Movies in 1939

By Richard von Busack

One hears it everywhere—1939, the greatest year in the American cinema. The Depression still lingered; the war was yet to begin. There was political strife and class struggle everywhere, which explains the skepticism, the questioning of motives and of extremes in 1939 films—a dislike of easy answers visible, or at least glimpsable, in everything from urban exposés to musicals to screwball comedies.

In his fine biography of Marlene Dietrich, Stephen Bach writes: "Why 1939 happened that way has been the subject of countless articles and even books, but it was less a watershed year (things would never be so good again) than a culmination of everything that had been learned since Al Jolson burst into song. All the elements of a popular art coalesced at a moment of maturity—sharp and fresh, without cynicism or contempt for the audience (which explains many things.)"

The truth is that 1940 was almost as good as 1939. 1925, 1926 and 1974 were all vintage years; as for 2019, we'll need a measure of time to figure out whether we have everything before us or nothing before us.

In 1939, 80 million tickets were sold to some 365 American films, by the count of the *Los Angeles Times'* Jack Mathews, one of the first to celebrate this golden year. The screens were still being filled by block booking—the practice of the seven major studios (Paramount, Universal, MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, Columbia and RKO), all ensuring they had a place for the films they were releasing sight unseen.

There were shadow factories running 24 hours a day: 20th Century Fox was managed by the polo-playing Darryl Zanuck, a Nebraskan anglophile; Fox was also a promoter of 1890s Americana and the roguishness of Don Ameche and Alice Faye. Warner Brothers used headlines as its grist—as James Cagney said, it was a place where "talent was not nurtured but consumed," in a flood of crime melos with a rotating cast of bad men ranging from the lizard calm of George Raft to the sulfurous Bogart. The macha Bette Davis caused as much trouble as the men.

Paramount specialized in froth and adult comedy. MGM was the largest and most prestigious: more stars than there are in Heaven, and so forth. The studio was still under the beyond-the-grave influence of the imperially slim Irving Thalberg and the 100 great books he had read as a lad. MGM was about to release two movies that would change everything, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind.* But they still had room for cozy programmers—three Andy Hardy movies in one year, for instance.

Universal: eldritch Transylvanian stuff, the golden-throated Deanna Durbin and the looniest comedies in Hollywood, usually derived from radio programs—they were the only studio that could have possibly made *Hellzapoppin* as well as the increasingly surreal W. C. Fields movies.

In 1939, RKO offered its last pairing of Rogers and Astaire and the high adventure of *Gunga Din*. Columbia had no clear specialty, but it had climbed out of Poverty Row with the help of the live wire Frank Capra and his popular comedies, each one, in these divisive times, urging the rich and the poor to connect.

Included below in this roster of just some of the films that made 1939 a banner year is the *New York Times* headline the day each given film was released, just to show what the audience was trying to escape. It was clear that war was brewing, and by fall it had arrived. Would America take part in it? The House Unamerican Activities Committee were investigating Hollywood for symptoms of what would later be called "premature anti-fascism"

to seek the sort of anti-Nazi bias that might persuade America into joining the European war. For some reason, they concluded their business on December 8, 1941.

The gathering war is a presence that can be detected by its absence: a peek at Mussolini's beefy face in a montage at the beginning of *The Roaring Twenties*; the quick line in *The Women,* scolding a lady taking up a whole bed, "You're all sprawled out like a swastika!" or W. C. Fields' muttering about a circus lady named Schicklgruber (such was Hitler's mother's maiden name). Warner Brothers took a risk by releasing *Confessions of a Nazi Spy.* Soon the new decade would begin, as would a wave of war time entertainment—the harsh, brash new comedies of Preston Sturges, brassy musicals, combat films that ranged from euphemistic to mendacious, and the kind of blackout stories the French called 'film noir.' But in 1939, in the small town of Palo Alto, the Stanford Theatre was one of three theaters, including the Varsity and the Mayfield (later the Fine Arts) that offered a double bill every night: a torrent of entertainments, thoughtful, kinetic, warm, sentimental, icy, provocative, lulling, thrilling.

You Can't Cheat an Honest Man

Released Feb 17, 1939

GERMAN ENVOY URGES CARDINALS
TO ELECT POPE FAVORING FACISTS

You can't cheat an honest man. And never give a sucker an even break or smarten up a chump. Mr. W. C. Fields as Larson E. Whipsnade, a man of robust figure, never afraid of a tipple. He's dealing with the various headaches involved in a circus—tending the elephants, fleecing the rubes, short-changing the ticket buyers, flummoxing the unions, and ballyhooing the world's largest midget, Elwood Prontwonk. To say nothing of having to stumble over lurking children: "You kids are disgusting! Standing around all day, reeking of popcorn and lollipops!" No duty is so painful as dealing with dummy Charlie "The Whispering Pine" McCarthy and his master Edgar Bergen. Any outrage at the thought of a ventriloquist act being a national hit on the radio won't be soothed by watching McCarthy and Bergen trying to act in a movie. However, Fields feeds McCarthy to a lion and recruits him as timber for a magicians' magic saw act. Even stranded in a hot air balloon, they still interrupt Fields' far superior vent act, carried out with mouth-obscuring cardboard mustache and buckteeth, as he cradles a demented-looking doll on his knee. Lo, he makes it sing. The lyrics to the heart-wringing ballad, so rudely interrupted by cuts to Bergen: "His heart was set on becoming a banker and wearing a high silk hat / And he treated rich and poor alike ... / and it wasn't long before / He had accumulated nearly $1,000 in his own right / And he'd charge 'em $500 and told 'em / that was practically nothing / He returned to the village / to see his own sweetheart / She looked coyly through the imitation lace curtains / She'd gained fifty pounds in the ten years he'd been away…" Like its singer, a thing of joy and a beauty forever.

The Great Man Votes

Released July 13, 1939

'FREEDOM PAVILION' AT FAIR PLANNED TO CELEBRATE PRE-NAZI CULTURE

John Barrymore in a sort of Emil Jannings role: he's an alcoholic—a part, sadly, that Barrymore was playing offscreen—a former Harvard professor broken by the death of his wife. Then comes a very close election in which his one vote matters, his ticket to redemption. The 27-year-old Garson Kanin directs.

Jesse James

Released Jan 27, 1939

MUSSOLINI SAYS FOES 'BITING DUST'; SAYS ITALY WILL GO ON CONQUERING

It could be looked at as a Technicolor prequel to writer/associate producer Nunnally Johnson's script for *The Grapes of Wrath;* complete with Henry Fonda's Frank James as a sort of ominous granddad of Tom Joad, and Jane "Ma Joad" Darwell as a first casualty of what the title cards call "the ever-growing ogre": the grasping railroad industry. (Johnson's father worked for the railroads, incidentally.) Plug-ugly Brian Donlevy is the railroad's point man buying up farms for a pittance. He makes the fatal mistake of leaning on the James family, and then the plot starts galloping. Director Henry King had been making westerns for at least 20 years and knew how to transition this easily from ardent Woody Guthrie populism into the downward spiral of a gangster who starts to love the game too much. Jesse had been warned, too, by his ladylove Zerelda, called "Zee" (Nancy Kelly) who'd tried to get him to stop robbing trains before it got into his blood. (When we see Jesse's black silhouette, racing across the tops of the railroad cars under the moonlight, we see the appeal of that line of work.) It may not be very historically ac-

curate, but this version has the advantage of Missouri locations, caves, creeks, and cloudscapes. The sturdy supporting actors include Randolph Scott as a marshal with a limited appetite for apprehending this Robin Hood; the Walter Hustonish Henry Hull as a fulminating small town newspaper owner, Spencer Charters as a preacher tearing into his sermon ("And then, the prodigal son come home to his maw and paw…") before welcoming the prodigal Jesse to his church: "My son, it's like rain to the flowers!" And a sweaty John Carradine is Bob Ford, the story's trembling Judas. A warning: those who can't bear 1939 eyebrows on an 1882 character will be troubled by Kelly's last scenes, no matter how pretty she rests her cowgirl hat on the nape of her neck. Ernest Whitman's black hired hand is called "Pinkie," and that's a harbinger of the level of stereotyping to come. (King was a Virginian, Johnson was a Georgian, say no more.) Lastly, a fantastic riding stunt at the Lake of the Ozarks will alarm you the instant the surprise wears off—after this, the SPCA stepped in to check the treatment of horses in the movies, and it's easy to see why.

Gunga Din

Released Feb 17, 1939

GERMAN ENVOI URGES CARDINALS
TO ELECT POPE FAVORING FASCISM

A movie of irresistible ebullience by George Stevens. Clearly one of the greatest performances in 1939 film is the High Sierra acting as the Hindu Kush; it's a terrific illusion in white on white; and a stunning background for a robust high adventure which continues to influence film today (a notable influence is *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*). 1880 or so: roguish soldiers Ballantine (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) MacChesney (Victor McLaughlin) and Cutter (Cary Grant), after a summary chewing out for brawling, are ordered deep into the Northwest of India to investigate the cutting of the telegraph wires. What they learn is that the infamous thuggee cult is rising, led by a mad guru

(Italian physician Eduardo Ciannelli, remembered not for his performances at La Scala but for swaying in a loincloth shouting "Kill brothers! Kill for KALI!"). A bad business, to be sure, but all Ballantine can think about is quitting the army and getting married. It's lightly based on Kipling's poem—and Kipling himself turns up at the end. As per the poem, a hero water carrier (Sam Jaffe) saves the Raj. But this Hecht-MacArthur screenplay isn't so much based on Kipling as on the Quirt and Flagg movies popular in the early sound days—none of which were as much fun or as full of stunts, hair-raising escapes and last-minute rescues.

Love Affair

Released April 7, 1939

ITALIAN FORCES LANDING IN ALBANIA;
ROME REPORTS ITS NATIONALS IMPERILED;
BRITAIN OFFERS GUARANTEE TO HUNGARY

Jonathan Rosenbaum's essay "Entertainment as Oppression" in his book *Movies as Politics* talks about the pinioning-down of the 1957 CinemaScope remake of *Love Affair*, as a "chick flick." That is how *An Affair to Remember* is described in Nora Ephron's demi-semi remake *Sleepless in Seattle*. Ephron popularized the repressive, reductive idea that movies have genders, like cats or French nouns or something. Rosenbaum argued eloquently that even if *An Affair to Remember* was designed for a female audience or advertised for it, "[Leo] McCarey could still make a movie that could make someone like me cry." I'm not saying that I sobbed when I saw this lovely and odd shipboard romance, sort of an O. Henry story about the ironies and points of pride that almost separate a couple ... and about the strange presence of an unseen, likely divine hand that blesses the love even as it draws them apart. I will say that said hand here seems less forced in the other three versions, particularly in *Sleepless*… (of course the problem of a romance between Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks

is that they're basically the same person, no matter what gender of movies they watch.)

The RKO radio tower gives way to a series of towers broadcasting the news: artist Michel Marnet (Charles Boyer) is on his way to America to live off his fiancée, a gravel heiress of "the industrial nobility." During the Atlantic crossing he's sidetracked by an effervescent, drawling singer Terry (Irene Dunne), with an accent you can't quite identify as either Main Line Philadelphia or Texas. ("What's the name of that funny place you come from?" "Kansas.") Their first kiss eclipsed by a half-closed door (in the remake, McCarey did it as a 'Scope horizontal, with the lovers between floors on a staircase); Michel has the gradual realization that Terry is no mere *amuse-bouche* before marriage.

McCarey proves his background as a man who'd worked with Laurel and Hardy (as when the couple double-teams a paparazzi to snatch his film); there's both whimsy and rapture in Terry's idea for them to re-meet in six months atop the Empire State Building after Michel has gone forth to make his own money ("I've never worked in all my life" he thinks aloud. "In all my life, I've never worked"). Dunne who preferred tragedy to comedy, gets to do both, demonstrating zany chattiness as well as a refusal to let a man take pity on her. I've never seen her better, and her contrast with the moodiness of Boyer makes it a dynamic, unpredictable courtship. In both versions, there is a problem of singing orphans—though a trio in this version are as pleasant as the Bosworth Sisters. The other potential tripping point, the business of his grandmother (Maya Ouspenskaya) in the Canary Islands, is handled deftly. Dunne and McCarey were both big Catholics, and the introduction of the sacred is as smooth as the use of "Plaisir d'Amour" to remind us of the fleetingness of love's pleasure.

Midnight

Released Mar 24, 1939

HUNGARIANS INVADE SLOVAKIA; HINT HIS PROGRAM IS ENDED IS CUT FROM HITLER'S SPEECH

"One of the authentic delights of the 1930s" said Pauline Kael of this comedy set in Paris, Paramount—"Better than Paris, France," said Lubitsch. Claudette Colbert is one of our fellow Americans down on her luck when she's hired (by John Barrymore) as a gigolette to charm a gigolo (Francis Lederer) who Barrymore's wife (Mary Astor) is obsessed with ... and then in comes a romantic taxi-driver (Don Ameche) to complicate what was once an easy-to-describe arrangement. Mitchell Liesen directs from a Charles Brackett-Billy Wilder script.

The Hound of the Baskervilles

Released Mar 31, 1939

BRITAIN AND FRANCE DECIDE TO DEFEND POLAND WITH ARMED POWER IF GERMANY ATTACKS HER; ACT ON MASSING OF REICH TROOPS MASSED ON BORDER

Sherlock Holmes: a figure to rebuke critics who see but do not observe. Has the ancestral curse on the House of Baskervilles been revived? Punished centuries ago for their wantonness by a spectral hellhound, the Baskervilles continue to dwell in the moors, but the 'sudden, violent and mysterious' attack on Sir Charles Baskerville sends a call to 221B Baker Street. This was the debut of Basil Rathbone as Holmes. Even though this part has been great for any actor, and even though this paragon will be played by marvelous as yet unborn actors long after we're dead, Rathbone seems the perfect version: ice cold and peremptory, bohemian and restless. Even if he was to get a far better director than Sidney Lanfield in subsequent episodes—I mean the deft film-noir pioneer Roy William Neill—there's no sub-

stitute for the first time an actor sinks his teeth into a role. And Nigel Bruce in this version plays Watson as far closer to the man of action he was in the books, holding the line as Holmes goes undercover in disguise as some sort of Tom O'Bedlam bit as a peddler. Suspects abound: Lionel Atwill as "Dr. Mortimer" (an alias?!) as well as the traditional escaped lunatic who seems to be as common to the moors as wild ponies.

Three Smart Girls Grow Up

Released Mar 24, 1939 (for headline see p. 9)

The phenomenal Canadian Deanna Durbin charmed 1930s audiences and was a mortgage lifter who saved Universal studios. In this chatty sequel to her hit *Three Smart Girls* about the foibles of a trio of sisters, Durbin sings that great dissolver of Irish people everywhere, "The Last Rose of Summer."

Never Say Die

Released April 14, 1939

BRITAIN AND FRANCE EXTEND GUARANTEE TO RUMANIA AND GREECE, TURKEY NEXT; 'WE'LL GO STRAIGHT AHEAD,' SAYS DUCE '

At the spa of Bad Gasswasser, Switzerland, a peevish hypochondriac named Kidley (Bob Hope)—heir to the Kidley's Beans fortune—is consulting a specialist about his stomach. The local doctor (Monty Woolley) goofs and switches the millionaire's medical record with a dog's. Bad news: the rich man is diagnosed with a case of "Acidus Canus": stomach acid so powerful it can dissolve bones. According to the doctor, Kidley will literally digest himself from the inside out within one month. Bolstered with philosophical consolation from his manservant Jeepers (Ernest Cossart), Kidley involves himself in the case of another guest at the spa: an oil princess (Martha Raye) being forced into a marriage with a wastrel aristocrat named Prince Smirnoff (Alan Mowbray). The man she really loves is a bus

driver back home in Texas (perennial hayseed Andy Devine). Preston Sturges is one of three hands credited on the screenplay of this unjustly forgotten screwball comedy, derived from a 1912 farce. *Never Say Die* often seems more like Sturges in his prime than, say, some of Sturges' lesser movies out past *Unfaithfully Yours*. Can it be that Sturges originated the gag here about "the pistol with the cross on the muzzle," later stolen outright for the most famous scene in the Danny Kaye movie *The Court Jester*? No one would have noticed the joke was pinched, since *Never Say Die* was a flop, dumped after a one-week run in New York. Probably, it failed because of miscasting. Hope is obviously trying to do a Jack Benny part here—Benny was originally cast for it. The difference between the two personas—Benny's pedantic fussiness vs. Hope's nervous wisecracking—may have been enough to drive off the few who showed up. Still, *Never Say Die* deserves a new life. The Universal Studios Germanic Village sets, where the famous monsters roamed, have, like parts of Europe, a lot of fake-European charm. Gale Sondergaard plays a comic version of one of her usual man-killers. Raye—here, an overripe version of Ginger Rogers—does some more restrained comic acting for a change. What a life she had—as turbulent as Judy Garland's; in fact, Garland stole one of Raye's six husbands. Born backstage in a Montana theater, Raye ending her career in Sid and Marty Kroft productions such as *H.R. Pufnstuf*. While Hope is known for his USO work, Raye actually did combat nursing: wounded three times, she held an honorary rank as a lieutenant colonel in the Marines.

The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle

Released April 28, 1939 (for headline see p. 19)

Fred and Ginger's last waltz. It's a biopic of popular dancers of 105 years ago: "We were young, clean, married and well-mannered" —dancer Irene Castle describing her act with her ill-fated husband Vernon. This account of Irene's partnership with her

husband Vernon, quoted in John Mueller's excellent book on Astaire and Rogers, shows why this last Fred and Ginger pairing is so uncharacteristic. The Castles and the Astaires (Fred and his sister Adele) had been mutual fans in the vaudeville of the nineteen-teens, but by the time this nostalgic film was made, the "Castle Walk" that the Castles had popularized was a bit forgotten. (Mueller notes that Fred was surprised that his own wife had never heard of them.) Thus, this musical sources a different kind of song and dance, as well as a quick union, instead of the beautiful prolonged strife of body and soul in the Astaire/Rogers partnership. Rather than Ginger's suspicion of this ardent showbiz man, her fear of falling for a heel, the two bond fast in an alarming meet-cute over a drowning dog. Then an early marriage, and then a conquering of America, represented by Fred and Ginger capering over a giant map of the continental USA. Some of the best numbers here are solos: Fred in a sort of battle dance on a Connecticut railway platform to "By the Light of the Silvery Moon" and Ginger clowning around to an antique novelty tune called "The Yama-Yama Song."

Dark Victory

Released April 22, 1939

SECRET TURKO-BRITISH PACT INDICATED

IN FLEET MOVES; RUSSIA SEEKS TRIPLE ACCORD

Bette Davis demolished audiences in this tale of a rich playgirl who develops a lethal brain tumor. George Brent is the doctor who tries to save her as she slowly loses her sight; Humphrey Bogart is the race-horse trainer who gives her salt of the earth advice. The movie has the dignity that copies lack … and besides, it was there first.

The Story of Alexander Graham Bell

Released April 14, 1939 (for headline see p. 10)

As accurate as a $2 watch, but a lot more fun than it sounds. In 1870s Boston, young Alexander Graham Bell (Don Ameche) struggles with electromagnetic communications while being fascinated with a pretty deaf lady Mabel (a fetching Loretta Young). This expert lip reader is the daughter of her clock-watching proper Bostonian financier (Charles Coburn) who is bankrolling Bell. When her sister asks Mabel how dad will react to the liaison, she responds: "I don't care what Papa will say. I'll just close my eyes and I won't hear." Director Irving Cummings makes this a story of a romance that can't be consummated until Bell figures out the invention. Lots of ardent looks between the appealing leads, plus long frustrated nights for Bell lying around in a garret with his bunkmate Mr. Watson (Henry Fonda, doing superior comedic pessimism). Meanwhile Coburn harrumphs through a vast beard: "disabuse yourself of the notion of marrying my daughter!" It'll be a long series of experiments with boinging springs and other wacky sound effects until the machine is perfect enough for a barbershop trio to sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner' through a line run from Boston to Salem. (In the background, witnesses to this historic moment doff their derbies at our anthem, and then pop the hats back on when the vocalists segue into 'Yankee Doodle.') With Beryl Mercer as Queen Victoria, who eyes this newfangled invention with great suspicion: "One does not converse with a wire!"

Union Pacific

Released May 5, 1939

IRT and BMT CUT 20 TO 25% IN COAL SHORTAGE;
STOPPAGE OF MINES WIDENS

Cecil B. DeMille's million-dollar spectacle on the making of the transcontinental railroad. Stanwyck is Mollie Monahan, the mailwoman at the end of the railroad, courted by good guy Joel

McCrea and raffish troublemaker Robert Preston. She gets a lot of action in: fighting off raiding Indians and racing atop moving trains. It must have pleased a childhood fan of Pearl White to hear the film likened to "The Perils of Pauline." The producer/director later wrote "Barbara's name is the first that comes to mind, as one on whom a director can always count on to do her work with all her heart."

Rose of Washington Square

Released May 5, 1939 (for headline see p. 13)

The title comes from a hit performed by everyone from Aretha Franklin to old time singer Billy Murray (voice of Bimbo in the Fleischer Brothers cartoons); the rose being a girl who sings "I've got no future, but oh! What a past!" Vaudeville luminary Fannie Brice sued 20th Century Fox for $750,000 when she learned about the plot of this musical. In the 1920s, Rose (sad eyed, throbbing voiced Alice Faye) is courted by a heart-breaking gambler (Tyrone Power) while performing torch songs such as "My Man," Brice's signature tune. 30 years later, Barbra Streisand would assay it in the Brice biopic *Funny Girl.* It'd be interesting to double bill the versions, Pauline Kael wrote—in her opinion, she preferred Tyrone Power in the Nicky Arnstein figure to Omar Sharif. Al Jolson, blackface and all, is there to play the steadier and more mature (age 53) man becalmed in Faye's Friend Zone. "Jolie" performs "Rockabye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody" and other songs with a brash and powerful delivery that influenced Dean Martin and Elvis alike. Jolson launched the sound era in film, but he'd still have a fraction of his once-enormous popularity today if he could have just done without the burnt cork for a second.

Wuthering Heights

Released April 7, 1939 (for headline see p. 7)

Adopted on the whim of a squire, an abandoned Liverpool slum child is taken to a remote Yorkshire estate and renamed Heathcliff—he will grow to be the ruin of Wuthering Heights through his cursed love for his foster sister. There's no definitive version of this bleak Gothic romance of pride and prejudice, and not for lack of trying (there's dozens of versions, including Egyptian and Mexican adaptations). Andrea Arnold's very good 2011 version had James Howson as her Heathcliff, a non-professional British actor of African extraction—that casting gave more sting to all the times Heathcliff is called 'black' or 'dirty' by the decadent heir to Wuthering Heights, Hindley. (The wastrel is played in this version by an authentically nasty Hugh Williams.) The Goldwyn version endures despite its tendencies to tidiness—"the story should be as coarse as a sewer" Graham Greene said in his review of this. Southern California uneasily plays wuthering (it means 'windy') Yorkshire, though Gregg Toland's lens makes this heath as silvery as an Edward Weston landscape. (According to Laurence Olivier, they sprayed the chaparral from a crop duster with oil to give it shadows.) Olivier was nervous to do the part. "Should I go to Hollywood and play Heathcliff?" he asked his friend "Ralphie" (let's presume Ralph Richardson). "Yes. Bit of fame. Good."

Olivier said he was "blind with misery" that he didn't get to act with his wife Vivien Leigh, and he was right. Instead of that perfect Catherine Earnshaw he had Merle Oberon, lovely, stiff, and by many accounts as proud as Lucifer. But Olivier noted of the director "[William] Wyler somewhat painfully, taught me respect for the medium" and Olivier is memorable embodying both the irresistibility and pettiness of a self-made lord, robbed by fate of what he wants most. As they said of the Bourbons, he learns nothing and forgets nothing, and ends making a dark bargain: begging to be haunted by a ghost "sobbing for unlived days."

David Niven is better than one remembers as the man Catherine chooses out of snobbery, pushing her toward a doom of ennui. In 1939, Hollywood was at its peak for greatness, as well as euphemism; it was a time when babies and the moribund alike glowed in their beds like incandescent bulbs.(Niven, a raconteur's raconteur, hilariously described what happened when he couldn't be moved to tears in *The Moon's A Balloon.*) Artifice aside, the Gothic hits nerves forever by addressing a longstanding problem of women, forced to choose between men who are too weak or too savage.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy

Released May 6, 1939

BECK REJECTS ALL OF HITLER'S DEMANDS,
BUT WOULD NEGOTIATE ON AN EQUALITY;
BRITAIN OPPOSES SOVIET ALLIANCE PLANS

On Feb 20, 1939, 22,000 Nazi supporters gathered at Madison Square Garden ostensibly to celebrate Washington's Birthday, but actually to cheer their own racist version of Americanism. Less than three months later, this film was released. FBI agent Leon Turrou's *The Nazi Spy Conspiracy in America* was the source; apparently the ten-year vet was considered a leaker whose newspaper articles allowed some suspects to get away, and he was fired from the agency.

As Agent Ed Renard, Edward G. Robinson tracks down infiltrators hiding in plain sight in the pro-Nazi German bund, using threats as well as cajolery to get the names. It ends with a lecture to the camera: a district attorney (Henry O'Neill) warning the nation of the insidious methods of the Third Reich (which, unsportingly, pressured to have this banned in 18 countries, according to Leonard Rubenstein's *The Great Spy Films*.) Usual Nazi suspects include Sig Rumann, George Sanders, Francis Lederer, and Paul Lukas. With Martin Kosleck as Goebbels.

Juarez

Released April 24, 1939

BRITAIN UNEXPECTEDLY SENDS ENVOI BACK TO BERLIN POST; CONSCRIPTION MOVE GAINING

As received historical ideas go, the received idea that Benito Juarez was the Abraham Lincoln of Mexico isn't a bad one, and William Dieterle's arresting if sometimes stagey film (based on a Franz Werfel play and other sources) isn't wrong for emphasizing the likeness. Jonathan Kandell, one historian, describes Juarez thus: "a face that revealed no emotion, except determination, the stiff-backed, square-shouldered torso …" That's what Paul Muni looks like in his black suit, his eyes hit with pin spotlights, acting this figure ready to oppose the monarchism seeking to absorb his country. Juarez fends off the scheming of history's veriest tinpot, Napoleon III (Claude Rains) and his odd beanpole empress (Gale Sondregaard); Raines is quite hissable, deriding the cattle who want to govern themselves and the decadence of democracy. It was Napoleon the Lesser's plan to ship to Mexico a pair of new royals who'd never even seen the place: the blonde bearded Maximillian (Brian Aherne) and his high-strung and devout wife Carlotta (Bette Davis). She was later to descend utterly into madness and is here already swooning before a candle-lit Virgin Mary. Muni asked for and got John Garfield to play Porfirio Diaz, Juarez's general, later the dictator whose excesses spawned the Mexican revolution. Risible miscasting, but even that's evidence of the interesting qualities of this off-again, on-again movie: handsomely appointed and lavished with an Erich Wolfgang Korngold score.

Stagecoach

Released Feb 2, 1939

SECRECY IN DEFENCE POLICY CAUSES STIR IN SENATE; GERMANS ATTACK ROOSEVELT

During an Apache uprising, a stagecoach full of mixed souls makes a perilous trip to Lordsburg, N.M. This film's high reputation comes from its complex plot, inspired by de Maupassant's short story "Boule de Suif," only with an improbably happy ending. John Ford's direction drew in a crowd that customarily avoided horse operas as kid stuff; years of factory westerns that refined the action-movie techniques displayed here. *Stagecoach* is a story of the closing of the West, with the gunslingers, the whores and the gamblers on their way out of town. These colorful characters are about to be replaced by the "blessings of civilization," as a well-known line of dialogue has it. Blessings, that is, like the skinny liquor peddler Mr. Peacock (Donald Meek) and the fat, embezzling banker Gatewood (Berton Churchill). Their fellow passenger, the drunk Irish doctor Josiah Boone (Thomas Mitchell), gets plenty of screen time and many of the best scenes, including this favorite: rallying for a medical emergency, the drunken sawbones calls thickly for "Coffee. Lots of it. Black." Doc Boone is a comic Irish role, but darker than usual. Boone drools a little when he's deeply drunk, and Bert Glennon's photography gives this sponging character dark shadows. (Boone was supposed to be an army surgeon during the Civil War. Maybe what he saw there turned him to the booze.) Claire Trevor always shone in torchy parts, as in the drink-addled singer in *Key Largo*; here as the shamed but gold-hearted prostitute Dallas, she has her own realistically tough moment. *Stagecoach* made a major star out of the tall, courtly B-picture actor who played an outlaw named the Ringo Kid. And millions since have found a kind of music in the phrasings of John Wayne's voice. The finale is still rousing: three dozen horsemen in pursuit of the

stagecoach across a dry lakebed. Enos "Yakima" Canutt's stunt and second-unit work here is still astonishing, if maybe compromised by time—the modern viewer might be too aware of all of that horseflesh murdered by trip wires. (Old-time cowboy star William S. Hart doubted *Stagecoach*'s big chase scene, anyway, commenting that the Apaches he knew were usually smart enough to pick off a stagecoach's ponies first.)

Calling Dr. Kildare

Released April 28, 1939

ROOSEVELT ASKED DICTATORS TO CONFER WITH HIM AT SEA; COMMONS BACKS THE DRAFT

From his beginning on screen in the underrated *Internes Can't Take Money* (1937) the young Dr. James Kildare ended up in seedy situations. In his debut, as played by Joel McCrae, he did surgery in a bar, using a sterilized violin string for a suture. Created by Max Brand, writing under the Weimarish pseudonym "Frederick Schiller Faust," the doctor was a popular figure. In this third film, the rebellious medico is demoted by the cantankerous Dr. Gillespie (Lionel Barrymore) to work in an urban clinic as a needed lesson in manners. Along comes a man seeking help: his friend has a gunshot wound and can't go to the cops. And the wounded man has a sister, too, played by Lana Turner—leaving Kildare distracted from the good-girl nurse (Laraine Day) he works with.

It's well known that Lew Ayres, who played Kildare in a number of films, declared Conscientious Objector status in WW II. Ayres took this career-damaging stance because he was so changed by the work he did in *All Quiet on the Western Front,* just as James Cromwell became a vegetarian after playing Farmer Hoggett in *Babe*. Less known, perhaps, is that Ayres enlisted and was for several years a WW II medic in New Guinea and Leyte ... which means at least one service man must have woken up from the anesthetic to see Dr. Kildare attending to him. A

further story, too good to be true and too good not to repeat, has it that Richard Chamberlain got the job playing Kildare in 1960s television because Ayres refused to be on a tv show that advertised tobacco.

Second Fiddle

Released June 30, 1939

BRITAIN IS READY FOR WAR, HALIFAX WARNS GERMANY;
POLES WOULD RESIST COUP

Tyrone Power sings! A busy factory, 20th Century Fox: in 1939, they released both *News is Made at Night* and *Everything Happens at Night*. The star of the latter was Norse Olympic skating champ Sonja Henie who busily skated her way through a number of musicals. Here she's a small-town Minnesota girl brought to Hollywood by a snazzy agent (Tyrone Power) and subjected to a fictive romance made for publicity with her co-star Rudy Vallee—already showing the starchiness that would make him perfect for a roasting by Preston Sturges. It's evidence, among other things that there are lots of Irving Berlin songs that no one has heard of: they include" An Old-Fashioned Tune is Always New" and "When Winter Comes" sung by Rudy Vallee. Power, never known for his pipes, performs "I Poured My Heart into a Song."

Goodbye, Mr. Chips

Released May 15, 1939

MUSSOLINI DECLARES WAR UNNECESSARY;
PRESENT PROBLEMS DO NOT 'JUSTIFY' IT;
ROOSEVELT STUDIES ECONOMIC PARLAY

Robert Donat won the Oscar for best actor in a highly crowded 1939 field as Charles Chipping, a Latin teaching pedant at a boy's public school who has a brief but happy marriage to a suffragette (Greer Garson) he met on holiday before the First World War. One of the most elegant versions of the frequently

filmed story of the seemingly dull teacher whose life turns out to be rich beyond measure.

Bachelor Mother

Released Aug 4, 1939

HOUSING BILL KILLED 191-170, BY HOUSE ECONOMY GROUP; QUICK ADJOURNMENT SOUGHT

Revealed: *Simpsons* bully Nelson Muntz learned his two-note "Ha Ha!" from Ginger Rogers. Don't let the title or the synopsis fool you; Garson Kanin spins its slim premise into prime feminist comedy. Having just survived the Christmas rush, shopgirl Polly (Ginger) picks up an abandoned baby in a basket and can't get rid of it ... and it's naturally assumed that it's hers. One had to live in the time when baby bumps were prohibited on screen by the Code to buy this premise. The big boss at the department store (Charles Coburn, rumbling with indignity) sticks his oar in, making her job dependent on keeping the baby ... a job she has to do cross-eyed from lack of sleep. David Niven is Coburn's playboy son who likes to swan into the office at noon. Thanks to the power of inference—at its prime in this era of screwball—word gets out that the baby is somehow his.

Bachelor Mother proves farce is just an inversion of melodrama—here society isn't trying to tear a baby away from a single mom, but vice versa: the single mom can't get rid of the baby; even muttering "Aw, no you don't" when it keeps coming back. I wonder if the powers that be hired Niven to sub for Fred Astaire. His monogrammed cashmere-scarfed elegance counters Ginger's street smarts, priming that thing Ginger did so well in so many movies: being a girl burning up at the idea that some man thinks she's a pushover. Niven is a stitch having to use the aforementioned scarf as an emergency diaper, or bringing in a book and mansplaining, as they would say today, the method of how to feed a baby by rubbing the oatmeal into its tummy.

Oddly, the romance itself isn't neglected; it's on New Year's Eve in Times Square (the theater is showing *Love Affair*) so that the exquisite delay of the first kiss happens because the crowd is too big. RKO released Disney's cartoons, which is the reason for the gags about the quacking Donald Duck toys and the billing of "Donald Duck as Himself." One little windup is essential to the plot, acting, as it were, as *duck ex machina.*

Only Angels Have Wings

Released May 15, 1939 (for headline see p. 20)

Calling Barranca! A beloved one by Howard Hawks. In an imaginary and squalid seaside town in Ecuador, pilots face death daily hauling mail over the Andes in unsafe planes. We meet the pilots at their hangout, Dutchman's, and learn of their fierce code through the arrival of a stranger, a visiting showgirl (Jean Arthur). Her brave, classy heroine faces off against the boss of the place (Cary Grant) who poses as disinterested in her. The film is some people's ideal vision of grace under pressure, in men and women alike. Anyone who loves Hawks ought to love the way this movie is "an anthology of Hawkisms" said Peter John Dyer, as well as demonstrating how a studio in 1939 could weave up a faraway place with used furniture, cheap backdrops, and players on the way up (Rita Hayworth) and on the way down (Richard Barthelmess). *Only Angels Have Wings* is a *credo ad absurdum* for critics; they believe in it because it's absurd, because of what Manny Farber called its "devil-may-care" silliness. And I have to say this movie has never cracked me. If there was any one question I could ask Henri-Georges Clouzot, it would be this: given the special reverence with which French critics particularly love *Only Angels Have Wings*, was the far better *The Wages of Fear* intended as a retort? Cluozot's film was smart enough to ask all the right *cui bono* questions about what the cargo was, why these pilots' lives are so cheap and who sent the men to die in the first place.

Young Mr. Lincoln

Released June 9, 1939

KING AND QUEEN GUESTS AT THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER AN IMPRESSIVE WELCOME IN WASHINGTON; GEORGE HOPES WE WILL EVER WALK IN FRIENDSHIP

Watching this persuasive, affecting and sometimes funny courtroom drama, one has to keep reminding oneself that the most remarkable man this nation ever produced was, ultimately, a politician. Whatever he did, he did for effect. It might have been Edmund Wilson who noted that those who likened Lincoln to Jesus would be smarter likening him to Bismarck. Still it's useless to put up a guard here against what Henry Fonda delivers. Fonda really wraps himself in the great man's spirit, the slowness, the solitude and melancholy, while never lacking a sense of fun—when trying to think things over, he props his long legs up on a wall while trying to perfect his version of "Turkey in the Straw" on a jaw harp. A discreet wart and some expert lighting make the likeness startling. Even if he comes into town on the back of a mule that's too short for him, Fonda has an apartness that politely acknowledges John Ford's typical boisterous-rurals comedy but doesn't quite touch it.

And this time, the bumpkins have a nasty side. The way this film tells it—it is a fiction with one true element—a beardless Abraham Lincoln's first trial was a murder case concerning strangers in town who just arrived in Springfield. They were a young pair of brothers (Richard Cromwell, Eddie Quillan) who each claim that they were the one who knifed a local man, after a Fourth of July picnic brawl. Lincoln manages to quell a lynch mob any way he can think of: first with a threat to fight any man in the house, and then with some self-deprecating talk: "Maybe these boys do deserve to hang. But with me handlin' their case, don't look like you'll have much to worry about on that score." Ford was having a monumental year as a director, but here he is at his best—the populism couldn't be more touching.

Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever

Released July 21, 1939

FEW IN WPA JOIN ALLIANCE STRIKE; NO DISORDERS HERE

The date-crazy kid from Carvel (Mickey Rooney), who was in three of these B-features that year, gets a crush on his drama teacher as she stages his *Madame Butterfly* in the South Seas style play "Adrift in Tahiti"—he wears the naval bicorn hat while Anne Rutherford takes the Princess Tondalaya role; meanwhile Judge Hardy learns about some land that might have bauxite on it. More speedy entertainment by W. S. Van Dyke (*Another Thin Man).*

Charlie Chan on Treasure Island

Released Sept 9, 1939

GERMANS IN PART OF WARSAW, POLES ARE RESISTING; FRENCH DRIVE ON, REPORT SAARBRUCKEN SURROUNDED; U.S. PROCLAIMS EMERGENCY TO PROTECT NEUTRALITY

The sleek Honolulu-based detective—here played by the portly somnambulistic Sidney Toler—was, on the whole, about as close to China as the American cinema got. For years, Chan was a sore point as a stereotype—aren't there worse things than being stereotyped as wise, oracular, brave, perceptive and painstakingly polite? Flying in from Hawaii on the China Clipper, Chan lands in Alameda and goes to the Golden Gate International Exhibition—stock footage, mostly, though there is a recreation of the Hawaiian pavilion. His new case is to see if a murdered friend had anything to do with a blackmailing society medium called "Dr. Zodiac." (My fellow critic Mike Monahan points out that those who remember the Zodiac Killer will feel a chill when they hear this psychic saying "This is Zodiac speaking." The voice is by unbilled Mercury Theater vet Gerald Mohr.) Cesar Romero lurks about in this mystery of thrown knives, fake seances, blackmail, and conjunction-free epigrams: "Favorite pastime of man is fooling himself."

Each Dawn I Die

Released July 22, 1939

347 UNPAID AT SING SING BECAUSE OF BUDGET DELAY

"Good in its particulars" said Otis Ferguson, a smart critic of the day. The implausible yet atmospheric big-house drama starts out right. In a downpour, James Cagney's Frank Ross is staking out the construction company of a political bigwig at night; he steals in and discovers them cooking the books—literally, in a furnace. Ross is a reporter trying to expose the criminal DA of his town; the tables turn when he's fingered and sent to Rocky Point prison for 20 years hard labor on a false vehicular-manslaughter beef. On the bus he meets an imperturbable con (George Raft) who has an agenda of his own. In this hit, Warner Brothers continued to establish itself as the grittiest and bloodiest studio of its time, right up to a machine-gun filled finale. But the violence is often smaller scale and emotional: petty humiliations and cruelties as mundane as the guards making a man stare at a brick wall like a kid being punished. The suddenness of reprisal murder is authentic enough, and if a genteel person of 1939 knew the word 'shiv' it's likely because they saw this movie.

Cagney is never less than exciting. Here is not the tough-guy cockiness of *Angels with Dirty Faces* or *White Heat*. Instead he's being slowly broken by injustice. Note the underplaying way he handles his mom, who turns up with a box lunch that he's too overwhelmed to eat. (Jane Bryan has the workaday part of the girl reporter waiting for him, but she does a first-rate job with it.) The ever-mannered Raft drifts through it, having to do some pretty ridiculous deeds with a straight face. However, there is a scene where Raft anticipates Belmondo-style French-movie insouciance: in a moment of renunciation he tosses his entire bankroll at a startled cabbie: "Don't worry, I didn't print it."

Blondie Takes A Vacation

Released July 20, 1939

BRITISH LABOR BIDS GERMANS RESIST NAZIS WARLIKE AIMS; FRANCE CAUTIONS THE REICH

Currently there's a lot of Internet *katzenjammer* about Scorsese and Coppola daring to flout the majesty of the MCU films, but we see that the problem of movies based on comics goes back aways. This third installment in a series of 28 (!) is derived from Chic Young's newspaper comic strip. Ditzy but domineering Blondie Bumstead *nee* Boopadoop (Penny Singleton)—like Nancy's Aunt Fritzi Ritz, she was a glamorous flapper once—married Dagwood (Arthur Lake), a dim salaryman man left to solace himself with afternoon naps and unfeasibly large sandwiches. He is the least intelligent member of his household, below his precocious brat Baby Dumpling (Larry Simms)—outwitted by his kid's logic he gripes "Aw, you're always showing off!" Even his dog Daisy is smarter than its master; the animal's double-takes and face-palms, or rather face-paws, show he can smell disaster coming.

This one gets them out of the set and on the road to "Lake Kenole" (Lake Arrowhead, as usual). On the train they meet a gleaming-eyed old firebug played by Donald Meek (the whiskey peddler in *Stagecoach,* the two-timing bank president in *Jesse James*); the mania in him is suggested by a vibraphone that starts shivering when he turns up, as well as some Karloffian dialogue when he borrows a match for his cigar: "Beautiful evening, isn't it? How bright the stars are! It seems as if the heavens are on fire!" Kerfuffle over Daisy the dog enrages the hotel keeper travelling on their train; so there's no room at the inn for the Bumsteads except at a decrepit (haunted?) hotel nearby, run by a desperate, nigh-bankrupt couple which our ensemble magnanimously bails out. It's 69 minutes includes a "From the studio that brought you the Three Stooges" moment about a skunk in the ventila-

tion shaft and a rebellious vacuum cleaner that defies gravity. The leads have an unforced rapport, so it's not a mystery why they kept making these movies. The lean Singleton, a singer turned actress—she has a number in *After the Thin Man*—is in a zone between Gracie Allen and Carole Lombard. Lake exudes all the necessary slick-haired fatuousness as the enduringly popular sap.

Stanley and Livingstone

Released Aug 18, 1939

REICH SEES POLISH REBUFF IN IGNORING OF ITS TERMS;
'ACTION' A MATTER OF DAYS

Fearless reporter Henry Stanley (Spencer Tracy) of the New York Herald is assigned to track down a missionary feared dead, deep in the interior of Africa (safari footage by Otto Brower); on the journey there he meets the daughter (Nancy Kelly) of the English commissioner of Zanzibar. Stiff upper lips throughout, but the newshound finds his man, played by Cedric Hardwicke.

Beau Geste

Released Aug 2, 1939

'RIOT ZONE' SET UP IN CLEVELAND
ENDS CLASHES IN STRIKE

William Wellman's shot for shot remake of the silent hit. The title is a pun: the "noble gesture" of expiation is explained in the beginning, when a fort full of corpses of Foreign Legionnaires is discovered by the army meant to relieve them. Among the bodies is a note confessing to the theft of a sapphire years ago. In flashback we learn of the fate of this fort in the trackless Sahara, and how the Geste brothers (Ray Milland, Gary Cooper, and Robert Preston) were soldiers under the command of a sadistic officer (Brian Donlevy). Even there, they couldn't escape their past.

Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Released Sept 1, 1939 (for headline see p. 33)

And now we're off to the races. A breathless Holmes film rushed out on the success of *Hound of the Baskervilles.* It commences with a breakneck carriage ride to the courtroom where Holmes (Basil Rathbone) is too late to see the Napoleon of Crime, Dr. Moriarity (George Zucco) being set free, having fixed the trial in his favor. On the way back, Holmes and Moriarity share a cab, and each promises the other's doom. Moriarity is preparing to retire from his usual endeavors—"Crime no longer amuses me." But perhaps one last crime, a grand caper to ruin Holmes by boggling his mercurial mind with strange clues—news of the voyage of the *SS Invincible*, in which the Star of Delhi travels, or the arrival of a beautiful young Ida Lupino, terrified by the possible death of her brother. She brings with her a threatening note, with a cartoon of a man with an albatross tied to his neck. All perhaps sand in Holmes' eyes to keep him from seeing the big picture: Moriarity's assault on an essential symbol of the monarchy. It's based on a popular play by William Gillette (there's an egregious pun about that play in the title cards of Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.*), but it doesn't seem stagey for a minute. It builds to a swashbuckling scene on the Tower Bridge; photographer Leon Shamroy gives the tale all necessary shadows. Director Alfred L. Werker handily sketches body/soul split of Watson and Holmes, the curious humanity versus the monomania of the Doctor—as in a lively scene where he threatens a hench with boiling in oil for having forgotten to water his houseplant.

Jamaica Inn

Released Oct 11, 1939

DALADIER BARS PEACE ON NAZI TERMS; FINLAND MOBILIZES HER BALTIC FLEET; SENDS CIVILIANS FROM BORDER TOWNS

This obscurity by Alfred Hitchcock was a hit in its day, a landlocked pirate tale set in Cornwall in 1820, with aspects of a bodice ripper (the star Maureen O'Hara literally gets her bodice ripped). The debuting O'Hara is Mary, an Irish orphan, coming to stay with her aunt at a locally infamous inn. Her uncle is lecherous for her, and the local gallowsbird denizens are a gang of 'wreckers.' They cloak the coastal lights to luring ships to the rocks, looting the spoils and leaving the sailors murdered. A young and good-looking Robert Newton—later to play the definitive Long John Silver—is the newest member of the gang; Mary saves his life from his confederates, and the adventure begins.

Hitchcock complained to Truffaut that star Charles Laughton had fattened his part with J. B. Priestley rewrites, but watching him is the first time I understood why Marlon Brando had been hired to take over the remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty*—there's a lot of Brando in Laughton; not the staccato barking Captain Bligh, but the strange malevolent effeteness. Laughton is constantly surprising, grotesquely made up, moon faced and with a wig in a Kewpie doll's forehead curl, and red eyebrows that make him look like a vast evil leprechaun. He doesn't make eye contact with his social inferiors, which means everyone in the film.

Pauline Kael remembered Graham Greene's comment that the supporting cast in *Jamaica Inn* were as overemphatic as a girl's school playing the secondary parts in Shakespeare. She *didn't* recall Greene calling Laughton magnificent (she wasn't a fan of Laughton much, except in David Lean's remake of *Hobson's Choice*). As Sir Humphrey Pengallant, Laughton *is* magnif-

icent—a magnificent ham, quoting Byron as if the ink was still fresh on the printed page. The strangeness makes his gathering madness plausible, from the first time the subject of the insanity of his family is muttered in an aside to his shocked manservant. Not trademark Hitchcock, maybe, but those who consider a woman in peril as essential to a Hitchcock film can see his stamp when Pengallen, scooping up Mary for despoilation, gags her with a silk scarf: "You must tell me if that hurts. But of course, you can't. How silly of me."

The Four Feathers

Released Aug 3, 1939

MAYOR URGES SATURDAY HOLIDAYS TO ALLOW ALL IN CITY TO VISIT FAIR; HE URGES SPECIAL RATE FOR PERSONS ON RELIEF

To filch a Monty Python joke, a memorial to all those who died to keep Sudan British. This still astonishing Technicolor spectacle by the Korda brothers, about the Khartoum campaign of 1898, is the best of seven versions of a 1902 novel. An underplaying John Clements is Harry Faversham, the heir to a military family that's been in the British army since the Celts were throwing rocks at the centurions. His fiancée's father (C. Aubrey Smith, Britain's last line of defense) frequently reminds him of his soldier's duty as, at the dinner table, he once again tells the story of his own bravery at Balaclava, using a finger dipped in wine to draw the Thin Red Line on the table. Harry purchases a commission in the Royal North Surrey Regiment. On the evening before they ship out to quell restless *jihadists* on the upper Nile, he turns in his commission. The decision is given all respect in a story, having been filmed in an England where it was not yet certain whether there'd be another war. He's shamed by three of his fellow soldiers; they leave him feathers, impaled in the visiting cards they left behind, as a symbol of Harry's chicken heartedness. When his fiancée Ethne (a ravishing June Duprez) also rejects him, he plucks a fourth feather from the plumes of her hat.

Harry goes on a one-man mission to Africa to face a series of ordeals, as a one-man commando disguised as a mute native.

The location footage is glorious, sold to many a movie as stock footage over the decades; it's one of the great riparian films, haunting the Nile and its banks, with one hallucinatory escape by raft with Harry and the blinded comrade (Ralph Richardson) who denounced him.

Whatever you feel about the Imperial era, it's thrilling to see those insurgents—who even Kipling saluted in verse—on the attack with only shields and spears. There are times when *The Four Feathers* seems to argue that bravery and cowardice are, just as Kipling wrote of success and failure, imposters that needed to be treated with the same disdain. One such moment is an old soldier calming a novice next to him on the firing line, as the cavalry charges: "If you want to close your eyes, I'll tell you when to open them." Still, sometimes all this British martial nobility makes one daydream of Sir Harry Flashman, George MacDonald Fraser's imperial poltroon, who would have happily accepted an entire feather boa if it kept his skin whole.

The Four Feathers is in many ways a proto-*Lawrence of Arabia*, though you couldn't say the same thing about it that critic Manny Farber said of *Lawrence*: "the only interesting shape in it was a camel": this desert of mammoth rocks, cones and hillocks and cracked playas is an eyeful, alternating with the swept delta shapes of sails on the river, and the skies filled with clouds of strange birds. Richardson is excellent, too, given a little Shakespeare to recite (Caliban in *The Tempest*) as well as a moment where he serves up his own portion of noble renunciation.

The Rains Came

Released Sept 9, 1939

GERMANS IN PART OF WARSAW, POLES ARE RESISTING, FRENCH DRIVE ON, REPORT SAARBRUCKEN SURROUNDED; U.S. PROCLAIMS EMERGENCY TO PROTECT NEUTRALITY

The Venn Diagram containing people who won both the Pulitzer Prize and the Croix de Guerre is very small. Add the facts that novelist Louis Bromfield was also the best man at the Bogart-Bacall wedding, and that he pioneered a model organic farm which is still open to the public in Ohio, and you can see that the author got around, no matter how little he's read today. Whether his source novel is more complex than this film adaptation is another question. It's school of Somerset Maugham (*The Painted Veil* seems a strong influence) about a romantic quadrille in the fictional city of Ranchipur in India. George Brent is Thomas, a blue blooded painter in a genteel state of expatriate dissipation, day drinking and using a slingshot to fend off the monkeys. He's sought and landed by Fern, a missionary's too-young, too-ardent daughter (Brenda Joyce) ... and then at a party at the maharaja's palace, Thomas sees the woman for whom he forsook Europe, Lady Edwina (Myrna Loy). She's now married to a portly titled vulgarian (Nigel "Dr. Watson" Bruce, showing an uncharacteristically abrasive side underneath his usually lovable display of solid English obtuseness). Married as she is, Lady Edwina is casting a net for a man who doesn't seem to care for her, Dr. Major Rama (Tyrone Power), a turbaned physician aiming to cleanse India of the diseases wracking the land. And then come events by the ton—an earthquake (the effects are superb) a flood (producer Darryl Zanuck loved floods—he'd killed a couple of extras with one in 1927's *Noah's Ark*), and lastly, an epidemic bubbling out of the bad water.

As late harvest Lost Generation lit, it has great shininess: Loy, who never ever feared a man, tells Brent, "We double-crossed al-

most everyone in the world, let's not start on each other." Brent, who sometimes tended to be a pencil-thin mustache with nothing behind it—let's face it, Ronald Colman couldn't be everywhere at once—acquits himself playing a gold-hearted cad. And director Clarence Brown, who'd directed Garbo more than once, knew how to wield a death-bed scene, even with italics around it: "I suppose this is how one feels when one repents …" Various Europeans are cast as the Indian dignitaries—H.B. Warner is the Maharaja; Maya Ouspensakaya as his beady-eyed maharini with a foot-long cigarette holder, and a lethal manner at the card table. Though it's of interest as exotica, as the way it showed the vague idea Hollywood had of Indian life, it has an actual Indian in it, a man named Lal Chand Mehra, who sings an authentic Hindi love song of his own composition as Power and Loy listen against a background of flickering lights. A San Franciscan and a UC Berkeley grad, Mehra immigrated here to become an ambassador of Hindi culture; he got into the movies, AD'd a serial about Fu Manchu, and ultimately did the voice for a talking crow on TV's *Bewitched*.

The Women

Released Sept 1, 1939

GERMAN ARMY ATTACKS POLAND, CITIES BOMBED, PORTS BLOCKADED; DANZIG IS ACCEPTED INTO REICH

The title card informs us that the source play had 666 performances at the Ethel Barrymore Theater ... the number is not the only diabolical thing about it. The all-female cast is helpfully identified by their spirit animals: deer, doe, fox, lamb, leopard, cat. The story concerns gossip breaking up the marriage of the woman who has it all, Mary Haines (Norma Shearer)—she's an equestrian, she can fish in Canada and cook like a French chef, and she has a beautifully mannered daughter (Virginia Weidler) who politely calls her "Mother."

That's when her many frenemies convey the news that her

off-screen husband has taken up with Crystal, a perfume-selling shopgirl (Joan Crawford) at "Black's Fifth Avenue." Soon Mary is hanging on to her marriage by her Jungle Red-enameled fingernails. Rosalind Russell, the head kitty in this cattery, is the fastest talker in the film—George Cukor could have used some of the Robert Altman multi track sound, since the epigrams and wisecracks fly like shrapnel: "Keep your chin up! That's right, both of them." Occasional remarks are pre code: "Can you beat him? He almost stood me up for his wife." Joan Fontaine and Paulette "Miss Impertinence of 1939" Goddard are part of the catcallers. Also special: Mary Boland as a four times divorced countess who has taken the road to Reno so many times that she can roll a cigarette one handed, like a cowboy. (Like *The Gay Divorcee*, this Reno business takes a bit of explaining to today's viewers—back when the USA's divorce laws were stern, you could get a fast split in Nevada after establishing six week's residence there.)

The centerpiece is a Technicolor fashion show, in which the one-named designer Adrian broke the leash at last. Funny hats always got a laugh in 1939 movies. An example is *Blonde Takes a Vacation*, where Blondie sulks after her new chapeau doesn't get the respect it deserves. In context, Blondie's bonnet seems to be relevant enough, since it's modeled on the trylon and perisphere logo of the 1939 World's Fair. ("It scares me," Dagwood whines.) *The Women* is a discourse on the madness of hatters; not a definitive list, mind, but the offerings here include: backward Robin Hood, Pizza Hut roof, chiminea, Pied Piper Moderne and Chico Marx tyrolean.

Author Claire Booth, later Clare Booth Luce, became a Republican congressman so outspoken that FDR went low and derided her "a former glamour girl." After her Stanford student daughter Anne Clare Brokaw was killed in a car accident at the corner of Everett Ave and Byron in January 1944, Luce turned to Catholicism to solace the pain, and became even more conservative. No surprise, though she'd written a very traditional values

hit which Shearer endures as a patient wife. It seems an ensemble of flamboyant characters requires a calm, uninteresting center. Whether explaining D-I-V-O-R-C-E to her daughter—a perfect popcorn break—or enduring her husband's affair, one is drawn more to Crawford, an unrepentant, bubble-bath soaking harridan whose line of farewell is almost as famous as Rhett Butler's. "I portrayed so many girls and women who went from rags to riches that L.B. Mayer thought I represented Cinderella to the public," Crawford told the late Lillian Ross. "I began to beg to play bitches." And who assayed them better? As for Shearer, it's clear that the man for whom she's waiting with open arms can only be Ralph Bellamy, with whom she'll raise a brood of earnest, suit-clad children ... maybe in Albany? or Oklahoma?

The Old Maid

Released Aug 16, 1939

AXIS WARNS DANZIG ISSUE MUST BE FACED PROMPTLY; BRITISH BAR NEW 'MUNICH'

Bette Davis as Charlotte, a well-off Philadelphia woman of the 1860s; eclipsed, throughout her life, by the radiance of her cousin Delia (Miriam Hopkins), who is preparing to marry the very day Fort Sumter is attacked. Delia's former fiancé Clem (George Brent) returns after a two years absence, little knowing that Delia has dropped him. Charlotte comforts Clem's broken heart, to the extent that there's an illegitimate child from the liason. As for Clem, he joins the legions of the Union dead. Their daughter Clementina (who grows into Jane Bryan) and the machinations between the cousin to hide the child's backstory conspire to wither Charlotte before our eyes. In the first half, we see the essence of what Davis had; the intensity and fearlessness, and the poise that makes even a hoop skirt look supple. Then, later on, she's overly made up to look consumed with disappointment, stabbing at her embroidery and being looked at with scorn as a spinster. It's based on an Edith Wharton novella, by way of

Zoe Akins' play. Unlike in much of Wharton it doesn't suggest the social changes going on outside the walls, except through the difference of costumes. It's a smaller thing compared to the greatest portrait of a thwarted woman whom life has passed by—Agnes Moorehead in *Magnificent Ambersons*.

It was an unhappy set. On the one hand Hopkins suspected Davis of dallying with her husband Anatole Litvak; on the other hand, Davis thought she was being made up too heavily (Hopkins' Delia ages with interesting shadows on her face; Davis looks like the denizen of a haunted house) If this isn't the movie that caused Davis to rhetorically ask "Is Max Steiner coming down these [expletive] stairs, or am I?" it might as well have been—the overemphatic score tends to sabotage what sensitivity Davis brings to playing a woman whose only fleeting happiness came from goodbye kisses.

The Roaring Twenties

Released Oct 23, 1939

ROOSEVELT HEARS PRAYER FOR KING AND HIS VICTORY

In his memoirs, James Cagney noted that crime dramas were flying off the assembly line at Warner Brothers with such rapidity—last minute script changes and changes in casting—that a lot of the actors were making things up off the cuff when they went along. An example, according to him, is the two-for-one punch he deals out here: the first mug caroms onto one behind him, and both hit the floor. Covering about 15 years of history in less than two hours, Raoul Walsh's dynamite adventure demonstrates how much faster the movies were in 1939 than now. Contemporary films are edited with more speed, but the actual urgency and rapidity of the story telling isn't as quick. Journalist turned producer Mark Hellinger—a theatrical columnist for an alarmingly titled insider's mag called *Zit's Weekly*, and an acquaintance of Legs Diamond and Dutch Schultz—put his signature on the titles. Narrator John Deering chatters away like a teletype ma-

chine, leading us through this story of prohibition, "an era of amazing madness!" in which there was a clash between "an unpopular law and an unwilling people."

It begins with a male meet-cute: during a bombardment, three doughboys seeking shelter in the same shell-hole. They're George (Humphrey Bogart), Eddie (James Cagney) and Lloyd (Jeffrey Lynn): after WW I, their various destinies link in NYC. Lloyd becomes a lawyer and a DA; Eddie becomes a bootlegger and distiller who (like Cagney in real life) never touches the stuff—"a dressmaker doesn't have to wear dresses." During a hijacking at sea, he re-encounters George and gets into a dubious partnership with his old war buddy. As the stakes rise, so does the body count ... and Eddie finds himself less able to hold onto the good girl he loves (singer Priscilla Lane, the Shirley Jones type). The music is the Bugs Bunny songbook: "Melancholy Baby," "I'm Just Wild About Harry," Gershwin's "Swanee"—much of it takes place at a speakeasy run by Eddie's loyal female pal Panama Smith (Gladys George, terrific); she's a figure based on the salty hostess Texas Guinan, who used to greet new arrivals at her speakeasy with "Hello, suckers!". Generic as this can be—"Take your hand off your heater, Lefty!"—it's directed with pepper and spirit by Walsh. Note the exciting way he stages a liquor warehouse heist with alternate high and low angles, with shadows of figures being surprised and kayoed, and Bogart's broad grin when he shoots an unarmed guard.

Drums Along the Mohawk

Released Nov 10, 1939 (for headline see p. 46)

Gil (Henry Fonda) and Magdalena, called Lana (Claudette Colbert—her make-up perfect)—are settlers in upstate New York in the Revolutionary War era; they're deep in the wilderness but the war comes to them. Certainly, there's premonitions of the European war to come in this movie about battle. But John Ford's focus on rumbustiousness and funny-accent-

ed bumpkins makes one think that the movie's never going to get underway. And the over-determination is so thick that John Carradine wears an eyepatch, so we'll know he's evil. Nevertheless, it *does* get underway—it's not all about how sweet Colbert looks (very sweet) in a little tri-cornered hat, or the stained-glass hues of Ford's first color film, or how cinematographers Ray Rennahan and Bert Glennon do for blues, purples and white what *GWTW* did for crimsons and scarlet. (Though the invading Indians use fire, and nothing looks better in Technicolor than fire). Ford's sense of composition doesn't fail him. Images here look like a cinematic version of Howard Pyle and N. C. Wyeth illustrations, particularly with figures stealing through the white birches. (Ford shot near Cedar City in Utah.) Things get rough, as the war starts to rob the settlers of life and limb—as in a scene where a soon to be one-legged man starts to tell a saw-wielding doctor a story about the first time he killed a deer, just as we fade out. Seneca Nation Chief John Big Tree is the Christian Indian who hollers "Hallelujah" like it's a war cry. He certainly has a face for the movies (he claimed he was one of the three models for the head on a buffalo nickel and could be). Also, there's some aid here from Edna May Oliver, as a widow who hires the burned-out Gil and Lana as domestics. Oliver clearly decided that it'd be a good idea to take the tale into Dickens territory. *Drums Along the Mohawk* is a reminder that every quotidian American town called Fort Whatever was once a place in which terrified settlers huddled, putting their trust in long rifles. But it's also a reminder that there's been no perfect movie about our revolution—was the struggle too cruel, or is it just the knee breeches and buckled shoes that throws a director off?

Intermezzo

Released Sept 22, 1939

ROOSEVELT ASKS SENATE TO REPEAL ARMS EMBARGO; HARD FIGHT INDICATED AS 24 SENATORS MAP RESITANCE; RUMANIAN PREMIER ASSASSINATED, NAZI COUP FOILED

Producer David O. Selznick made this as sort of an 'intermezzo' (among other things, a short piece between grander opuses) before *Gone with the Wind*. Returning to settle down in Stockholm with his wife and family after a major tour, the concert violinist Holger (Leslie Howard) is swept away by his daughter's piano teacher Anita ("introducing Ingrid Bergman" says the title card, though she'd already starred in several Swedish films, including the first version of *A Woman's Face*). The affair is excused—somewhat—by the way these two musicians duet on Edvard Grieg; the power of music compels them, until the guilt is too much to stand. When Holger compares Anita to the music of the now-occupied music capitals of Europe, Budapest and Vienna, there may be a little more extenuating circumstances for this mad affair on the grounds that the world itself has gone mad.

"Melodrama" used to mean "a drama with music," and this short (69 min) romance tries to sweep an audience away through such effective melodramatic devices as having the divine lightning not striking the sinner, but the innocent party standing beside him. The really interesting duet isn't Bergman and Howard, suffused with his characteristic nimbus of nobile suffering. Rather, it's between photographer Gregg Toland and Bergman; Bergman's rocky English was no stumbling block to what she's trying to emote, and her freshness and sensuality here is a prelude to work that would make millions fall in love with her. Gregory Ratoff directs.

Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex

Released Sept 27, 1939

RUSSO-GERMAN PACT TO DOMINATE BALKANS SEEN IN MOSCOW PARLEY; FRANCE PUTS BAN ON COMMUNISM

In her sixties, Queen Elizabeth I (Bette Davis) is beguiled by a man half her age, a court favorite who often goes out of favor: the tempestuous Earl of Essex (Errol Flynn) who fears neither her rank nor her breeding. The Maxwell Anderson play this is based on has aged poorly; ladies in the audience will relish lines like "Oh [Sir Francis] Bacon, I'm only a woman. Must I carry the weight of the world alone?" But as the struggle between the two worsens, the movie improves—it's too good a story to fray just because of the acting that's beyond Flynn's ken. Obviously, Flynn is a lot more comfortable in battle scenes—meeting up in Ireland with a rebel leader the Earl of Tyrone (Alan Hale, with a fine light Irish accent, bringing in the rapidity and colloquialism one expects from a 1939 movie about the 1590s).

As for the title couple: mutual antagonism is also a form of chemistry. It is a film about a man and a woman who both try to get the upper hand; not being a fan of Flynn's, Davis was ready and willing to take charge. She was born for the part. She's slightly grotesque in ruffs that makes her look like a frilled lizard, but she uses her hands and her eyes to overcome a queen's royal immobility in all that yardage. She's epic poetry in motion, too, during the Essex rebellion, striding down her hall, she pauses to straighten one of her guards' crooked halberds.

As anyone who has been to a Renaissance Faire can tell you, not everyone looks good in that wardrobe, but Flynn is a sight to behold in the tights and the doublet—Lady Penelope, a young lady in waiting, Olivia de Havilland, is once again thunderstruck by Flynn's handsomeness. (When Penelope decides to twit the Queen by a Christopher Marlowe ballad about the problem of youth and age in love, her accompanist on the keyboards is

Nanette Fabares, later Fabray.) Shakespeare is name-checked—Elizabeth complains about the banning of *Richard II*—and certainly this palace is as full of whisperers and connivers as Elsinore itself, with Henry Daniell and Vincent Price among the serpents. It's a pity the Bard couldn't have come by for a rewrite. Michael Curtiz always finds some item of sardonic contrast, such as a clutch of baby kittens frolicking in the shade of a grindstone being used to sharpen a headsman's axe. With the jeweled medievalisms here, photographer Sol Polito shows that Olivier's *Henry V* wouldn't come completely out of nowhere. And Erich Wolfgang Korngold's score is movie music at its finest.

The Shop Around the Corner

Released Jan 12, 1940

COLLEGE TEACHER'S RIGHTS AS CITIZEN SET FORTH AT PHILADELPHIA MEETING; WHEN HE SPEAKS OR WRITES IN PRIVATE CAPACITY HE SHOULD BE FREE FROM CENSORSHIP OR DISCIPLINE, A RESOLUTION ASSERTS

Why does this false version of Eastern Europe, assembled at the MGM studio in Culver City, seem so easy to believe? It's in high 1939 style—light, sophisticated and glowing with William Daniels' creamy lighting in the close-ups. But Daniels also records the dingy cloakrooms at the shop, and the language is Old-World formal. In the dialogue, you can hear the careful locutions of men and women who don't want to be misunderstood by authority. In Jimmy Stewart's dry, detached characterization, you'll recognize something like the icy pride of Hungary's own Peter Lorre. Alfred Kralik (Stewart) enters, dyspeptic from some inferior goose-liver pâté; soon, he'll have more cause for heartburn. The young man is the best salesclerk at Matuschek and Company, a small notions store. Today, a woman he thought was a customer, Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), turns out to be just another job seeker. Klara is hired on as a saleswoman, to Alfred's disgust. The rivalry between the two clerks is the backbone

of the story, yet the film is actually a heavenly romance. Both Klara and Alfred are conducting affairs through letters with strangers; neither ever realizes that their soul mates are actually the colleague that they are spatting with all the live-long day. This confectionery old-movie plot is made stinging and smart by Lubitsch's views of life at Matuschek and Company. We never even see any character's home in this film; one of the more touching scenes is the realization by old Matuschek that he has no home other than his store. Is *The Shop Around the Corner* a sort of tale of Lubitsch's life at MGM? The employees include a tragic, Hollywood-quality yes man (the fine comic actor Felix Bressart); Ferencz (Joseph Schildkraut) is the company fink, advancing himself by passing gossip and sleeping his way to the top. And there's a brash Sammy Glick of a young delivery boy, a Mickey Rooney-like kid on the make (William Tracy): "I'd call myself a contact person. I keep contact between the customers and Matuschek and Company. On a bicycle." Tracy's brashness rings out in a really unsettling scene where he gets to tell off a straying wife via phone, cackling at her—this is maybe the only Lubitsch film that indicates that infidelity can draw blood, that it isn't just a trifle, not just a bemusing injury to one's pride. Finally, Mr. Matuschek, the owner (Frank Morgan), could well be Louis B. Mayer as he envisioned himself—paternal, no-nonsense, lovable. Matuschek's troubles make him subject to poor business decisions—such as the purchase of a gross of leatherette cigarette boxes that tinkle out the Russian lament "Ochi Tchorny." (Sullavan's sale of one of these unsellable trinkets to a fur-bedecked matron is a memorably crafty bit.) Though it's a film for all seasons, Lubitsch was bold to make a Christmas movie that's a reminder of how love and generosity have to fight for a place with what the holiday means for so many: retail work, with pestering customers, sagging sales and mandatory overtime.

The Wizard of Oz

Released Aug 25, 1939

HITLER ACTS TO TAKE DANZIG, ORDERS ARMY BE READY; CHAMBERLAIN GETS WAR POWERS; LONDON, PARIS DARK; ROOSEVELT APPEALS TO GERMANY, POLAND, AND ITALY

No synopsis is necessary, but it is one of the films that suffers most from a small screen. There were those—Otis Ferguson among them—who felt his childhood was being abused by it (he complained about the 'overstuffed vaudevillians' in it and thought Judy Garland was too emotional. Almost everyone today succumbs to the unquenchable yearning in Judy Garland's voice, the witty Tin Pan Alley songs that never could have been written with such easy panache if the composers had known what *The Wizard of Oz* was going to mean years later to people looking for a place in the world. It's salted with horror as well as sentiment: the winged monkeys and the disappearance of the Wicked Witch, achieved with a hydraulic elevator and a cloak full of dry-ice smoke. *The Wizard of Oz* exists beyond the usual standards of criticism, which is why critics tend not to write too much about it. What's on-screen is immaterial to the reactions it rouses in those watching it: the hopes of escape, the misfit's aching memories of persecution and solitude.

Another Thin Man

Released Nov 17, 1939

AL CAPONE IS FREED FROM PRISON; GUARDED IN BALTIMORE HOSPITAL

Back from a bibulous tour of the world—"Nick was sober in Kansas City" Nora says, recalling the unusual event—the Charleses come back to New York with their trunks, their new baby, and the amazing Asta (a dog so privileged that he has his own personal fire hydrant.) People can't seem to wait to start

dying so that the detectives can do a little sleuthing, a little chatting, and a little cocktailing. There are some who say that a series jumps the shark when a baby arrives on the scene, but William Powell and Myrna Loy still have the rhythm and the chemistry to pantomime the most perfect of marriages. Guest stars include C. Aubrey Smith as a bedeviled country house owner.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

Released April 7, 1939 (for headline see p. 7)

Boy Ranger leader (James Stewart) goes to Washington to clean up the Senate, with only his secretary (Jean Arthur) for help. Meanwhile, a chorus of cynics observe, circling the last honest man like a committee of vultures. Thomas Mitchell, an expert at portraying unstable but likable drunks, co-stars with Claude Rains, Eugene Pallette, Guy Kibbee and Edward Arnold (Avarice, Gluttony, Sloth and Wrath—that's four of the Seven Deadly Sins right there). It was thundered against by Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley. Sen. James Byrnes of South Carolina was more specific: "Here is a picture that is going to tell the country that 95 out of 96 senators are corrupt; that the federal, state and municipal governments are corrupt; that one corrupt boss can control the press of a state; that the newspapers are corrupt; the radios are corrupt; reporters are corrupt. ... The thing was outrageous ..." (quoted in Joseph McBride's *The Catastrophe of Success*). Today's viewers may be shocked, shocked by these conclusions. The film's intimate moments—such as the drunk scene between Mitchell and Arthur, supposedly coached by Howard Hawks—outdoes the big patriotic heartstring-puller, Stewart's famous filibuster.

Ninotchka

Released Nov 23, 1939

MINE SINKS BRITISH WARSHIP, 40 LOST; FRENCH CRAFT DESTROYS TWO U-BOATS; NETHERLANDS HALTS ALL SHIP SAILINGS

Melvyn Douglas slouches his elegant way through this as a persuasive demi gigolo in Paris, involved with a White Russian grand duchess in reduced circumstances. ("I suppose one gets the face one deserves," Ina Claire says, surveying herself in the mirror; the quote turns up here several years before its usual attribution to George Orwell.) A Soviet commissar named Yakischova turns up with the duchess's jewels, trying to sell them to raise money for the USSR. The gigolo must turn his charms upon her, but she (Greta Garbo) is quite immune. She drinks vodka but winces at champagne. "Don't make an issue of my womanhood," she frowns, poring over a map of Paris as if it were an overdue bill. Garbo is hilarious here, sending up her usual roles as a weary, mannish man killer. Wearing what look like waterproof stockings and speaking as tonelessly as a Martian, Garbo is the immovable object of totalitarianism, undone by the irresistible force of romance. Unfortunately, Ernst Lubitsch's movie is not as smooth as Douglas. It's sometimes lead-footed in moments of levity. And when Garbo is made to utter a stage laugh, there's a note of capitulation in it. ("Garbo laughs!" cried the posters, but she'd laughed before and with more cause in *Queen Christina*.) But the politics are deft, satirizing both the USSR's aims to make "fewer but better Russians" as well as the golden hindsight of the aristocratic class. Douglas comments that "problems are never solved by bowing from a balcony"—a thought to tide one over during the next presidential photo opportunity.

The Cat and the Canary

Released Nov 10, 1939

FATAL BORDER CLASH STIRS DUTCH; DEFENSE MEASURES ARE RUSHED; MAJOR NAZI OFFENSIVE FORECAST

It has but a passing resemblance to Paul Leni's expressionist horror film. This old dark house in the remote Bayou mystery commences when a lawyer (the ever-ophidian George Zucco) arrives to read the will on the tenth anniversary of the Master's death. Keeping the mansion is Miss Lu, the Frau Blucherish Gale Sondergaard ("the old boy's 'housekeeper'" is how she's referred to, quotation marks theirs). Various feuding relatives gather to hear the will and spend the night, as is the tradition; and eventually (as later satirized in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*) a guard from the local asylum for the criminally insane arrives to announce that a beastly maniac nicknamed 'The Cat' has escaped and is at large. But before that happens, in barges Bob Hope, a fountain of borrowed pleasantries and ancient wisecracks in a snazzy double-breasted suit. Hope is a noted radio actor who gooses the plot along on the grounds that he's played it a dozen times before. "It reminds me a lot of melodramas" he says of the situation; when the lights flicker out: "That's what happens when you don't pay your bill." He also predicts that there's a girl in the picture; said girl indeed turns up, pretty Paulette Goddard, and from then on, the film bubbles away, making its own gravy. Included: paintings with the eyes cut out, sliding panels, strange shadows and corpuses delicti—all with running patter by the wisenheimer who taught Woody Allen everything he knew about the manly art of witty cowardice.

Gone with the Wind

Atlanta premiere Dec 15, 1939

URUGUAY LETS THE SPEE STAY FOR REPAIRS AS BRITISH MASS SHIPS OFF MONTEVIDEO; FINNS REPORT GAINS; LEAGUE DROPS RUSSIA.

Another one that, as Umberto Eco said of *Casablanca,* is not a movie, but *the* movies; co-star Evelyn Keyes said at its premiere that she felt like she'd never seen a movie before. The saturated colors—the reds and blacks, especially profound—are only part of the reason a current audience might greet *Gone with the Wind* with the exclamation "What a dark movie!" A revisit hauls you through war, soldier rape, spousal rape, miscarriage, illegitimacy, adultery—not bad for a film that epitomizes the family era in cinema. It's the story of the fall of the O'Haras, plantation owners who named their Georgia spread after the kingly Irish halls, and the high and mighty princess of the place, Miss Scarlett. She's so involved with beaus, balls, and boyfriend filching that she doesn't see the War Between the States materializing.

It's been suggested that the American Civil War was a restaging of the English Civil War, a battle of northern Puritans against Southern cavaliers. The courtship of Scarlett and Rhett is like a mirror of the war, with conflict between the northernized Rhett (from Charleston, but he don't talk it) and Scarlett (a shrewd, even cutting performance by Vivien Leigh). Not much room here, so let's honor the famous names: producer David O. Selznick, who hauled truckloads of red Georgia earth to Culver City; Max Steiner, composer of the score that doesn't overwhelm the action, and William Cameron Menzies, the hard-working production designer, who gives the eye a new treat in every scene. Uncredited but deeply felt: Ben Hecht, who gave the script a much-needed hard-boiling while bypassing Margaret Mitchell's gigantic novel. (When Rhett calls Scarlet O'Hara 'the cutest little trick in shoe leather,' who could have written the line but a

Chicagoan like Hecht?) A product of its time, it's deeply racist, and it's cast with some of the worst child actors ever. Joni Mitchell sang "shades of Scarlett conquering, she said 'a woman must have everything,'" but other feminists could object to the "staircase scene" (even a writer as good-humored as Angela Carter thought that Rhett Butler needed his kneecaps broken). Still, *Gone With the Wind* is that unimaginable thing, a flexible masterpiece: thrilling, vivid, moving and funny when you least expect it.