

Where Will They Be In 1939?

Forecasting The Fate Of Film Stars

(Continued from page 12).

to Louise Rainer and Spencer Tracy, despite the fact that they won 1937's Academy Awards.

Miss Rainer will need to be careful. Two pictures—"The Great Ziegfeld" and "The Good Earth"—have skyrocketed her to fame, and in them she proved her versatility beyond doubt. But "The Emperor's Candlesticks" was hardly more than an ordinary picture, and although I have not, at the time of writing, seen "Big City," the general critical opinion is that this film again stresses Miss Rainer's capacity for artificial cuteness rather than her proven ability for broad cinematic acting. The point is that Miss Rainer has not yet consolidated her position in Hollywood, and good parts or bad ones at this stage will make all the difference between whether she is to be just another spectacular foreign importation or one of the screen's lasting luminaries. And her accent does not make the choice of suitable parts any more easy.

The path that lies ahead of Spencer Tracy is smoother, but I doubt if he is firmly enough established yet for his producers to afford to take chances. At the moment he ranks almost with Muni as the screen's greatest character actor, and given a fair run should be in much the same position a year from now. It is doubtful, however, if Tracy will ever be a smashing sensation at the box-office: character actors seldom are. For that, you need more of the handsome, romantic type.

Gable and Taylor

AND with that we arrive at Clark Gable and Robert Taylor. What does the coming year hold for them? Gable, I think, has almost passed through the stage when sex-appeal was his biggest draw: he is depending more on pure acting ability. He has given ample proof that he is not lacking in this, and it should be enough to keep him at the top—again provided he gets the right parts. In my opinion he should eschew all—what shall I say?—"stunt" roles (such as that in "Parnell" for which he was definitely not suited) and concentrate on being a modern American hero. Either drama or comedy, but not history for Clark Gable.

At the moment, Robert Taylor depends on his place as premier box-office male mainly because of the flutters he can cause in feminine hearts. But he, too, has given us an occasional glimpse of something more solid behind his prettiness; and if this something could be developed it might even make him the equivalent of Rudolph Valentino, who so successfully combined sex-appeal with talent.

Currently, however, there is evidence that too much reliance is being placed upon Taylor's purely physical charm—as, for instance, in "Broadway Melody of 1938"—and this charm in itself won't be enough to keep him at the top.

LAST year, Janet Gaynor made a remarkable come-back in "A Star is Born," proving that she has passed beyond the sickly sentimental stage and is capable of being a mature actress if given the chance. Her plans at the moment seem indefinite, but she might have a bright future if this new side of her screen character is properly developed.

March's Chance

With Janet Gaynor in "A Star is Born," Fredric March also staged a come-back. He has always been a very able exponent of swashbuckling "costume" roles, but the public was becoming tired of the same Fredric March in picture after picture, until he showed what he could do with a subtle but un-theatrical modern role in "A Star is Born." This film opened up a big possibility for him—it remains to see if he will be able to develop it. If not, I'm afraid Fredric March will be on the way down by 1939.

What "A Star is Born" did for March, "Night Must Fall" did for Robert Montgomery, who was definitely going into eclipse as the screen's typical playboy. It would be absurd to suggest that Montgomery should now concentrate on melodrama films as a result of his macabre triumph in "Night Must Fall"; but all the same, that picture did reveal a versatility and depth of talent previously unsuspected. If this results in a wider range of roles for him, he should remain a fixture. If not . . .

I'm doubtful about Joan Crawford. Her work in recent years shows marked signs of improvement, but she now seems to be plastering on the glamour at the expense of her dramatic ability, and, if this process continues, it must eventually affect her popularity. Her own ambition, it is said, is to be a serious actress rather than an exotic one; if that is so, and she is wise, she should take her fate in her own hands at an early date, otherwise the Gorgeous Hussy may be just a Faded Orchid by 1939.

After a long, uphill struggle against tragic motherhood and "refinement," Kay Francis appears definitely to be losing ground. She might, perhaps, be able to stop the rot with one really worthwhile part, but I think myself she is past her prime as a star.

And though I hate to admit it, because I admire him greatly, I'm almost equally afraid that William Powell has reached his peak, and isn't likely to stay there—that is, not unless he can break away from the stereotyped "Thin Man" variety of role. His decline will be gradual, but none the less certain, unless they can give him something rather more substantial to act than he has had in his past few pictures.

CLAUDETTE COLBERT'S forte is intelligent, sophisticated comedy. She has had many ups and downs, and one of the most serious "downs" was caused by her miscasting in "Maid of Salem." Her next picture, "I Met Him

in Paris," pulled her up a bit, and her coming part in "Tovarich," should also give her a helping hand on the climb back to the top.

As for Mariene Dietrich, I'm afraid that unless a miracle happens she won't be among the big ones a year from now. The miracle would be a succession of roles that suited her as well as the one she had in "Desire"—roles that would disclose a human personality and not just a fantastic and artificial beauty.

A similar miracle—in this case a succession of films as good as "Stage Door"—is necessary to save Katharine Hepburn.

If you want to back winners, I would suggest that you keep an eye on Joel McCrea, a young man who has been steadily improving in recent pictures, and who probably needs nothing much more than a haircut to make him fairly soon a really important star. Also watch out for Cary Grant, who is losing his self-consciousness and being given more and more important assignments. Next year may see him very near the top of the ladder. That goes also for Annabella, the delightful French star of "Wings of the Morning."

However, I fail to see eye to eye with those who are predicting great things for Carole Lombard. In spite of the fact that she earns the highest salary per picture of any star in Hollywood to-day, she is a victim of typing in crazy comedies; and sooner or later—if, indeed, the process has not already begun—the public is going to become heartily sick of seeing her act like a half-witted, spoiled child.

British Prospects

ON the British front, Charles Laughton is important enough to catch attention any time he likes to make an appearance. Yet he suffers slightly from what I call "Arliiss's Disease"—always being too much himself.

Merle Oberon is now an experienced actress and is likely to remain a fixture very near the top for some time.

Yet the most promising stars on the British screen to-day are probably Vivien Leigh and Rex Harrison, seen together in "Storm in a Tea Cup." Vivien Leigh has been well grounded in her career by Alexander Korda. Her rise is likely to be steady rather than spectacular, but none the less well worth watching. Rex Harrison is still not quite sure of himself, but once he gains confidence I think England will have a new type of leading man to be envied by Hollywood—and probably stolen.

This survey of the movie heavens is not really a survey but a glance here and there at some of the most interesting stars. I have omitted others probably just as interesting—what about Leslie Howard, Robert Donat, Errol Flynn, Marian Hopkins, Irene Dunne, Rosalind Russell?—and I have not touched on the musical stars, the child prodigies, nor the starlets (such as Olympe Bradna, Jon Hall and Dorothy Lamour)—whose light is likely to grow brighter as the year goes on. But I think I have committed myself quite far enough as a prophet; and I would now ask you all to tear out these pages and burn them so that you will have no evidence to hold against me a year from now.