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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

NATASHA

(Lenfilms)



ONE of the lesser benefits of the Anglo-Russian accord is that we do now occasionally get a belated chance to see a Soviet film,

and what's more, we can go to see it quite openly in a public theatre, whereas until a year or so ago you could practically have counted on the fingers of your clenched fist the number of people in New Zealand who had managed to take even a semi-surreptitious peep at the works of such Old Russian Masters as Eisenstein and Pudovkin. Unfortunately, our officially-blessed introduction to the cinema industry of the U.S.S.R. has taken place a bit too late for us to get the best out of it.

The trouble is that just when Russian films have become respectable they have also tended to become dull—at least by comparison with some of their predecessors, though not necessarily by comparison with contemporary productions from Hollywood and Great Britain. I didn't see many of the early masterpieces, but I did see *Turk-Sib*, *Potemkin* and *Storm Over Asia*; and I saw enough to make me think now that some of the light has gone out of Russian films. It is probably the light of fanaticism, but it did give a quality of excitement and daring experiment to those early efforts which shone past all the obvious propaganda. Then they were still fighting the Revolution on the screen; they were prophets with a gospel to establish against the opposition of the entire world. But now that the Revolution is an accepted fact, Russian films have inclined to grow pedantic; the prophets have become pedagogues; fanatical faith has been replaced by studied preaching.

However, if you forget the past and compare it only with what is being done in the present, there is enough real cinematic merit in such a comparatively recent production as *Natasha* to make it well worth study, and for it to be an object lesson to those producers and picture-goers who believe that all heroines must be glamour girls. *Natasha* (played by Zoya Fyodorova), is a young peasant who becomes a Red Cross nurse, in charge of a detachment of *frontovye podruzi* ("front line girlfriends"), who appear to be almost as expert at causing wounds among the Nazis as at curing them among the Russians. She has a romance (which is incidental to the plot), and twice we see her in a night-gown: apart from this the film almost seems to go out of its way to disguise the femininity of *Natasha* and her assistant-nurses, and to make it clear that they are doing a man-size job, even to the extent of using a rifle or machine-gun on occasions. In thick uniforms practically identical with those of the soldiers, which make them into shapeless lumps, these sturdy, cheerful, and courageous girls fight cold, disease, pain, despair—and Nazis—in the front line outside Leningrad, and the cinema turns it all into a plain, sturdy documentary record which is mostly so sincere that it is often easy to forget that

STAND-UP CLAPS: *Fantasia*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *Mr. Davis* (*The Next of Kin*), *Mrs. Miniver*, *The Gold Rush*, *The Talk of the Town*, *Moontide*.
SIT-DOWN CLAPS: *Crossroads*, *My Favourite Blonde*, *Roxie Hart*, *Shining Victory*, *Seven Days' Leave*, *My Gal Sal*.

the primary purpose is not entertainment but propaganda.

The "dubbing-in" of English dialogue is for the most part very well done—but would a Russian girl use such a bourgeois term as "fiancé"?

MY SISTER EILEEN

(Columbia)



NOW here is Miss Rosalind Russell, streamlined as ever, stepping down from the company director's pedestal and out of the feathered

slippers she affected in *Take a Letter Darling*, to walk about New York in a business-like suit trying to sell her stories to editors, while Janet Blair, as her sister Eileen, fascinates young men in drug stores and the vestibules of theatre managers' sanctums. And I have to say that I much prefer this slightly harassed edition of Miss Russell to the extremely de luxe one of *Take a Letter, Darling*.

We meet the sisters Ruth (mad about writing), and Eileen (mad about acting), as Ruth is writing up a beautiful account of Eileen's performance in the local drama festival, to take place around the time when the fourth edition is selling like silk stockings on the street. But the trouble is that the editor's daughter plays Eileen's part instead: Ruth gets the sack; Eileen weeps through her insulted make-up; and with grandmother's encouragement ("Ruth wants to write; she ought to be where magazines and publishers are"), they leave to conquer New York. And if it hadn't been for the coincidence that in New York there was a magazine called "The Man-hatter" sluggishly boring its way to dusty bankruptcy, with only Editor Brian Aherne aware that it could be Saved by Real Live Stories about Real Live People, New York would probably have conquered the sisters.

But they don't have to go home after all. Because sister Eileen is recognised for the brilliant actress she says she is (and is not)? Oh, no. Because Miss Russell writes one of those Real Stories about looking for jobs in New York, living in a basement, eating spaghetti (she says she's put on three pounds in a month, but really, you wouldn't notice it), and dealing with the stray people collected by the irresistible Eileen. The story is called *My Sister Eileen*, and Mr. Aherne likes it and gets the sack for liking it, but he publishes it just the same as a last fling before his sack is closed. Then his sack his opened again because "The Manhatter" sells awfully

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