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#### FILM REVIEWS BY F.A.J.

## The Great Hollywood Myth

### A STAR IS BORN

(Warner Bros.-CinemaScope)

**G**EORGE CUKOR'S *A Star is Born* is not a great picture, and I shall probably regret

the reckless generosity of my grading as soon as I see it in print; but this is one of those occasions when I feel it should reflect the astonishment of my on-the-spot reaction to the film. The idea of two and a half hours plus of Judy Garland, in colour and on the widest of all possible screens, filled me with dismay. Then I sat through it, with an occasional fastidious shudder certainly, but with scarcely a yawn or a fidget, still interested if a little thirsty on the home stretch.

*A Star is Born*, as I hardly need explain, is about the rise to stardom of an obscure singer (Miss Garland). The man who sees that she gets her big chance is an alcoholic actor (James Mason). Against his better judgment they marry—and so on. This is no very original plot, and what really makes it as a story and a film is its satirical treatment of the great Hollywood myth. This is the line taken at the start as the stars are welcomed at an exciting, noisy charity concert, it comes through in the impersonality of the young singer's first encounters with the studio, and it is still there at the end when, as a star, she is mobbed at a funeral. Throughout, the big publicity man (Jack Carson) stands for the worst we know of Hollywood oafishness; and Miss Garland puts across a nice piece of satire herself in a hilarious drawing-room take-off of the perennial Hollywood "biggest scene ever."

You might begin to gather from all this that I found the non-musical part rather more important in *A Star is Born* than in many another musical, and I'd be interested to know how much of this the scriptwriter Moss Hart borrowed from the earlier version of the film. But *A Star is Born* is a musical, and I suppose successful enough on that level, though I must admit that not all of the music appealed to me. Nor, for that matter, did Miss Garland's singing always appeal, though it seems to be pretty good of its kind. As an actress, however, she impressed me much more, from the moment she first displayed her odd, boyish charm and a sort of eagerness and confusion as she hesitated before the big plunge. Perhaps she is a bit over-emotional at times, but that is easy to forgive in the wife of a talented husband who is drinking himself to death. As an acting vehicle, then, this is Miss Garland's picture. However, I think Mr. Mason, who struck such good form again in *The Man Between*, also deserves praise for his playing of a difficult part—I shall never forget the ravaged face that looks out to sea in one of his last scenes.

There's a pretty fair chance that in making a film of this sort a director will fall for some of the things that go along with the attitude he satirises, and this film is not without its lapses—the Warner-coloured sunset sort of thing, if you know what I mean. And even though it manages to get by, it's really far too

### BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "*A Star is Born*."  
MAINLY FAIR: "*Susan Slept Here*."  
FAIR: "*The Hitch-Hiker*."

long. Whole scenes, like the Academy Award evening, could have been cut, and I would even have been spared a bit of a fidget if the celebrated "Born in a Trunk" sequence had been more severely pruned. Still, with a showy subject and so much time to play with, it might have been worse; and while I know many won't agree with me, my feeling at the end was one of surprised gratitude that Hollywood could still laugh at itself in an undertaking as vast as this.

### SUSAN SLEPT HERE

(R.K.O.-Radio)

(S)CARS seem to get more than their fair share of the films this week. They rate a credit in *A Star is Born*, and in *Susan Slept Here* one of the darned things even becomes a sort of film star in its own right, chipping in every now and then to tell part of the story. In the circumstances, I was more pleased than dismayed when Debbie Reynolds, all unknowing, picked it up and found it made a fine nut-cracker. Its owner, Dick Powell, I must add, was more dismayed than pleased. Miss Reynolds, easily the pick of the bunch in this piece, is a juvenile delinquent whom some friendly police deliver on Christmas Eve to the home of an Academy Award winning scriptwriter (Mr. Powell), because they know he needs some raw material for his first serious story. Miss Reynolds begins straightway to make an impression in the rich, carpeted acres of Mr. Powell's apartment, and before the story ends—and that blonde who keeps ringing up notwithstanding—well, guess what? This is a rather screwball piece with a thin story; but here and there it has some amusing lines, and Miss Reynolds, as I started to say, is nice to watch—especially eating strawberries and mixed pickles for breakfast.

### THE HITCH-HIKER

(The Filmakers-R.K.O.-Radio)

*THE HITCH-HIKER* is pretty obviously based on the story of Billy Cook, who, four years ago in America, killed six people after hitching rides in their cars. Though the leading character here has a different name, his record is much the same, and like Billy Cook he even has the deformed right eyelid which leaves one eye deceptively open while he sleeps. Directed by Ida Lupino, with William Talman as the killer, *The Hitch-Hiker* spares us the more horrible details of the killings. These are sketched in with a telling use of significant detail in a short sequence, shot from below waist level, which runs under the credit titles. The film then goes on to describe the gunman's ride across country as a back-seat driver for two more potential victims. As a suspense story it is very effective; but it's a pity it doesn't try to go deeper into the character of the real-life killer, who lost his mother and was abandoned by his father in a deserted mine cave when he was five years old.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 22, 1955.