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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

PALM BEACH STORY

(Paramount)



THERE is not much on the surface of this latest Preston Sturges picture to explain why there now exists among keen picturegoers a kind of Preston Sturges cult. And that, of course, is a good sign, because a cult is a self-conscious thing, and there is nothing particularly self-conscious about Preston Sturges.

Palm Beach Story does not impress me as being Sturges's most notable achievement. At the same time, it is the kind of picture that is either a flop or a success—and thanks to the director, it is a success. For Sturges is one of the few real wits in Hollywood; and it is wit with a dash of satire that keeps *Palm Beach Story* from being just another of those tiresome crazy comedies, and turns it instead into as lively and beguiling a piece of foolery as you could hope to find in six months of theatre-going.

If you tried to analyse the story, it would fall to pieces, being nothing but some nonsense about a wife who wants a divorce, a husband who doesn't, a multi-millionaire who wants the wife, and a trip to Florida. Everybody is absorbed by what one of the characters describes as "Topic A"—in other words, sex. But it is sex treated with wit, sophistication, and good manners; a bedtime story for grown-ups.

Claudette Colbert and Joel McCrea play their parts with skill and as if they enjoyed them, but the big surprise of the picture is Rudy Vallee. As the absorbed and be-spectacled multi-millionaire, he is (in my perhaps rather biased opinion), at least one hundred times better as an actor than he has ever been as a crooner. He sings only once in *Palm Beach Story*, and even then Preston Sturges makes a joke of it, as he makes a joke of everything else that happens from the first credit title to the final fade-out.

THE CAT PEOPLE

(RKO Radio)



THIS is not a film that I should like to recommend to my feminist friends. I think it might put their backs up. We men have often enough got ourselves into trouble in the past for merely suggesting that certain women in certain circumstances have been known to behave in a manner that might, by some stretch of the imagination, be described as feline: but here are Messrs. RKO Radio boldly telling the story of a girl who not only behaves like a cat, but actually turns into one!

Of course you won't believe the tale; you aren't really expected to; though I must say the producers do try their best to make it convincing with a fairly well sustained crescendo of uncanniness and suspense, building up to a climax which is, within the limits of the picture, a real climax—not, as so often happens in such cases, an anti-climax which attempts to explain the whole thing away in "scientific" terms. After all, the best ghost stories are those which remain on the

supernatural level throughout and don't blame the wind in the chimney on the last page.

The only trouble here is that Simone Simon, who plays Irene Dubrovna, the cat-girl, does not strike one as being particularly feline or frightening, even if stroked the wrong way. Of course she's supposed to be a Serbian immigrant in New York, and that's a help because you know what these Slavs are like when it comes to being psychic and having trouble with their souls. Look at Dracula, for instance. Anyway, Miss Dubrovna's soul is a happy hunting ground for the Powers of Evil in the form of cats because, you see, her medieval ancestors were all witches and warlocks who used to go out on the tiles every night. At first she does try very hard to shoo the cats out of her soul, because she has just married a nice young American and is afraid that if she even lets him kiss her she'll revert to type and scratch his eyes out. This, as you can imagine, is rather hard on the husband, but he's very patient. However, he's only human, and when he finally becomes interested in a girl at the office his wife turns really catty. Not just ordinary jealousy, you understand, but Black Magic.

I must confess that as I'm fond of cats and like weird stories, I rather enjoyed this picture. But I shouldn't care to have Simone Simon as a pet.

ASSIGNMENT IN BRITTANY

(M.G.M.)



COMMANDOS strike again at dawn, and this time some of them are equipped with bows and arrows. This touch of toxophilic novelty is practically the only thing which distinguishes *Assignment in Brittany* from half the other spy melodramas that Hollywood has ever produced.

Judging by such pictures, nearly everybody in the world must have a double, and these coincidences of appearance always conveniently occur whenever the Government wants to send an agent into enemy territory to gather Vital Information. Just pop into the nearest hospital or prison-camp and look around until you notice somebody who exactly resembles your spy; then send your spy off to take his place with the folks back home. What could be easier? In this case, a Free French officer impersonates a renegade Frenchman, and goes off to Brittany, where he insinuates himself into the bosom of the renegade's family to gain information about a submarine base. Then follow hairbreadth escapes, capture, and torture by the Nazis; patriotism and perfidy by the French villagers; a secret wireless station, and a message that gets through to the British—whereupon, the commandos come galloping up in the nick of time and save the situation. Sorry, they don't gallop; I wonder what made me think of cowboys? Fade-out on close embrace of hero and heroine aboard a destroyer, while battle-stained British commandos courteously sing the Marseillaise.

The star is Pierre Aumont, a new French actor in Hollywood. I did not get the impression that he was taking this particular job of acting very seriously—but then, why should he?

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