

Charley's Musical Aunt

WHERE'S CHARLEY?

(Warner Bros.)

JUST about ninety per cent of the fun in this polished musical version of *Charley's Aunt* comes from the performance in the principal role of Ray Bolger, the comic dancer who pranced his way to fame as the Straw Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. As Charley, the Oxford undergraduate who impersonates his rich aunt from Brazil for a single hectic afternoon, he successfully bamboozles two middle-aged suitors who are after his aunt's millions, as well as solving the more romantic matrimonial problems of himself and his room-mate with their respective young ladies.

David Butler, the director, has based his film on the Broadway musical comedy of 1948, and the action of the familiar old story is interspersed with half a dozen song and dance numbers by the two men and their girl friends, with a chorus of assorted undergraduates. These musical routines are occasionally tedious insofar as they interrupt the hilarious flight of Charley's impersonation, but since they are staged with the spontaneous gaiety which we have come to associate with better musicals like *On the Town* or *An American in Paris*, they are well worth looking at for their own sake. There is also, following the example of the two films just mentioned, a fairly long, wordless ballet sequence near the end, in which Charley and his girl friend (played by Allyn McLerie) imagine they are in South America, pursued by a gang of Spanish-Indian cut-throats. This exotic masquerade is played with just the right air of burlesquing a real ballet to keep it in tune with the farcical spirit of the rest of the film.

The story relates how Charley and his friend have invited their girls up to their room in one of the university town's ivy-covered colleges. Since the time is about the turn of the century the girls are required to have a chaperone for the visit—and this was to be the role of Charley's aunt, who, unfortunately, misses the train from London. Charley manages to soothe the misgivings of the girls by dressing up in a long black dress and a wig and pretending to be the old lady. But when the girls' Uncle Spettigue unexpectedly arrives the affair becomes complicated. Charley not only successfully deceives the fierce uncle. He also becomes involved in a hilarious wooing match with him that leads up and down the garden paths, through the cloisters and over the walls, when Spettigue (who "just loves money") feels the urge to take a wife.

The further arrival of the father of Charley's room-mate, with similar ideas and later of the real Dona Lucia d'Alvadorez (Charley's aunt) gets Charley into such a giddy spin that his unfrocking becomes obviously only a matter of time. It takes place at a ball that evening, but not before Charley has persuaded Spettigue to consent to the marriage of himself and his room-mate to the two girls. Horace Cooper is first-rate as Spettigue, and Robert Shackleton is agreeable as Charley's room-mate. The film uses a number of actual Oxford settings, and is all in all a neat and happy piece of work.

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Where's Charley?"
FAIR: "Dreamboat."

DREAMBOAT

(20th Century-Fox)

IN his new film Clifton Webb appears as a university professor with a dark past—he was once a silent film star. When his old films are revived on television he becomes the joke of the university and decides to go to New York to sue the sponsors of the programme in which he is appearing without his consent. But, of course, he can't resist the almost forgotten temptation of the arc lights, and is soon back in Hollywood with a new contract to appear in talkies. The film is a brisk satire on the inanities of commercialised television, and also gets some laughs out of its jerky, melodramatic presentation of the silent films in which Webb woos with abandon his old leading lady, played in a brunette wig by Ginger Rogers. These silent sequences are (paradoxically, if you like) really the funniest part of the film. The rest of it is smoothly put together, as scripted and directed by Claude Binyon, and if it adds nothing to the lustre that Clifton Webb brought to himself in his earlier comedy, *Sitting Pretty*, it is still pretty reasonable entertainment.

National Film Unit

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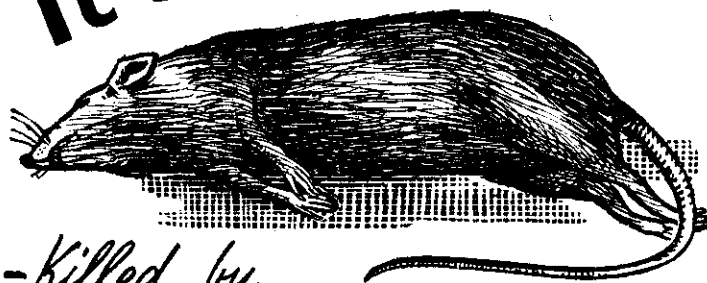


RAY BOLGER

"Through the cloisters and over the walls"

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 2, 1953.

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