

The Road to Zanzibar



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Cast

- Bing Crosby as Chuck Reardon
- Bob Hope as Hubert 'Fearless' Frazier
- Dorothy Lamour as Donna LaTour
- Una Merkel as Julia Quimby
- Eric Blore as Charles Kimble
- Joan Marsh as Dimples, the assistant in the Human Cannonball act
- Iris Adrian as the French soubrette in the café scene
- Douglass Dumbrille as the slave trader
- Lionel Royce as Monsieur Lebec
- Buck Woods as Thonga
- Leigh Whipper as Scarface
- Ernest Whitman as Whiteface
- Noble Johnson as the village Chief
- Charles Gemora as the Gorilla

Directed by Victor Schertzinger. Produced by Paul Jones. Screenplay by Frank Butler and Don Hartman with uncredited additions by Hope and Crosby and their gag writers. Editing by Alma Macrorie. Cinematography by Ted Tetziaff. Music by Victor Young: Studio: Paramount Pictures. Released on 11th April 1941; Running Time 91 minutes: Rating PG: Available on DVD and free on Utube. Reviewer's rating 85%

In 1940 the first of the *Road to* films *The Road to Singapore* was a great commercial success, so the team that put it together, director Victor Schertzinger and writers Frank Butler and Don Hartman, decided to build on that success with a similar film starring the three principal performers from *The Road to Singapore*, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour. Once again the plot was flimsy, the setting was exotic and a few songs sung by Crosby

were included. *The Road to Zanzibar* was not quite a musical comedy and not quite a spoof of the African adventure film and not quite in the caper genre, yet it's makers neatly, almost seamlessly merged elements within all three genre's to make a unified whole.

This was amazing as so much went against that possibility. Making the *The Road to Zanzibar* was a rushed process. Its predecessor had only premiered in March 1940 and the screenwriters had to transform a straight African adventure story of a search for a missing explorer into a comedy, keeping only an African setting.

By modern standards, filming was fast, being finished in six weeks. It started that November and the film was released the next April. By 1940s standards that was a long shoot, Hollywood feature films under the studio system being completed from start to finish in two weeks were nothing unusual. One reason for this comparatively long shoot was that Hope and Crosby loved to add lib with their own gags or use their gag writers to feed them lines. Schertzing, Butler and Hartman were at the least, vexed as the pair took over the script or frequently even discarded it. This was amazing, as this was in the days of the studio system, when studio heads were called mughals for very good reasons. They had actors under contracts and so could quickly cancel for the slightest infraction or general disobedience. Hope and Crosby knew that they could get away with their spontaneity, being amongst Paramount's greatest stars and the *The Road to Singapore* being one of the year's biggest financial successes for a financially troubled studio. According to Hope, Lamour's response was to go along with them and to no longer try to remember her lines, but just get a sense of what the scene was about. Hope praised her remarkable ability to be quick on the uptake and follow their ad libbed repartee. Lamour's comment on working with them was less complementary. She said that she was a slice of white bread placed

between two slices of ham. The inference here is that Hope and Crosby were ham actors.

Amazingly, despite the tactics of Hope and Crosby and the use of different genres, *The Road to Zanzibar* does not come across as a mish mash. Director Schertzing was probably the reason. Starting as a childhood prodigy with the ability to learn and work fast, he became not only a director, but a musical composer and conductor, film producer and screenwriter. In his prolific career he made 89 films and the *The Road to Singapore* and *The Road to Zanzibar* were amongst his last before dying of a heart attack in late 1941. His wide ranging expertise, experience and familiarity with the prequel and the major performers were probably the reason he could smooth things over and deliver a finished, unified entertainment, for entertaining it is. A fast, but not too fast narrative, glib dialogue, perfect editing, funny surprises in the narrative and a deft touch with the banter all made for a success.

As is usual in the *Road to ...* films Crosby and Hope are expatriate Americans on a caper in an exotic locale. Here it is South Africa, where as part of a travelling circus. Chuck (Crosby) is the sprucker for “Fearless Frazier the Human Cannonball.” When the time comes to shoot Hope through a ring of fire and over the circus marquee into the river the replacing dummy falls short, setting the marquee on fire. This dynamic duo flee the police by going further into Africa, where Chuck dreams up ever increasingly bizarre and dangerous schemes for the ever more fearful Fearless who as he says, is really a coward. With this character Hope developed a type and a situation he would play in films for the next twenty years, the hapless, bumbling, frenetic, but fearful cynic. He always finds himself in bizarre and dangerous situations, but with a mixture of shrewdness, energy and luck gets himself out of it – and into the next one.

Crosby on the other hand, stays calm, wise and reasonable, although in this film he sometimes reverses the role with Hope of being the wise one who sees things clearly. He is the one who is conned out of their earnings with a sale of a non-existent diamond mine and then conned again by two American women, played by Lamour and Una Merkel. The scammers are scammed as these two persuade Hope and Crosby to take them on a safari. Their purported purpose being that the safari will eventually lead them to Lamour's missing father. The reality is that the father does not exist and the safari will provide the women with chances to milk the men of their money. The safari also provides the audience with songs, mischief, misunderstandings and many a laugh as harmless havoc piles up on harmless havoc.



Bob Hope (1903-2003) in 1940.

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*Dorothy Lamour (1914-1996) in 1952
Film screenshot, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*

The audiences of 1941 loved it, making the film one of the biggest financial successes of the year, bigger even than its prequel. This success ensured that the starring trio would be in *Road to* movies for just over another decade. They should have left the 1952 success *The Road to Bali* as the finale. By 1960 when Hope had his near fatal heart attack and needed to slow down and Lamour and Crosby were aging. Hollywood was also changing; nobody could make quality films in a few weeks anymore. In 1961 with *The Road to Hong Kong* they did make the mistake so many filmmakers make, of returning to their earlier success too late, when youth, energy and originality have faded. This writer remembers seeing this at the cinema, where crowds went in with expectant smiles and came out with disappointed faces. The

mistake was made again in 1987 with the flop *Ishtar*, an extremely expensive update of *The Road to Morocco*. This version got at best mixed reviews and was voted amongst the worst films of all time.

Hollywood had changed, but the 1940s *Road to* films retain their charm and vitality.



Bing Crosby 1903-1977

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Victor Schertzinger 1888-1941

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