

CHEERS FOR "MRS. MINIVER"

(M-G-M)



THE war has had to last three years for the first real picture about the war to make its appearance. *Mrs. Miniver* is the type of film,

about the natural behaviour of ordinary people in a catastrophic situation, which I have been rather fond of suggesting should be the proper concern of film producers at present, whereas they have, in general, used the war merely as a convenient excuse to dish up all the old romantic clichés with a topical background. Since it is extremely unlikely that anybody in Hollywood ever reads or takes notice of *The Listener*, it would appear that somebody else must have been suggesting this also: or perhaps M-G-M just stumbled on the formula by accident. Anyway, here it is at last—a "simple wartime story about real people"—and what's more, it's what the public wants if the crowds inside and outside the theatre are any indication. Critics are not always out of touch with the box-office!

WHEN I say that *Mrs. Miniver* is my idea of the type of film that is needed to-day, I do not necessarily say that it is my *ideal* of the type. Though it is a story about real people in a People's War, it is still not explicitly a story about The People, in the Ma Joad sense—the ones who live on four pounds a week instead of approximately forty, as do the Minivers. And though the film is concerned, for a very welcome change, with the inner significance and personal tragedy of war rather than with its outward show (there are no bloody battles for instance, and Dunkirk is just a sound of distant gunfire and the gathering of the rescue fleet in an English estuary), it does not do nearly enough, for my preference, to suggest the revolutionary impact of this war on the social structure. On the contrary, in an extremely subtle way, you are led to believe that the present structure is completely sound and doesn't need changing. There'll always be an England, and it will always, apparently, be an England of benevolent titled autocrats and contented, slightly obsequious tenants.

But, as I repeat, this is all very subtle; you may not notice it, and if you do, it may not bother you at all. I am simply clearing the decks for hearty applause of a very fine and moving picture by disposing of all my personal points of criticism at once. So while I'm at it, I'll mention that, technically brilliant as it is, Dame May Whitty's performance as the dowager duchess who turns up trumps (of course!), had too much the flavour of burlesque for my liking, and that I found the last few moments of the picture (the finale of the church sequence), bogus in sentiment and unworthy of the true spirit of the piece.

FOR a film made in Hollywood, there are astonishingly few outcroppings of Americanism in the English scene. *Mrs. Miniver* is a very handsome and warm-hearted tribute to the spirit of England and her people (well, some of them), impeccably acted by Greer Gar-



GREER GARSON
An Academy Award in sight?

son and most others of a hand-picked cast, and directed by William Wyler with good taste and a real sense of human values and dramatic timing. Based on the characters of a column in *The Times* by Jan Struther, it is the simple story (how that word "simple" keeps cropping up, but it is the keynote of the film), of an upper middle-class English family in a small, charming village, from the days just before the outbreak of war in 1939 up to the beginning of the big air-raids. Scarcely anything is over-emphasised by the director: by concentrating on such homely details as the clock on the stairs that is always slow, the buying of a new hat by Mrs. Miniver, the acquiring of a new car by her husband, a successful architect (Walter Pidgeon), the return of their son (Richard Ney), from Oxford, and the arrangement for the annual village flower-show, Wyler builds up an atmosphere of such domestic peace and happiness that it is sufficient in itself to point the contrast when war breaks out. There is no need then for the director or cast to tread on the loud pedal of

tragedy in order to make the audience get busy with handkerchiefs: they simply continue in the same restrained and often whimsical vein to show what total war means to ordinary human beings. Sometimes there is humour, as when the duchess's butler, on the occasion of the first air-raid warning, opens the door and announces, with an expression of acute distaste, "Sirens, my lady!" More often there is tragedy, as when the airman son's bride-of-a-fortnight (Teresa Wright), is killed in an air-raid—it was a touch of dramatic genius to choose the less obvious victim. Often, too, there is the sense of adventure, excitement, and suspense, as when Mr. Miniver disappears into the night in his little boat bound for Dunkirk; when, during his absence, Mrs. Miniver captures a wounded German airman in her kitchen, succours him, and then slaps his face for talking like a fool; and when the Minivers and their two young children spend a night of heroic terror in their Anderson shelter while the bombs fall around them. From this experience they go next day to the famous flower-show. That is typical, but there is nothing mock-heroic about this gesture, nor indeed about almost anything else in the story.

TO rise so far above bathos as to be often inspirational, *Mrs. Miniver* demanded acting as sensitive as its direction. It gets it from Greer Garson particularly, as well as from Teresa Wright (seen in *The Little Foxes*), Walter Pidgeon, Henry Travers, Richard Ney, and from most of the others. Hardly a line or a gesture is out of place anywhere. Yet Greer Garson is the undisputed star. She is *Mrs. Miniver*, and *Mrs. Miniver* is Greer Garson. Perhaps she is a trifle too young and well-preserved, and she can't have been a member of the Family Planning Association (it was rather a shock when her third child turned out to be a young man at Oxford), but if I now predict that Miss Garson will win an Academy Award, I think I have as much chance of being a true prophet as I had last year about Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York*.



The Family Remedy

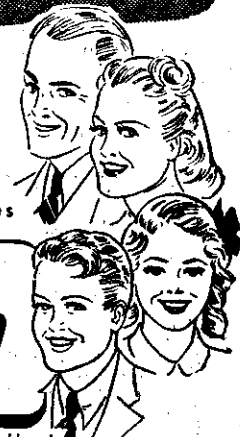
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