have long since come to the conclusion that this is impossible, and that the only thing that a critic can honestly do is to express his *personal* reactions in the light of his knowledge and experience, not entirely overlooking the film's prospects at the box-office, but not being over-awed and blinded by them, nor by the big names in the credit-titles. In time, the critic's reactions constitute a recognisable guide, which readers follow or ignore, according to their own tastes. I have never, so far as I can remember, said that any film "out-smarts the smart guy who made it, and should have stopped in the can," and I have frequently indicated that a film is for one type of audience and not for another. Also, if all the men making films were of the calibre of Disney and Welles, I probably shouldn't have much complaint—but I'll bet the box-office magazines would!

Still, it comes down to this—if the movies are purely and simply a matter of cold, hard business, then the box-office is all that matters: but the film industry itself is the first to claim (with some reason) that they are also an art, just as much as the stage is an art. The industry can't have it both ways: if there is any art in films there should also be criticism — if only because it's good for business! If John Doe wants a good inside story of how films are made in Hollywood he should read Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run*. He will find one character expressing the opinion that what the movies badly need is "real slugging criticism"—and plenty of it.

As for Avon G. Todd, I doubt if his (or her) survey of the last 30 or 40 films

STAND-UP CLAPS: *Fantasia*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *The Next of Kin*, *To Be Or Not To Be*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Ball of Fire*, *Remember the Day*, *Alexander Nevsky*, *Sergeant York*.
SIT-DOWN CLAPS: *This Gun for Hire*, *Eagle Squadron*, *One of Our Aircraft is Missing*, *The Bride Came C.O.D.*, *The Oppenheim Family*, *The Lady is Willing*, *Footsteps in the Dark*, *Bedtime Story*, *Out of the Fog*, *Ladies in Retirement*, *Three Girls About Town*, *The Turtles of Tahiti*, *Captains of the Clouds*, *Strawberry Blonde*, *Swamp Water*.

I have reviewed would reveal such a preponderance in favour of one company's product as against another's. But it is true that I have adversely criticised a good many M-G-M films: for the simple reason that in my opinion (and it is only my opinion) this company, perhaps more than any other, is in the habit of relying too much on its big box-office stars to attract audiences and has, in general, concentrated too much on shallow, superficial themes (mostly about rich and idle people) which are unrelated to the needs and events of the world we are living in. *Mrs. Miniver* may well be an exception: at the time of writing I haven't seen it.

JEANNIE

(Gaumont-British)



THERE was a time when I had the impression that Michael Redgrave just stood around being Michael Redgrave while the other people in his picture did most of the work. Then I changed my mind about him, but I would probably start to change it back again if I saw many pictures like *Jeannie*. In this he certainly does a little more than just stand around: he is once seen to dry two dishes, and he also smokes a pipe on various occasions, and once he hits a man, who thereupon falls down. Other notable things about this film are that Wilfrid Lawson appears for what seems to be about three feet, and Barbara Mullen—she doesn't need to be a pretty young lassie, but she could surely have been more attractive — is there all the time and that seems to be about 10,000 feet.

This Jeannie is a brash young Scots-woman—26 years old her passport says, and I'd hate to suggest that even passports can be faked in films—and her father leaves her his fortune of £297 and some odd shillings. With this, Jeannie has a fling all the way to Vienna, meets a Count who is at least genuine about taking all but the return ticket out of the £297, meets a young Yorkshireman who sells a washing-machine and meets a blonde—and you see, there it is: not merely a triangle but a parallelogram. The brightest remark I heard was made by the blonde, who said she'd like to drink something non-intoxicating with something intoxicating in it.

AMERICAN PARALLEL

An echo of the Great 49th Parallel Controversy has come from a reader who has drawn my attention to a copy of the *American Newsweek*, in which the critic of that paper supported my own view about the propaganda value of the film. Said *Newsweek*: "As anti-Nazi propaganda, the British film laboured under an important psychological handicap. Although the six Nazi sailors stranded in the vast, armed Dominion of Canada were successfully pinioned as dangerous, ruthless egomaniacs, they were spotted so far behind the democratic 8-ball that they inevitably inspired a reluctant sympathy for the underdog."