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THE ROAD BACK (Universal, 1937) Directed by James Whale; Produced by Charles R. Rogers, Associate Producer, Edmund Grainger; Screenplay by R.C. Sheriff and Charles Kenyon from the novel by Erich Maria Remarque; Camera, John Mescall and George Robinson; Music, Dmitri Tiomkin; 90 mins. (Last NS showing: July 1972) With John King (Ernst); Richard Cromwell (Ludwig); Slim Summerville (Tjaden); Andy Devine (Willy); Barbara Read (Lucy); Louise Fazenda (Angelina); Lionel Atwill (Prosecutor); Noah Beery jr. (Wessling); Maurice Murphy (Von Hagen); Etienne Girardot (Mayor); Henry Hunter (Bethke); Larry Blake (Well); Gene Garrick (Giesicke); Jean Rouverol (Elsa); Greta Gynte (Maria); Spring Byington (Ernst's mother); Frank Reicher (his father); Laura Hope Crews (his aunt); Charles Halton (Uncle Rudolph); Arthur Hohl (Heinrich); William B. Davidson (Hartscher); Al Shean (Mr. Markham); Edwin Maxwell (Principal); Samuel S. Hinds (Defense attorney); Robert Warwick (Judge) and Ben Bard, Jonathan Hale, Buddy Roosevelt, Lane Chandler, Tom Steele, Dwight Frye, Edward Van Sloan, Paul Panzer, Francis Ford, William Benedict, Eddie Phillips.

Never reissued nor sold to television, "The Road Back" is one of the more ambitious of Hollywood's (at this stage) rather half-hearted attacks on German militarism. It could have been one of James Whale's major works. but unfortunately it came at a time of change in Universal's management. The old regime was out, and the new regime wanted economical and safe pictures. The grimness of the original script was undercut by new producers insisting on building up the comedy content (!) and by casting as many of Universal's young (and usually very American) male players as possible. While they may have hoped to repeat the star building process afforded to Lew Ayres in the earlier film, giving the lead to stolid and colorless John King (adequate in westerns, serials, actioners and comedies, but even there no more than adequate) was a major mistake. He just didn't have the sensitivity or depth to begin to cope with the difficult leading role. The last straw was frantic editing of the original climax to change an anti-Nazi stance into one attacking militarism generally, Britain, France et al being given equal blame with Germany. It was an artistic and boxoffice disappointment in 1937, but our greater knowledge and appreciation of Whale today makes it a far more interesting film now. Despite the interference, moments of real power remain. Technically Whale remains interesting, bringing the old "Broadway" crane into exciting play in the street mob scenes, emulating Lewis Milestone's tracking camera in the battle scenes, and getting far more out of his stock company - Lionel Atwill, Edward van Sloan etc. - than from the younger players, though there's an excellent performance from John Emery. Even if Whale had been left entirely alone, it probably wouldn't have been as good as "All Quiet" - but enough remains to suggest that it might have been a very fine film. Its failure marked a turning point in Whale's career; he seemed to lose heart, and studios seemed to lose confidence in him, the latter at least partially due to Universal's shabby treatment of him in the remaining films due under his Universal contract.

--- William K. Everson

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