

## *Malaya*



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Produced by Edwin H. Kopf. Directed by Richard Thorpe. Screenplay by Frank Fenton. Based on a story by Manchester Body. Cinematography by George J. Foly. Art Direction by Malcom Brown and Cedric Gibbons. Original Music by Bronislau Kaper. Music conducted by Andre Previn. Edited by Ben Lewis. Key Costumer: Irene Valles.

Cinematic length: 98 minutes. Distributed by MGM. Cinematic release: December 1949 (USA) elsewhere mostly around the middle of 1950: DVD release 2002. Check for ratings initially PGA. Rating 90%.

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## *Cast*

*Spencer Tracy: Cannahan*

*James Stewart: John Royer*

*Sidney Greenstreet: The Dutchman*

*John Hodiak: Kellar the government agent*

*Lionel Barrymore: Manchester the editor*

*Gilbert Roland : Romano*

*Richard Loo: Colonel Tomura*

*Roland Winters: Bruno Gruber the German plantation owner*

*Ian MacDonald: Carlos Tassuma as the Brazilian plantation owner*

*Tom Helmore: Mattison, the English plantation owner*

*David Fresco: Barracuda*

*Russell Hicks: board member*

*Luther Davis : the captain*

*Lieutenant Glenson: De Forest Kelly*

## *Review*

*Malaya* has never gained the status of a famous film classic, but it should have. Perhaps film audiences had watched enough WW2 secret mission movies by the time of the film's release in 1949/1950. Another problem must be that films of this era without a strong romance are rarely considered great or popular, although it made a comfortable profit and got favourable reviews. The similarities to *Casablanca* (1942) and *To Have and Have Not* (1945) would have made it seem unoriginal and a lesser film. Once again we have the exotic bar in an exotic wartime locale where the desperate, the colourful and those with hidden agendas meet. Once again we have the cynical adventurer John Royer (James Stewart) on an anti-fascist mission, an equally cynical but loyal sidekick Spencer Tracy

(Cannahan) a singer in the bar Luana, who is the romantic interest (Valentine Cortese) a suspicious fascist officer in control of the local area, Colonel Tomura (Richard Loo) and a worldly wise fatalist who observes, warns and comments. His title here being 'the Dutchman.' The latter was played by Sydney Greenstreet, who played a similar role in *Casablanca*. This role would be his last in film.



*Sidney Greenstreet*



*Lionel Barrymore*

However there are wide differences from the earlier films, where romance serves as a central, even vital factor. Here it romance remains peripheral and does not involve the central character Royer, but his sidekick, Cannahan. The romance lacks the passion of those depicted in the earlier films, which proved wise as Tracy and Cortese are a bit too old for wild passion. Instead the romance turns out to be a comfortable arrangement between two people, who by being on the outskirts of society, have a cynical worldview based in expediency and so are well suited to each other. This has a dangerous moment when Luana comes close to revealing to Cannahan that she was involved with Tomura when she thought he was dead or jailed. Body language, voice tones and facial expressions reveal this - to the audience, not to Cannahan. Such subtle touches make *Malaya* stand out in the genre. Another standout cause must be that Luana suffers no punishment for this, as is usual in Hollywood films where “the bad girl/ the fallen woman” usually suffers death or at the least degradation for her failing to remain sexually pure. She survives the mission without harm.



*Three cast members, the Dutchman's parrot, James Stewart and Valentine Cortese.*

Another reason why *Malaya* stands out in the secret mission genre is that the focus goes undividedly on the secret mission, which gets a realistic depiction. Royer's mission does not concern some remarkable individual as is usually the case, but a vital ingredient for modern war, rubber. Manchester (Lionel Barrymore) explains to Royer (and therefore the audience) how important rubber will be to America's war effort and how desperate they are for rubber. He offers journalist Royer the task he knows he will reject, reporting stories about recycling rubber. Instead Royer, a refugee from recently invaded Malaya, tells Manchester that he knows where the planters have hidden their rubber crop so that the invading Japanese will not get it and with his contacts and those of his jailed pal Cannahan he could smuggle the rubber out. After Royer leaves the wily Manchester, smiling smugly phones somebody, they have got Royer doing what they wanted. Manchester (like nearly every character) has a hidden agenda. The risky attempt to smuggle the rubber gets a treatment full of the prosaic detail that would be there in reality and gets a realistic depiction.



*Spencer Tracy:*

“Realistically” here means that the script to *Malaya* works without those endless supplies of contrived luck that has more to do with “calling on the fairies” by

Hollywood scriptwriters for a happy ending than on plausibility. With Royer's team allocated resources, careful planning and caution (all based in intelligence work) allow the allied team to survive intact as long as they do. Like most real secret missions, luck runs out and the mission team must confront an extremely dangerous and able enemy, one not like the easily fooled, passive dopes that they seem to be in Hollywood scripts.

Other assets to the film include rounded characters, Frank Fenton's dialogue, every bit as sardonic, shrewd and sometimes witty as that in *Casablanca*, welcomingly unpredictable plot developments, a strong sense of pace and place and the remarkable, at times beautiful black and white photography, which increases the sense of *Malaya* being in the film noir style. The early scenes, set in film noir's setting capital, San Francisco, add to this impression. Amazingly not one scene was filmed in Malaya. The jungle section of Los Angeles gardens doubled for most of the outdoor shots. Well when that type of thing works its Hollywood magic and it works here.



*Richard Thorpe 1896-1991*