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Film Reviews by G.M.

HITCHCOCK'S 100 MINUTES

SABOTEUR

(Universal)

ALFRED Hitchcock's latest thriller begins with an explosion and a fire in a big Pacific Coast aircraft factory. It ends 100 minutes later with a Fifth Columnist slipping horribly, inch by inch, from the giant, torch-holding hand of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. In between these two points of time and distance, various characters have been shot at, sandbagged and kidnapped; the hero has leapt off a bridge into a swirling river and has escaped various other forms of death and disaster by inches; and attempts have been made to blow up Boulder Dam and a battleship at its launching. When the light goes up, any member of the audience who has been able to survive Hitchcock's Hundred Minutes without feeling slightly limp from suspense and excitement should be fit to qualify without further test, as a parachute trooper or one-man submarine crew.

Every trick in Hitchcock's repertoire has gone to the making of *Saboteur*. Not many of them are brand-new, some are slightly worn or over-worked, and one or two fail to come off. But these clever devices of the old master are enough to turn what, in other hands, might have been just a routine thriller into a first-rate melodrama—a motion picture which seldom forgets to move, even when its characters are merely talking.

The director is so much the star of this film that it wasn't necessary to crowd the cast with big names. Robert Cummings portrays the young worker in the aircraft factory who is wrongly accused of setting fire to the plant, and who sets out to track down the Axis agent (Norman Lloyd), who is really responsible. Bewildered but determined, he uncovers an elaborate sabotage organisation, and follows a trail which takes him right across the American continent. On the way, he meets the heroine (Priscilla Lane), is befriended by a blind recluse and a troupe of circus freaks, falls into the hands of the police and out again, into the hands of the Fifth Columnists and not so easily out again.

Hitchcock is sometimes so anxious to pull off a trick and pack in an extra ounce of excitement that he leaves his audience guessing as to which turn the story has taken in its headlong course. And once, anyway, I think that the suspense fizzled out. There is a terrific build-up of anxiety when the hero and heroine find themselves among the Best People at a patriotic function in New York, only to realise that they are nevertheless still trapped by their enemies, and that nobody will believe their story that their hostess is an Axis agent, and that the immaculate gentleman over there talking to the general is planning to blow up a battleship. It is a nightmarish situation, and how the director could have rounded it off better I don't quite know. But the present dénouement strikes me as tame.

Well to the fore all through the film is the familiar Hitchcock technique of investing apparently innocent objects and people with sinister meaning and purpose. This time it is mostly people: the villains of *Saboteur* are not deep-dyed desperadoes, but seem-

ingly respectable citizens. Fifth Columnists and Fascist sympathisers, as Hitchcock points out, are seldom obvious: they are more likely to be drawn from the cream of society than from the scum of the gutter. So the head of the sabotage ring (Otto Kruger), is a rich, respected ranch-owner, who frankly admits that he sides with the Axis because it offers more chance for his type of rugged individualism to flourish; one of his chief assistants is a mild-mannered, soft-spoken fellow, who seems incapable of violence (Alan Baxter); another is a dowager, who hob-nobs with generals and diplomats. Nearly all of them are fond of children and family life: even one of the more ordinary villains expresses the hope that he will soon be able to dispose of the heroine (whom he is guarding), because he wants to take his kid sister to a concert!

It is this kind of casual, horrifying understatement that makes *Saboteur*, not by any means the best of all Hitchcock pictures, but by far the most intelligent and at the same time most exciting film of its type for a good many months.

THE GREAT LIE

(Warner Bros.)

BY the same standards as those applied above, *The Great Lie* is a long way superior to the average contemporary Hollywood pot-boiler, even though it may not be in the same street as some Bette Davis masterpieces of the past. It is also notable in its own right for three rather unusual circumstances: (1) It marks one of the few occasions on which the normally tragic or unpleasant Miss Davis has portrayed a likeable and comparatively cheerful young woman and has come through to a happy ending. (2) For about the fourth time, Miss Davis has George Brent as her leading man, and this time she gets him. On other occasions either one or the other has died tragically. (3) Miss Davis has to withstand a determined challenge from Mary Astor, not only for possession of George Brent as husband, but also for the right to be considered the star of the picture. Miss Davis triumphs in the domestic situation, but on the acting side honours are about even.

Mary Astor, the "menace" of the story, portrays a famous woman pianist; Bette Davis is a country girl, who has loved the irresponsible Brent from childhood, and who marries him properly after his brief and invalid union with Miss Astor. Thus far the film is just a routine triangular drama, but it gains in interest when Brent is reported missing in an air crash over the Brazilian jungle and the pianist announces that she is going to have a baby by him. So the two women strike a bargain: the legal wife is to get the baby and rear it as her own, the pianist is to get enough money to make motherhood worth while. The long sequence in which the wife insists that the temperamental, self-indulgent expectant mother shall conduct herself as far as possible along Plunket lines until the child is born is treated with considerable humour, drama and insight.

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