

It's a Big Country

US : 1952 : dir. Clarence Brown; Don Hartman; John Sturges; Richard Thorpe;
Charles Vidor; Don Weiss; William A Wellman : M.G.M : 90 min
prod: Robert Sisk : scr: William Ludwig, Helen Deutsch, George Wells, Allen Rivkin,
Dorothy Kingsley & Isobel Lennert
dir.ph.: John Alton, Ray June, William Mellor & Joseph Rattenberg

Bobby Hyatt; Jerry Hunter.....
Fredric March; Ethel Barrymore; Keefe Braselle; Gary Cooper; Nancy Davis; Van Johnson;
Gene Kelly; Janet Leigh; Marjorie Main; George Murphy; William Powell; S.Z. Sakall; Lewis
Stone; James Whitmore; Leon Ames; Keenan Wynn; Angela Clarke; Sharon McManus;
Elizabeth Risdon; Bill Baldwin

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ≠ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2727a	4½	7	5	1,633	3 - - - -	No	Unseen



Important safety tip: Never short change your old pa!

Source: The Films of Fredric March

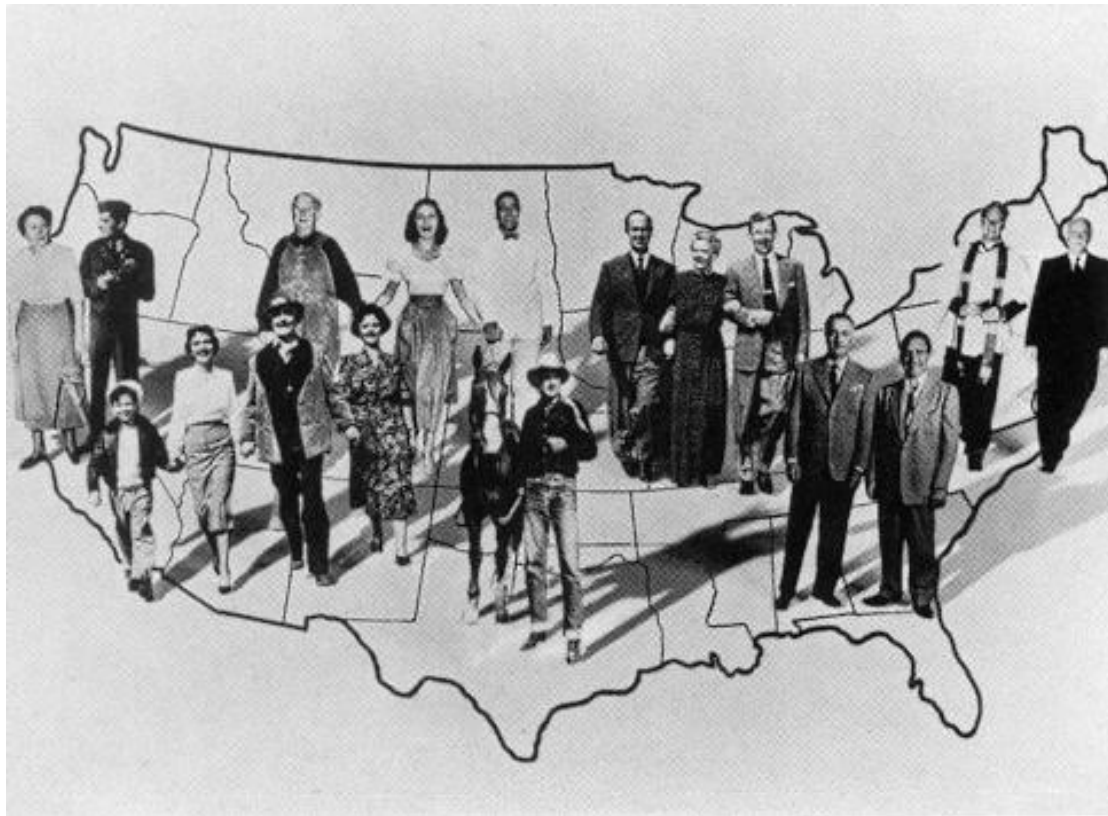
Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"Dore Scharj's plug for America uses several pointless episodes about the variety of people and places in the U.S. Other segments make up for it in a very uneven film. Narrated by Louis Calhern. **½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above, but still giving it three stars.

Halliwel's Film Guide review:

"Seven stories show the diversity of the U.S. and the glory of being one of its citizens. Stultifying flag-waver memorable chiefly as a waste of good actors. Writers: William



A big country might be expected to yield some more interesting film concepts Oh, and it's an eerily homogenous all-white country too, if the poster is any indication.
Source: *The M.G.M. Story*

Ludwig, Helen Deutsch, George Wells, Allen Rivkin, Dorothy Kingsley & Isobel Lennert.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“An octet of stories, some better than others, comprise the framework of this film which is a big valentine to America. One of the best episodes stars Kelly as the son of a Greek immigrant who falls in love with the daughter, played by Miss Leigh, of a Hungarian farmer charmingly played by S.Z. Sakall. Among the many stars who appear in the various segments are Van Johnson, James Whitmore, Gary Cooper and Ethel Barrymore. **½ ”

The Films of Fredric March review:

“At Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [March] did the part of an Italian immigrant who thinks it unmanly for his son to wear glasses. It was a segment - the weakest - of an eight-part film that purported to celebrate American life in all its human and geographical variety. Though replete with potent star names and powerhouse

directorial talent, the result made it obvious that producer Dore Schary had overreached himself. Some parts were better than others; March's segment - and performance - were soundly criticised when the film opened in January 1952.”

“Dore Schary, then head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's production activities, put on the screen what was termed an "American anthology" of eight unrelated episodes purporting to highlight various aspects of American life. It was far from a masterpiece, in fact so forgettable that once it had completed its run, little or nothing was heard of it again. A host of MGM stars got involved in this pedestrian attempt "to pay tribute to the wonder and excitement and drama and variety that is America", but all the king's horses and all the king's men and all the painstaking craftsmen, top directors, careful technicians, couldn't put this Humpty-Dumpty into any form that made sense or point. The consensus upon the picture's release was that all would have been better occupied with other projects.

March was one of those personalities who got mixed up in the business, and in an episode

which was regarded as the weakest and most pointless of the eight, he essayed the role of an Italian-American, Papa Esposito, who bucks, for what seems endless length, at buying eyeglasses for his son Joseph, played by Bobby Hyatt. On hand as March's wife was Angela Clarke. Poorly written, inadequately, indeed obscurely motivated, the vignette is an outstanding example of a much-ado-about-nothing situation, and in what perhaps rates as the most forgettable of his screen appearances, March was no more than adequate; indeed, he must have been fully aware (too late) of what he had let himself in for, as his performance radiates (if that is the word) a half-hearted, half-baked quality that is distinctly not March.

The business takes twice as long as it should, with schoolteacher Nancy Davis trying to persuade March, who sports an Italian dialect, that it is not unmanly for his boy to wear the glasses that have been prescribed for him. Three of the eight segments are, indeed, not sketches but lectures (of a sort); Gary Cooper discusses Texas; William Powell analyses the American mystique¹; a montage pays tribute to the accomplishments of American negroes; the sketches include one of Ethel Barrymore as an Irish-American Bostonian complaining to the editor of the "Boston Post" that she has been omitted from the 1950 census; Keefe Brasselle as a wounded Korean vet who brings a letter to the mother of a soldier who has been killed in action (this sequence was regarded by many critics as the best); S.Z. Sakall and Gene Kelly as enemies of varying nationalities who are reconciled when Kelly wins the hand of Sakall's daughter; and Van Johnson, a substitute minister in a Washington church, gets to meet the President of the United States; he also learns he is not preaching just for the President."

"If this is the long-awaited Hollywood's short story film challenge to the three and four-part movie gems turned out in recent years by the British film-makers, our English cousins may relax. Presumably on the principle that bigger means better, more means merrier and eight episodes squeezed into a ninety-minute picture are finer entertainment than three (or four), **"IT'S A BIG COUNTRY"** announces its eight stories (count 'em: eight) and expects you to pop your eyes with excitement ... the melting pot is melted into an M-G-M multiple movie with mixed mediocre results - mostly soapy, sentimental, sugary and as elementary as a

comic strip. All are animated by a spirit of sincerity. I wish they had been as well done as intended. The average is poor." - **Cue**

"One looks in vain for any subtlety in its message of hope and glory, any genuine depth of perception in its eight-sided view of life in the U.S.A. This is not to question the motives of Dore Schary and his M-G-M associates. Their hearts are undoubtedly in the right place... But there are certain things missing... such as the spirit of humility and searching self-appraisal. One hesitates to think of the effect on overseas audiences of some of the film's sequences... The individual sequences are developed economically and efficiently by their respective directors. In content and treatment there is a good deal to admire about the overall purpose of the film... Powerful reservations should perhaps be directed at the overblown commentary which ties the eight parts together and the booster-club heartiness with which it is delivered. Greater restraint might have helped [the film] come nearer to its purpose."

- **Christian Science Monitor**

The M-G-M Story review:

"**"IT'S A BIG COUNTRY"**, an ambitious project, was in production most of 1950 and 1951. Schary marshalled an army of writers to celebrate the American way of life in nine separate episodes. By the time the film was released, seven had survived (six in Britain) but the movie itself died at the paybox."

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Bobby Hyatt:

"... His lively eyes and soft, good-natured profile made him a welcome ingredient of many movies of his time. He was particularly engaging in the "Four Eyes" episode of **"IT'S A BIG COUNTRY"**, and was spunky enough to play Gavroche in the 1952 version of **"LES MISERABLES"**..."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

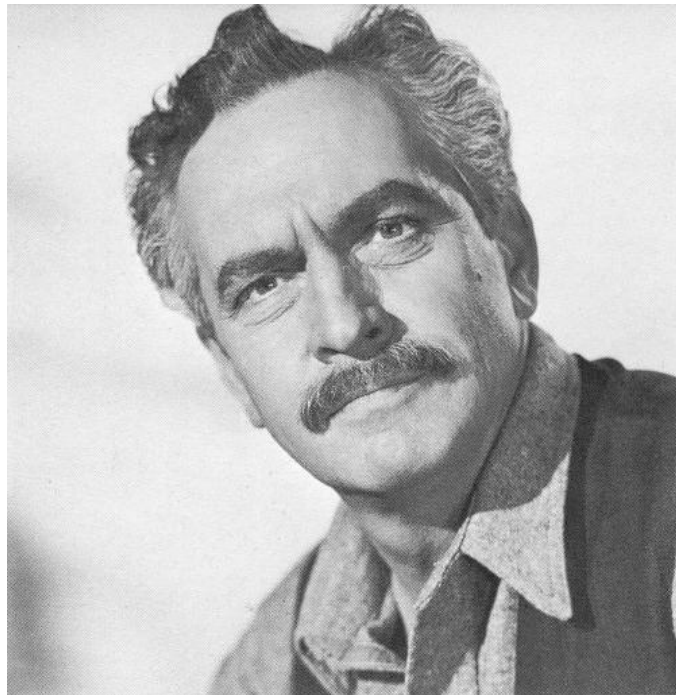
¹ *What mystique, pray?*



Top: Papa Esposito will have no namby-pamby eyeglasses worn in **his** household

Bottom: March and Bobby Hyatt – without glasses – try to make out the small print on their contracts

Source: The Films of Fredric March



My agent shall pay for this, by jiminy!

Source: The Films of Fredric March

It's a big flop. A piece of cut-and-dried yankee propaganda, so much so that the American public stayed away in droves. It seems fair to infer that the involvement - not to say wastage - of so many talented players and directors reflected a deal of contractual arm-twisting by the studio in what was evidently intended to be a major prestige production. In my own view, portmanteau films inevitably fail - on the principle of being only as strong as their weakest segment. The linkage in this case seems even more tenuous than most, and if the film is as much of a braggart as the above reviews imply, then it should be viewed with the same distaste as overtly propagandist cinema from any quarter. Hollywood's answer to "**TRIUMPH OF THE WILL**" we can certainly do without.

Hyatt was about 11, his more than twenty feature appearances including "**MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET**" (47), "**NO MINOR VICES**" (48), "**WHEN I GROW UP**" (51) and "**GYPSY COLT**" (53). Jerry Hunter, who appears in one of the other episodes, was also seen in "**HAPPY LAND**" (43), "**A BOY, A GIRL AND A DOG**" (46), "**HEAVEN ONLY KNOWS**" (47) and "**THE GREAT LOVER**" (49 - presumably as one of Bob Hope's Scout pack).

See subject index under **THE CHILD AS PROPAGANDA SYMBOL, PORTMANTEAU FILMS** and, absurdly enough for the question of wearing eyeglasses, **DISABLED / HANDICAPPED**.