

Document Citation

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| Title | 'Lifeboat,' Alfred Hitchcock picture, opens at the Astor Theater |
| Author(s) | Eileen Creelman |
| Source | <i>New York Sun</i> |
| Date | 1944 Jan 13 |
| Type | review |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 1 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | Lifeboat, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1944 |

January 13, 1944

'Lifeboat,' Alfred Hitchcock Picture, Opens at the Astor Theater

By EILEEN CREELMAN

THE Astor Theater is showing one of the year's most unusual pictures. "Lifeboat" might easily have been just a tour de force, a picture remarkable simply because all its action takes place aboard a lifeboat adrift in the Atlantic. "Lifeboat" is remarkable for that fact, and for a few more important ones.

In the first place, it is good drama. It grips the attention from the first scene, that shot of a smoking funnel followed by the quick, terrible sight of a freighter sinking quickly and forever. As rapidly the camera turns to the cluttered sea, centering at last on a lifeboat. Some one is sitting there, sitting there alone, detached, unafraid, complete in her own egotism and the pride of her possessions. This is Connie Porter, war correspondent de luxe. She is joined by others, characters as amusing and as sharply defined as her own.

Alfred Hitchcock, who directed the film and of course assisted with the writing, and John Steinbeck have managed to keep their story alive and filled with suspense. Their characters are strong and also amusing. The picture is robust with humor. Mrs. Porter's wise cracks, the disabled seaman's description of life with his Rosie, the magnate's quiet and soon disputed assumption of authority, the engine-room sailor's socialistic views, and their prisoner of war's jollity are all subjects for fun. The laughter is frequent, refreshing and good to remember later.

Director and writer had a sound idea back of their drama. They do not stress their symbolism. It is, in fact, invisible to the naked eye. But the Messrs. Hitchcock and Steinbeck had something to say, more than the adventures of an oddly assorted group shipwrecked somewhere off Bermuda. Because they carefully avoid any reference to their real theme, the picture is the more effective. It is no propaganda picture, complete with a ten-minute speech about democracy. This seems just a melodrama, and a corker. Under its exterior plot, giving it depth and unexpected force, is the Hitchcock-Steinbeck feeling that this is a tale of the democracies, who go each their own ways, trying to reason, trying to compromise, never quite sure of their definite goal, as opposed to the Nazi, highly trained, competent, sure of what he wants and how to get it, ruthless and efficient. The squabbling group unites only when it realizes the treachery and cruelty of the man it had befriended.

Mr. Hitchcock manages to keep the lifeboat from seeming a far from monotonous background. He has collected a fine cast, each actor at his top best—Tallulah Bankhead has never given such a sound and vivid characterization on the screen. She makes the most of the comedy. She also, without any apparent softening, brings the film a real emotion. William Bendix plays the seaman who must have his leg amputated by a Nazi submarine captain. Walter Slezak plays that captain, a genial and song-loving fellow who has no mercy in his soul. Mary Anderson is appealing as the Army nurse, and Hume Cronyn as the radio operator. A newcomer, and one to be watched, is John Hodiak, whose portrayal is one of the dominating performances. Heather Angel appears briefly in a poignant bit. Canada Lee has the small, well-played part of a Negro steward.

"Lifeboat" is a brilliantly written and directed drama of people lost at sea, frightened, hungry, thirsty, and yet somehow gallant.