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Film Notes by G.M.

ABOUT THOMAS MITCHELL

FOR almost no other reason than that Thomas Mitchell was in the cast, I went the other evening to a suburban theatre to see a return season of the Warner film *Invitation to a Murder*, which I had missed on its first release. What prompted this outburst of energy in Mitchell's direction was a letter I had had from a correspondent (Avon G. Todd) who, when writing in commendation of *The Listener's* reviews of *Out of the Fog* and *Moontide*, had expressed the opinion that Thomas Mitchell is the greatest actor in Hollywood at the present time, if not the greatest since Charlie Chaplin.

In support of that contention, Mr. Todd listed the films in which he saw Mitchell in 1942 and in every one of which he was "the tops"—*Out of the Fog*, *Invitation to a Murder*, *The Long Voyage Home* (as the fighting Irishman), *Joan of Paris* (as the priest), *Gone with the Wind* (as Scarlett's father, Gerald O'Hara) and *The Hurricane* (rather an old one, this). It is certainly an impressive list of acting performances—sometimes more impressive than the pictures themselves—and it becomes more impressive when one adds *Moontide* at one end, and *Angels Over Broadway* (as the playwright), *Lost Horizon*, *Stagecoach* (the whisky-soaked doctor) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (the whisky-soured newspaperman) at the other. I don't include *Swiss Family Robinson* and it isn't likely that Mitchell would wish his role of the rather priggish pious paterfamilias to be remembered, for his own comment on the part was: "The way he prayed every 30 minutes scared the daylight out of me."

WHEN you look at that list you may agree (as I am inclined to) with Avon Todd's view that Mitchell's contribution to the art of screen acting has been surpassed only by Chaplin. And you may agree also when I suggest that it is the sterling "bit" players of Mitchell's type—mature veterans of stage and screen like Donald Crisp, John Carradine, Montagu Love, and dozens of others—who are the real backbone of the films on the acting side. They seldom become stars, they seldom win Academy Awards, but time and again they provide a sound foundation for an otherwise flimsy edifice.

MITCHELL has, of course, sometimes been starred: he was, for instance, in *Invitation to a Murder*. I don't propose to review this at length, because it is not a new film, but it is the story of a professor of philosophy (a most lovable person really) who, on being told that he must inevitably die of a bad heart within six months, decides to pass the time with interest to himself and benefit to the

world by committing a "socially useful" murder. Though it is slightly spoiled at the end by sentimentalism and the Hays Office rule that murder must never be justified and murderers must never go unpunished (as a result of which the professor decides to pay the penalty of the law instead of availing himself of his bad heart to choose his own moment of departure), this is a good story. But what makes *Invitation to a Murder* really noteworthy is Mitchell's performance in the central part, with its blend of academic unworldliness, philosophic blandness, and deadly purpose. That sounds a difficult mixture: Mitchell makes it seem easy.



THOMAS MITCHELL
... the greatest since Chaplin?

THE question of credit titles in films—whether they should be abolished or retained—was also raised by Avon G. Todd in his letter. Hollywood has decided that it would be patriotic to save film because of the war, and having apparently rejected the idea that it should stop making movies altogether or at least make only good ones, has seriously considered the abolition of "credits"—those long lists of often unpronounceable names which tell you who did the costumes and who did the sets, and so on. I imagine the suggestion has been particularly seriously considered by the gentlemen concerned, because from what I have read of Hollywood a great deal of their prestige and, hence, of their income, may depend on the number of "credits" they can secure. Frankly, I have often felt, and I expect you have also, that it doesn't add much to the sum of human knowledge to be informed that Isaac Zinklebaum was assistant-deputy-script-writer, and that Silas K. Slapgurge and Kurt Prmzmsl were respectively responsible for the lighting and background music. On the other hand, these workers behind the scenes are really as much entitled to their share of recognition as the people in front of the cameras. It is also a good democratic principle that people should be held responsible for their actions—and they can't be held responsible if you don't know who they are. Again, there are occasions when one of these names really does mean something to the keen picturegoer.

So if it means keeping the Zinklebaums, the Slapgurses, and the Prmzmsls happy; and if credit titles do occasionally tell you something you want to know, I vote to retain them. But in that case, in the name of common sense, let us have them at the end of the film instead of at the beginning. How, as Lejenue asked in an article we reprinted the other week, can you tell whether you're going to be interested in who wrote the background music until you've heard it?

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