

# MR. CAPRA GIRDS (MILDLY) AT THE GOVERNMENT

By DOUGLAS W. CHURCHILL

*New York Times (1923-Current file); May 14, 1939;*

ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2007) w/ Index (1851-1993)

pg. 133

## MR. CAPRA GIRDS (MILDLY) AT THE GOVERNMENT

By DOUGLAS W. CHURCHILL

HOLLYWOOD.

FRANK CAPRA'S annual inspection of America's social-consciousness is under way at Columbia, where youthful James Stewart is confounding and exposing the nation's greatest minds in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." As representative of the Rangers (the Boy Scouts of America objected to having any part in Mr. Capra's reform movement) and inspired by the love of a good woman, Jean Arthur, Stewart is winning the adoration of the common people by exposing Claude Rains, the senatorial tool of that iniquitous representative of big business, Edward Arnold. To realists, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" may seem to be the ultimate in a merger of the Cinderella and Horatio Alger motifs; Capra prefers to characterize the story as a plea for honest government.

All kinds of problems have confronted Capra since he decided to clean things up down in Washington. Originally it was intended to use Gary Cooper as a Senator from Montana and call the picture "Mr. Deeds Goes to Washington." Unable to secure Cooper, Stewart was borrowed from MGM, Mr. Deeds became Mr. Smith and Montana was changed to an unnamed Commonwealth. The plot provided for

the appointment of Stewart, Scout Master, to the Senate to fill the unexpired term of a deceased politician; the Scouts were then to whoop it up over the honor paid their leader. The organization's heads very pointedly told Columbia that Scouts never take any part in politics, and this intervention resulted in the formation of the Rangers.

After Capra had satisfied the Scouts, he was compelled to cope with James B. Preston, former superintendent of the Senate press gallery, who was brought to Hollywood as technical adviser. Preston, who looks like Neville Chamberlain and portrayed him at a recent Gridiron banquet, at the outset was like all technical advisers: he thought the movies should conform to fact. Bowing to the first law of the cinema—that the medium must not offend any one, ever—he conceded that the Vice President could abandon recognition of members on the floor by States and, instead, could say, "Mr. Smith, the Senior Senator." He had no solution for the problem of identifying the characters with a political party, so the dialogue will avoid use of the words Republican and Democrat. However, wiseacres in the audience will know the political stripe of the villain because the Democrats sit on the right side of the Senate chamber and the Republicans on the left. Capra was afraid that this seating arrangement might impel a national crisis, for the inference would be that the Republicans are Leftists. Preston thought not, though.

Guided by photographs and measurements and the alert eye of Preston, Lionel Banks, Columbia's art director, has copied the Senate Chamber exactly. The body's desks have never been duplicated and the studio had to have them built. The busts of Vice Presidents which are set in niches around the chamber do not entirely conform to fact. An unnecessary expense would have been incurred to reproduce

each one, so a group of six were selected to appear in close shots and casts of these same half-dozen were made to fill the other niches for the long shots.

\* \* \*

Elsa Maxwell is giving more than casual thought to the party she must stage in "Elsa Maxwell's Hotel for Women," which is before the Twentieth Century-Fox cameras. She realizes that her reputation is at stake with the movie audiences and that the celebration on the screen must be as startling as it is unique in order to retain the customers' faith. She came to Hollywood to serve as technical adviser on the film, which was then known as "Hotel for Women," but after screen tests were made, Darryl Zanuck gave orders to build the picture around her and incorporate her name in the title. So a part was written in which she serves in the story as a kind of *dea ex machina* to Linda Darnell, Fox's current Cinderella girl, who has replaced Arleen Whelan as the studio's favorite novice, and the party she gives for Miss Darnell is the object of her concern.

Miss Maxwell says that her principal complaint about Hollywood is that she is a highly organized person in a highly disorganized industry. Such things as being awakened at 6:30, reporting at the studio at 8 and not being needed until 11 irritate her. She says that disorganization has affected her so greatly that when the picture is finished she will have to go to Europe for a rest. Otherwise she is quite enthusiastic about the screen.

"You know, money means nothing to me," she says. "With me it's a matter of loyalty. That is why I'm so happy here. They have won my loyalty. It makes all the difference in the world to work with gentlemen, and the men at Fox are gentlemen. If I am a success and remain in pictures, I shall work for no one but Fox."

She describes Zanuck as a wizard, the Marconi of the films who is

head and shoulders above any other genius in Hollywood. "I love Mr. Zanuck," she says simply. She says she loves Gregory Ratoff, her director, too.

Miss Maxwell believes that she is able to cope with Hollywood because of her sense of humor. She says she makes a practice of taking serious things lightly and frivolous things seriously. Before she leaves town she hopes to give a party that will quite outshine anything Hollywood has known. She is troubled by the fact that the citizens, while delightful, are so conservative.

\* \* \*

Alan Mowbray is quite concerned about the health of Bobby Breen. He is appearing with the young singing star in "Way Down South," Sol Lesser's current discussion of culture on the plantations. After working with Bobby for three or four days, Mowbray went to Bernard Vorhaus, the director, and said, "You'd better get those electricians to change their terminology. They keep yelling, 'Kill that junior.'" Then, fixing an eye on Bobby, he continued, "One of them might misunderstand."

"Way Down South" will be one of Master Breen's more pretentious offerings. It has to do with the slave days on the old Breen plantation, a wicked lawyer, a faithful servant and glamour in the form of Steffi Duna. Clarence Muse and Langston Hughes, Negro composers of considerable note, have arranged eleven spirituals to be sung by the Hall Johnson Choir, as well as some original music which Bobby will sing. Much of the action takes place in the slave quarters at the edge of the sugar cane. For an authentic touch, the studio had several tons of cane shipped from Louisiana, but when it arrived at the California border it was found that agricultural restrictions prohibited bringing it in. Desperate because of the time element, they discovered that sugar cane is grown in quantities near Bakersfield, about 100 miles from Hollywood. [

# CAPRA CUTS A CAPER

## And Offers a Passing Salute to Liberty in 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington'

By FRANK S. NUGENT

EVERY one has his own idea about what is essential for the preservation of democracy. Some say it is freedom of the press, and some say it is freedom of the polls, and some say it is freedom from governmental interference with business, and some say it is freedom from business interference with government, and some say this and some say that. But what we say, and we have no right to say it, is that every theory depends on this: a sense of humor. If publishers did not have a sense of humor they would get out of the newspaper business, and if readers lacked a sense of humor they would not bother to buy a paper. (Could anything be more bitterly humorous than the news these days?) A voter without a sense of humor wouldn't be a voter; only a humorist would stand in line for an hour to vote "yes" knowing the humorist right behind him is going to cancel him out with a "no." And so it goes.

It goes, in fact, right on down to the question of dictatorship, which is a condition of government characterized by a complete absence of humor, unless the joke is on the other fellow. There is no case on record of a full-blown dictator getting a belly-laugh out of a glimpse of himself in a distorting mirror. The correct dictatorial procedure in such cases is to destroy the mirror, attach the cash register, impound the concessionaire in a concentration camp and impose fines on all the grinning bystanders. That is why satire, burlesque, caricature and other forms of free criticism which depend on the ability to "take it" as well as "dish it out" have become distinguishing marks of democracy. And that is why—to end this preamble—Frank Capra's "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" is such a jaunty boutonniere in democracy's lapel.

\* \* \*

FOR "Mr. Smith" couldn't have happened there. It has exposed our most august body, the Senate, to ridicule, if not to contempt. It has suggested, with bounteous good nature, that Senators are not born but made—sometimes out of sheer political expedience. It has, with due solemnity, summoned that body into public session and permitted a four-foot page boy to rend the tabernacle veil and reveal the holy of holies for what we humorists have suspected it to be: a forum compounded of all human frailties but one—the vocal. It has brought up the great question of law-making and has invited a chit of a girl secretary to explain, with chilling candor, how things are done or—as happens more frequently—are left undone. It has reminded us of graft in high places, of the uncertain tenure of office, of the pork barrel and the hungry constituents back home. It has, in brief, taken the pants off that most august body, the Senate, and made it play Godiva down Pennsylvania Avenue.

And yet we would stake a New Deal dollar against a wartime mark that ninety-four out of ninety-six Senators—we wouldn't count too heavily on the senior from North Dakota and the Vice-Presidential timber from New Hampshire—will chuckle over it as heartily as the Music Hall's audiences, recognizing it as the best possible proof of America's loyalty to, and continued belief in, the democratic principle. For beneath the jasper of Mr. Capra's tripping Washington comedy there is not merely the stirring patriotic appeal of its hero, Jeff Smith, for renewed devotion to liberty and justice, but a still deeper undercurrent, latent in the film itself, of faith in democracy. "Mr. Smith" couldn't, we repeat, have happened there. That it has happened here; that its première was held in Constitution Hall in Washington under the auspices of the National Press Club; that the Marines failed to land and take the print well in hand are joyful things

to recall. They prove that liberty is its own reward.

\* \* \*

WE haven't mentioned the story. It's on the "Mr. Deeds" pattern, with a Boy Ranger leader (a Scoutmaster in disguise) getting a short-term appointment to the Senate on the State boss's theory that he will be too dumb to spot the graft in a land-purchase bill he and the senior Senator have introduced. The trouble is that Jefferson Smith, who takes his job and Washington seriously, is so dumb he introduces a bill of his own to acquire the same land for a national boys' camp. In the ensuing political melee Senator Smith barely has his eyes opened before they are blackened, but he fights on—disillusioned about everything except democracy's first principles—and, with the aid of his young secretary and the longest individual filibuster in the Senate history (three hours longer than the senior La Follette's), he finally wins through. It makes a good story under Frank Capra's telling, with James Stewart, Jean Arthur, Thomas Mitchell and Claude Rains to help him spin it out.

Mr. Capra has paced it perfectly, with a fine balance between comedy and sincerity, exploiting the Capitol background capitally, yet never permitting it to loom larger than the players before it. His cast has responded as casts always do when Capra's at the controls. Mr. Stewart's Jeff Smith is unquestionably the best thing he has done, and Mr. Stewart has done several fine jobs before. Miss Arthur remains one of the screen's most ingratiating comediennes. Mr. Rains as the senior Senator, Edward Arnold as the domineering party boss, Mr. Mitchell as a jovial correspondent, Harry Carey as the vice president and all the assorted senators, page-boys, secretaries and hangers-on are completely in order and must be sustained on every count. So, for one reason and another—including Sidney Buchman's neatly turned script and the magnificent camera work of Joseph Walker and Slavko Vorkapich—"Mr. Smith" has matched "Mr. Deeds" and becomes envoy extraordinary of screen entertainment.

\* \* \*

"HOLLYWOOD CAVALCADE," which fits in snugly with the American film's fiftieth anniversary celebration, has not come off quite as well as we had hoped, chiefly—we suspect—because the movies are fifty years old and like to hark back to the good old scripts. The notion was promising: a history, or cavalcade, of the movies from Sennett to sound (1914-27) as a background for the career and love stories of a composite director, glamour girl, leading man and producer. What happened, unfortunately, was that the writers lost sight of the background after the first third of the picture and began concentrating on the synthetic and unreasonably formulaic personal stories which were not nearly so dramatic as a straightforward history of Hollywood might have been.

The film's best parts are the Keystone chapters, with Don Ameche shouting directions to Buster Keaton, Alice Faye, the Kops and the Bathing Girls. After all these years Mr. Keaton still has a way with a custard pie; and we never guessed that Miss Faye could make such a perfect target. The expression of blissful ignorance, the apprehensive side-glance, the look of horror, the smack and spatter, the slack jaw, the utter woe, the indignation, the fiery resolve, the wind-up for a retributive pie-toss—then repeat as before. In each of these involved and highly technical manoeuvres, dependent entirely upon precise timing and flawless pantomime, Miss Faye was superb—a throwback to a blackberry Bernhardt, a raspberry Rejane, a dough-splattered Duse. She obviously was born behind her time. We hate to see her talent buried again. She has so little as a dramatic actress.



Akim Tamiroff and Dorothy Lamour stand vigil at the bedside of John Howard during one of those climactic moments in "Disputed Passage," coming to the Paramount on Wednesday.

# CAPRA'S CAPITOL OFFENSE

By FRANK S. NUGENT

IT begins to look as though we were premature last Sunday in proposing a toast to democracy's sense of humor on the basis of Frank Capra's "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." All this week contrary evidence has been coming in. Fredric William Wile wrote in his column in The Washington Star that he considered the film "little short of an affront both to our representative form of government and to the Washington newspaper fraternity." He added that the picture "ought to go over big in Berlin, Rome and Moscow because it shows up the democratic system and our vaunted free press in exactly the colors Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin are fond of painting them."

Pete Harrison of Harrison's Reports, a trade journal, resents "as an American citizen, Mr. Capra's casting of a reflection upon the integrity of the United States Senate . . . particularly in these times when the whole world is going through strenuous days and the prestige of this nation may be needed to bring peace among the warring nations. How will the people of other countries feel toward this country when they are made to believe that the United States Senate, the entire Congress for that matter, is controlled by crooked politicians? What faith can they have in such a nation as a promoter of peace?" Mr. Harrison sees some good in the situation, though. He suggests that exhibitors use the picture as an argument for passage of the Neely anti-block-booking bill.

\* \* \*  
"TELL the members of the House of Representatives," he says, "that this is only a sample of the impotence of the exhibitors to reject a picture that has been sold on the block-booking system, and that Congress must therefore make it possible for them to reject such a picture and similar other pictures which may offend the sensibilities of the American public."

Mr. Harrison may find some curiously motivated Congressional support for his favored block-booking legislation if we can believe Willard Edwards's column in The Washington Times-Herald last Sunday. The Senate, said Mr. Edwards, believing itself to have been maligned "by the motion picture industry," is preparing to strike back at Hollywood, "wounding the movie moguls where it hurts most—in the pocketbook." According to Mr. Edwards, indignation had been running high in the Capitol, but without purpose until some one remembered that the Neely bill still was pending in the House. "Very quietly in the last few days," he concludes, "a group of Senators has organized to put that measure over by using their influence with the House."

All of this makes us a little less enthusiastic about democracy's sense of humor, although we have not given up all hope for it yet. There is delicious humor in the very humorlessness of Mr. Harrison's implication that Mr. Capra will be the responsible man if the United States fails to stop the war. And there is bitter humor in the notion of a group of Senators, indignant because a comedy suggests that Senators are not always nobly motivated, convincing Hollywood of its error by spitefully working for the passage of punitive legislation. We find it a matter of humorous reflection, too, that the National Press Club, whose members now are so annoyed by the film's depiction of newspaper men, sponsored the picture's Washington premiere and threw a most enjoyable cocktail party after it.

\* \* \*  
AND just what are the objections to "Mr. Smith"? That there is one servant of an airtight political machine wearing the silver hair of a Senator. (If there aren't a few such attending the current session we'll eat every hat in the political ring.) That the gentlemen of the upper house occasionally are guilty of errors of judgment. (We won't press the point.) That a Washington correspondent is seen in his cups, although behaving like a little gentleman throughout, after working hours. (Objection overruled.) That photographers play dirty tricks on the unsuspecting, thereby being revealed as unscrupulous chaps with a sometimes



A quorum of Dead End Kids, having finally achieved the comparative gentility of military school cadets, come in for a well-deserved hazing in "On Dress Parade," at the Strand.

malicious sense of humor. (Mr. Hoover, in a derby hat, trout-fishing; a midget on J. P. Morgan's lap.)

No, these objections seem (to me) to have no validity, for they are concerned too much with the form and not enough with the spirit of Mr. Capra's comedy, too much with the form and not enough with the spirit of the government Mr. Capra has celebrated in his comedy. With the forms of government Mr. Capra has been irreverent. Quite possibly he declines to be overawed by the men who strut in office after running like mad to get there. But his recognition that legislators are human (and that is more than some of their critics would concede) has not kept him from expressing a reverent and sincere and heart-warming belief in the government those legislators are serving. If the indignant members of the Senate cannot see that, if they believe their personal dignity is more important

than the dignity of democracy, then Mr. Capra's "Mr. Smith" has come to Washington, and to the nation, at a perfect time: the Senate needs a session on first principles again.

\* \* \*  
IF objections have to be entered against some of our recent films, we should prefer to see them directed at "Disputed Passage," "Babes in Arms" and "On Your Toes," which are wide open to protest. "Disputed Passage" (at the Paramount) is a promisingly begun and wretchedly resolved problem drama in Dr. Lloyd C. Douglas's best moral-pointing style. Is the coldly austere, pure-scientific approach to the art of healing the proper one, or must the physician recognize that there are some things beyond a scientist's ken? Will any one support the former? Not Dr. Douglas certainly. His picture opens well, with Akim Tamiroff as the Midwestern surgeon who caustically

challenges his medical students to find a soul in the human anatomy. It ends in war-torn China with the surgical cynic recanting after Dorothy Lamour (as Lon Ying) imbues the stricken John Howard with the will to live. "There is something stronger than science," murmurs Mr. Tamiroff. Could it, Dr. Douglas, be love? Much of the writing is cogent, Mr. Tamiroff's performance is splendid and Frank Borzage has handled some of his sequences with vigor and clarity. But as a unit it isn't.

"Babes in Arms," with Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney a few times more, will be all right for the Rooney insatiates, a bit wearing on the nerves of the rest of you. He's even bigger than the production numbers. . . . "On Your Toes," with Zorina and Eddie Albert, is heavy-going farce relieved by a few comic ballets and the sight of Alan Hale in a beret and monocle.