

## Hard-as-Nails Dept.

THE MOST neatly machined movie since "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek," and the meanest one since "The Maltese Falcon" (without being as good as either), is a murder melodrama called "Double Indemnity," which was taken from a James Cain story in which a good-bad insurance salesman and an all-bad Los Angeles housewife figure up a nearly foolproof way to kill the wife's husband and collect his insurance. At the end their crime is so nearly cracked by the insurance company's claims manager (Edward G. Robinson), and the two of them (Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck) have become so distrustful, sick to death and jealous of one another that they try to shoot each other to death. The whole bloody business is told by MacMurray in a flashback as he confesses to his friend's, the claims manager's, dictaphone.

The film is one in which the only people who aren't deceiving someone are either ferociously soured on life, or as dyspeptic and wry as the claims manager, or too foolish to bother with; the manner of getting on with one another, either in conversation, lovemaking or gunplay, is intended to produce an effect like that of two trains hitting head-on. Their conversation—the joint work of James Cain, Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder—is as fancy and metaphorical as I have ever heard in a movie, so that sometimes they sound like detective-story writers turned gangster. For instance, when the hero wants to say that he must think something over, he says, "I'll have to drive it around a while," when he feels the conversation is positively finished he says, "That tears it." The motto that the wife and he use to describe how their partnership has to be is "It's got to be straight down the line." This produces some embarrassingly cute, candyish talk, as well as a good deal that is accurately and fatly descriptive.

The film on its own level is a smooth, talented job of writing and directing, with some very bright, realistic perceptions of the kind of people and places that rarely get into American movies, and some adequate playing—especially by the monolithic MacMurray, who is less that way than he has ever been, by Tom Powers as the soured husband, and by Robinson, who is a mousy creature, but an aggressive, masterful sleuth. However, it leaves me on the cold side of interested.

It seems to me to be slick, slight, arty and visually synthetic. The first murder is dependent on successfully projecting enough sex between the wife and the insurance agent to make a convincing murderer out of a man who is really too smart to murder anyone; the last two depend on successfully working up enough jealousy between them, hatred and fear of each other's suspected deceit, and concern on the man's part for the woman's step-daughter, to make their foolhardy turning on each other credible. The love affair seems too slight to drive the man into murder and to give the picture the great sense of passion and evil it needs, and which Cain himself often gets. Miss Stanwyck's brand of sulky, aloof coldness doesn't seem big enough, and isn't given a chance to make its evil quality effective. Their falling-out and everything else about the ending has a phony ring.

The characters of the two murderers are in general taken far too much for granted, and the very conscious attempt the picture makes to be bluntly and perceptively realistic, from the hero's match-sucking habit to the way Robinson slobbers his drink when he is excited, is a success to the degree that it is less synthetic than most Hollywood films, but it is certainly not less enough. Without going into the reasons for this for the fiftieth time, I can point out that the Russian film, "They Met in Moscow," is scene for scene more real-seeming and meaningful as realism, without making nearly so pretentious an attempt to be. I recommend "Double Indemnity," though, because the level of the work in it seems to me to be higher than it generally is in Hollywood, for the ingenuity and presentation of its first murder and for a lot of information about an interesting business—insurance.

I recommend also "They Met in Moscow," which does two very common Hollywood preoccupations—the musical films and cuteness—in a much pleasanter, fresher, more natural way than Hollywood does them. The plot of this operetta has a number of standard Sovietisms in it: an honored worker from the north, a swineherdess named Glasha, meets an honored worker from the south, a shepherd named Muzaib, at the agricultural fair in Moscow; and after a year's separation, during which they raise more pigs and sheep than they or anybody ever did before, they get married. Glasha is an example of the Russian felicity for selecting a heroine whose tomboy cuteness seems most diverting and fresh, from her homemade kind of Jackie Coogan haircut to her even more homemade make-up. The acting styles, way of singing, looks and dress of the players are distinct in each case and seem completely natural to them. I was very taken with the teeth-gnashing, passionate style of the hero, the breakneck speed at which he rode his horse home from the fair and the fact that he and his shepherding friends conversed mainly by shouting. His adenoidal singing, the heroine's soprano, the comic's manner, all have an energy, roughness, individuality and charm detrimentally lacking in Hollywood musicals like "Two Girls and a Sailor." These Russian players seem to be genuinely involved in whatever they are doing.

MANNY FARBER

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## The Bandwagon

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... the Negro issue is not acute in Virginia: almost a dozen Negro delegate votes were cast and accepted at Roanoke. — *From The New York Times.*

He [Bromley, Esquire's lawyer] said Esquire is comparable in all respects to *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Ladies Home Journal*. — *From PM.*

### Bedtime Story

The Brickers have a little boy, Jackie. He and his father are inseparable. Together, they are just two boys. Jackie was at the convention, distributing buttons and handbills, running errands and having the time of his life. And then he discovered, as a cruel world would have it, that his father was not to be the President of the United States. Jackie continued to distribute buttons and handbills, but Jackie was hit hard. . . . After

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