"HOLLYWOOD CAVALCADE" (20th Century Fox, 1939)  
Directed by Irving Cummings; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; 
Assoc. Producer: Harry Joe Brown; Screenplay by Ernest Pascal from 
a story by Hillary Boa & Broom Holmes; Keystone Cop sequence 
supervised by Mack Sennett and directed by Malcolm St. Clair; 
Photographed in Technicolor by Allen N. Davye and Ernest Palmer.  
With Alice Faye, Don Ameche, Buster Keaton, J. Edward Bromberg, Alan 
Curtis, Stuart Erwin, Jed Prouty, Donald Meek, George Civot, Eddie 
Collins, Hank Mann, Helene Conklin, James Finlayson, Chick Chandler, 
Robert Lowery, Russell Hicks, Ben Welden, Willie Fung, Paul Stanton, 
Mary Forbes, Joseph Crehan, Irving Bacon, Ben Turpin, Chester Conklin, 
Marjorie Beebe, Frederick Burton, Kin Tin Tin Jr., Lee Duncan, Mack 
Sennett, Al Jolson.  

Hollywood, which has made so many excellent fictional movies about itself, 
specifically "Sunset Boulevard", "Bombshell" and (probably) James 
Cruse's long lost silent "Hollywood", invariably seems to come a 
spectacular coppper when it sets out to tell its own story, or that of 
any given personality. Even allowing for the legal necessity of 
sometimes muddying the celluloid or blurring the personalities, there 
is no excuse for such abysmal distortions of fact and record as, for 
example, "Buster Keaton Story". That particular film seemed to go 
out of its way to create a deliberate no-man's-land of misinformation, 
in which every fact was wrong, events 20 years apart were telescoped 
into a single afternoon, and fashions over a 40 year span remained 
resolutely those of 1914! The Pearl White and Annette Kellerman bi-
ops weren't much better, although some care and respect for the truth 
did seem to enter into Cagney's biography of Lon Chaney.  

"Hollywood Cavalcade" however tends to disarm all criticism in 
advance, since it is staged within the fairly formula Fox framework 
of musical comedy, and claims to be an entertainment first, and film 
history second. There are the generalisations and errors if one cares 
to look for them, certainly, Don Ameche, having invented the telephone 
for Fox earlier that year, here guides the destiny of the movies 
almost single-handed, in a fictional composite that seems to be 
75% Mack Sennett, 10% Griffith, and 15% miscellany. It is ilksome perhaps 
to find the great Buster Keaton identified so positively with custard 
pie humor -- a brand of comedy that he never indulged in, and that 
was anyway never as widespread in the silent era as is generally 
believed. The film name-drops unsubtly, and never once suggests that 
the silent cinema was capable of great artistry as well as great 
showmanship. But these things apart, and perhaps unintentionally, 
the film is a far better, and in general reference terms, more 
reliable, entertainment-costed introduction to the development and 
modus operandi of the silent comedy screen, than many later feature 
films and documentaries that claimed authenticity and truth.  

"Hollywood Cavalcade" was Hollywood's first major attempt to tell its 
own story, and the end of the silent era was then, after all, less 
than a decade away. Hollywood was remembering, rather than sombrely 
reconstructing, and the affection shows through. Most of the men 
involved in the film had of course been very much a part of the silent 
era too -- from director Irving Cummings, who had been an actor, 
western star and director to Malcolm St. Clair, a former Sennett 
taco who graduated to silken sophistication as a director of the 
Kubitsch school, and who here returns with easy confidence to the 
staging of the Keystone Cop sequence. If the dresses and decor and 
details aren't always right, at least they're unobtrusively wrong, 
and one doesn't get such faux-pas as Kirk Douglas directing a tracking 
shot from in front of the camera ("The Bad and the Beautiful") or 
Holly, a studio executive commenting on the success of the new Sarah Bernhardt 
movie (1912) and then in the same breath remarking that the studio 
needs a new Valentine ("The Buster Keaton Story"). Perhaps the only 
major distortion is the elevating of that genial clown Mack Sennett 
into genius status -- but since the French historians have been doing 
that for years anyway, we can surely allow Hollywood a little poetic 
license to do the same.  

Space precludes mention of the film-history oriented shorts that will 
precede the film, or the little "bonus" that will follow it, but I'll 
discuss and identify these prior to the screening.  

---- William K. Everson ----