

Picnic in New Mexico

THE BIG CARNIVAL

(Paramount)

If you are interested in the psychopathology of American life—and if your interest extends beyond those eccentricities which Dr. Kinsey has made his own peculiar domain—then I have no doubt that you will find Billy Wilder's latest production, *The Big Carnival*, a stimulating experience. Just how it will stimulate you will depend on the strength of your stomach (I found it at times more emetic than cathartic); you may notice that the characterisation is uneven and inconsistent and that the script is riddled with dramatic solecisms; in the end you may even doubt whether the producer-director manages to accomplish what he set out to do. But at least it is not the kind of film to leave you indifferent or bored.

Wilder has already (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Lost Weekend*) shown a keen, clinical interest in the aberrant and the perverted. So far, in fact, the Wilder corpus is no child's garden of verses, and the last chapter makes no break with that tradition. *The Big Carnival*, however, was (I thought) something more than a portrayal of individual degeneracy. Though it is not an unusually violent film—if you measure violence in terms of physical action—it is, to some extent, a study of the social climate in which sadism and brutality thrive.

The central character (he's no hero) is a tough and unscrupulous reporter who has been rusticated from Times Square for professional malleance. When the action gets under way he has been biting his nails for a year in the backblocks of Albuquerque (New Mexico), waiting for the newsbreak that will earn him his ticket back to New York. It comes when a roadside curio-dealer is pinned by a fall of rock in an ancient Indian catacomb. Sensing the "human interest" in the situation, the newsman enters into an unholy alliance with the local sheriff to exploit it for their own ends. Instead of effecting a simple straightforward rescue, they adopt the spectacular but slow method of drilling an escape shaft down through solid rock. The imprisoned man survives for almost a week, shocked, chilled,

choked with falling dust and half-demented by the noise of the drills. Outside, in the harsh sunlight, the morbid sightseers gather in their thousands as the jazzed-up story hits the headlines, and the desert blossoms with amusement-booths, hot-dog stands, radio commentators and teletype machines. As the long week draws to a close, oxygen has to be pumped in to the victim underground, but it is then too late to save him and he dies of pneumonia, coughing and babbling in the dark.

Looked at through the lens of the film-camera, this terrible story is expertly told. The tempo of the picture is exciting, the photography is bold and sometimes beautiful, and the camera turns a cold, clear eye on the crowd, as well as on the principals. Indeed, many of the minor characters are just as horrible in their hectic carnival setting as the principal villains—and more shockingly close to reality.

As the double-dyed yellow journalist, Kirk Douglas acts with as much strength and vigour as he showed in *Champion*, but he is unable to conceal some of the basic improbabilities in the part (how could such a character stick it out for a year in Albuquerque?) Wilder himself sacrifices probability for pictorial effect in the sequence which shows the carnival crowds ebbing away; in fact, the whole film—strong as it is in its initial impact—does not stand up so well to sober re-examination. The story seems thrown together, and the treatment is overdone. That, of course, may just be a New Zealander's reaction. Americans may have found it nearer to reality as they know it, and therefore more disturbing. And I have no doubt that the Americans were those whom Mr. Wilder was most anxious to disturb.

KON-TIKI

(RKO-Radio)

If old explorer Flaherty could have been aboard the Kon-Tiki, this record of the long drift from Peru to Polynesia might have been the film of a lifetime. Even without his sense of cinema, it is bound to find a place in film archives and certainly deserves a corner to itself among the year's pictures. But it is technically disappointing. I hate to say that, for the astonishing thing is that it could have been made at all, that so much that was usable survived the scend of deep seas and the hazards of wreck. What was salvaged, however, has been stretched a little too thin to make a feature-length picture, and to get oneself properly "in the picture" it is really necessary to have read Heyerdahl, and perhaps Hesselberg. But I wouldn't have missed seeing it, and I felt afterwards that perhaps the truth about Polynesia lay somewhere between the Pros. and the Kons.



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