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Classics

MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (1939)

Directed by Frank Capra. Starring James Stewart, Jean Arthur, Claude Rains, Edward Arnold. (Columbia Pictures Home Entertainment, B&W, 120 min., \$59.95)

By William K. Everson

In many ways Frank Capra's fable about an idealistic hick going to Washington and routing the forces of political corruption is far more interesting today than it was 40 years ago.

Then, audiences believed in the All-American-Boy hero as fervently as they disbelieved in the likelihood of widespread corruption in high federal places. (In city halls maybe, but not Washington.) Time and Watergate have lent credibility to what earlier had seemed melodramatic excess. Too, at that time we'd never had a Capra hero in or near the White House. Now, with Jimmy Carter (a Capra-ish name if there ever was one) we have a Gary Cooper-James Stewart composite as President.

Personally I've always had a great deal more confidence in the efficient corruption of Capra's politico-villains than in the inefficient honesty of his heroes. And in this film, Edward Arnold and Claude Rains work so skillfully at their conniving that they really deserve to succeed—and one suspects that, fleeced or not, the country might be in



Stewart, Arthur: more interesting today.

William K. Everson has written more than a dozen books on movie history and hosted TV movie specials.

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better shape with them at the helm. (I once suggested this to Capra, who almost collapsed with apoplexy until he learned that I was English-born, which seemed to explain the whole problem as far as he was concerned! Actually it should only have underlined my suggestion. Britain has statesmen rather than politicians, who at most get caught in sex scandals, not political graft. British politicians are far too inefficient to be corrupt, which is why economically that country is in even worse shape than the United States.)

In any event, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington's* study of the American political scene—which certainly hit home in 1939, when it was roundly disliked by Congress—is particularly apropos to our current election-year scene. Not that Capra's classic is limited in its appeal to an electioneering period, for certainly over the next two or more years it is going to be both topical and conversation-provoking.

At \$59.95, it's decidedly a good buy. It's one of the most typical Capra movies, solidly crafted with some excellent performances—much better than, for example, the generally disappointing Capra picture that preceded it, *You Can't Take It With You*. Pictorial and sound quality are excellent, and much of the story is told in tight closeups and through dialogue, so that it loses very little in the transference to smaller screens.

Two minor complaints: Dedicated buffs will doubtless be irked by the displacement of the original Columbia logo in favor of the current one. And, in order to get the movie onto a two-hour tape length, a few minutes have been fairly carefully excised. But in works as meticulously crafted as Capra's, some awkward transitions now occur because of these trims, and the movie gets off to a rather abrupt start because of an opening deletion. □



Mr. Smith: a political classic for election-year viewing.