

Film empire reaches end of era

By TOM BONNELLY
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WASHINGTON—"M-G-M Scrams Theatre Distribution" was the headline in *Variety*. The accompanying story said that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, for several decades the acknowledged leader of the motion picture industry, wasn't folding up entirely, as persistent rumors had it. No, as Metro president James Aubrey explained it, the company was pulling out of theatrical film distribution because "the bottom has fallen out of the market."

Henceforth M-G-M would concentrate on features for TV, he said, and on the hotel business, and would make "highly selective quality films," no more than six or eight a year, to be released theatrically through other companies.

As far as veteran film fans are concerned (I have no hesitation in speaking for them, being a V.F.F. in good standing myself) the news that M-G-M, which once turned out a movie every single week, is going to make a mere half dozen films a year, to be released through Paramount or Twentieth or whomever, is only a mite less shocking than the news that M-G-M had vanished entirely and forever.

Chad Everett???

How could M-G-M the "Tiffany's of the industry," the studio with "more stars than there are in heaven," have fallen so low? It didn't happen overnight. We veteran film fans should have seen the handwriting on the Metro wall as of the mid-'60s when the once glittering roster of great names was down to one major contract player: Chad Everett. Chad Everett??? That's a star? To ask the question is to answer it.

To go back to the glorious beginning, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was officially launched in 1924 with Louis Mayer as vice president in charge of production. (Mayer emigrated from Minsk, Russia, at the age of 3, and got into the movie business via the scrap metal business.)

In his history of the Metro corporation, "The Lion's Share," Bosley Crowther relates that at the dedication ceremonies Mayer sat on a platform with Mae Murray (the blonde with the bee-stung lips), Lon Chaney ("Don't step on it, it might be Lon Chaney"), Ramon Navarro (one of M-G-M's answers to Valentino), Antonio Moreno (another Valentino challenger), John Gilbert (who was to prove you didn't have to be a Latin to be a great lover), and Lillian Gish. The Admiral of the Pacific Fleet was also present. While telegrams of congratulation from President Coolidge and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover were read to the assemblage, a shower of roses from the Governor of California was dropped from a circling plane.

Happy endings

When they gave him a large symbolic key to the new studio, Mayer, all choked up with emotion, pledged that each M-G-M picture would "teach a lesson." He was no doubt thinking of lessons like, "Be good to your mother or God will strike you dead." Mayer was very big on mothers and moral finales. He was also big on happy endings; he preferred, on the whole, that M-G-M heroes should see the light before it was too late.

His vision was shared by countless millions of moviegoers until—and when it happened Mayer wasn't the only one who couldn't understand it—the world was a different place and mothers were out of style, especially in the movies.

Two of the big hits in the early M-G-M days occasioned much strife, grief and excessive expenditure. When the temperamental Erich Von Stroheim refused to permit the temperamental Mae Murray to make a big entrance for the waltz

sequence in "The Merry Widow," Mae called the director "a dirty Hun," Von Stroheim stalked off the set and Mayer tried to replace him with another director.

The stagehands and the extras, loyal to the master, refused to work and jeered and threatened Mayer when he tried to take command. Von Stroheim was called back and Mae was persuaded to apologize. The necessity for this galled Mayer at least as much as it galled Mae, since the director had infuriated the studio chief by casually remarking that "practically all women are whores."

(In her autobiography Mae Murray told how she went rushing to the train station to retrieve her co-star John Gilbert, who was so crushed by Von Stroheim's brutal criticisms that he wanted to leave Hollywood forever. Mae swore that it was only when she got to the depot that she realized she was wearing nothing but a hat and shoes.)

Lots of camels

"Ben Hur" had been in production in Rome for many months under the auspices of the Goldwyn company when Goldwyn merged into M-G-M. George Walsh, a muscular type specializing in rugged outdoor dramas, had been cast as Ben Hur. Mayer and Irving Thalberg, the "wonder boy" who handled the "creative end" of studio operations, hadn't seen any of the footage but they apparently stoutly feared the worst, because they sent to Italy

company was called home, and the great chariot race was shot on the home grounds, in an Antioch coliseum especially built for the film at a cost of \$300,000. It was the biggest movie set erected up to that time (1925). M-G-M's vastly more expensive remake of "Ben Hur" won the Oscar for "Best Picture" in 1959.

Through the years, Louis Mayer demonstrated a powerful knack for recognizing star material in its preliminary stages. In 1924 he saw "The Saga of Gosta Berling" in a Berlin screening room and at once decided Greta Garbo, the girl playing the second female lead, had something special. He met her, noted with disapproval that she had fat arms and thick ankles, and told her through an interpreter that "In America our men don't like fat women." According to Crowther, Garbo accepted this information "thoughtfully."

Mayer signed the fabulous face to a contract and was agreeably surprised when a much reduced Garbo arrived in Hollywood; she had taken his advice and looked the other way when they passed the mashed potatoes.

It wasn't long before Garbo and John Gilbert were thrilling the world on screen in "Love" (a version of "Anna Karenina" with a happy ending) and off-screen, too, via the fan magazines. Walter Winchell

sleeping pills—Mickey sprawled out on one bed, and me on another."

Jean Harlow. Ava Gardner. Margaret Sullivan. Rosalind Russell. Lana Turner. "Look," said Adela Rogers St. John, "Let's not get mixed up about the real Lana Turner. The real Lana Turner is Lana Turner. She was always a movie star and loved it. Her personal life and her movie star life are one."

Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. William Powell and Myrna Loy. Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon. Marie Dressler and Wallace Beery. Marie Dressler and Polly Moran. Crawford and Gable. Metro had more teams than any other studio.

Mayer loves "Sin"

John, Lionel and Ethel. Metro had more Barrymores than you could shake a stick at.

Helen Hayes. Irving Thalberg, whose ability to re-edit and reshape flops into hits is called legendary, is said to have taken a piece of garbage called "Lullaby" and converted it into "The Sin of Madelon Claudet," which won an Academy Award for Helen Hayes (1931-32). "Madelon" was still garbage, but Louis Mayer loved it, and so did large audiences.

Johnny Weismuller. Frank Sinatra. Fred Astaire. Gene Kelly. Robert Montgomery. Lauritz Melchior. Margaret O'Brien. Red Skelton. Eleanor Powell. Lawrence Toppett. Robert Taylor. Laurel & Hardy. Lucille Ball. June Allyson. Is there anybody who didn't work for Metro?

"Grand Hotel." "Mutiny on the Bounty" (the Gable-Laughton version). "San Francisco." "Camille." "The Thin Man." "The Good Earth." "Captains Courageous." "Night Must Fall." "A Night at the Opera." "Meet me in St. Louis." "Singing in the Rain." "An American in Paris." "The Philadelphia Story." No doubt about it, they turned out a nifty entertainment at Metro from time to time.

To be sure, they also turned out a lot of gilded corn over the years: dated high-society dramas about wives unjustly accused of carnal error, sappy operettas ("The Affinity of MacDonald and Eddy for bad plots is amazing" wrote one critic), imbecilic Esther Williams specials ("Just so much water over the dam"), dreary costume dramas (Clark Gable spent years trying to live down "Parnell"), and technicolor hodge-podges advancing the curious proposition that stardom awaited any ingenue soprano lucky enough to get an audition with Jose Iturbi.

Comes the smiling cobra

In 1969, James Aubrey, formerly the president of the CBS television network, called "The Smiling Cobra" for his ruthless ways in business and other things for his support of such shows as "The Beverly Hillbillies" and "Petticoat Junction," was named president of a much-eroded Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. In its April 2 issue of this year, *Newsweek* hailed him for having fashioned a "remarkable comeback" for M-G-M.

"The smiling cobra hacked away at assets that dripped Hollywood sentiment," says *Newsweek*. He sold Andy Hardy's old auto and Judy Garland's red "Oz" slippers and several warehouses full of theatrical properties to a Los Angeles auctioneer for \$1.4 million. He sold 187 acres of the back lot to a housing developer. He made movies like "House of Dark Shadows" and "Shaft" and "Skyjacked" and they cleaned up. "We measure a movie by its box office," said Aubrey. "We don't care about awards and reviews." As we take leave of Aubrey in this April 2 issue of *Newsweek*, he has moved on from three years of producing B movies to the manufacture of such attractions as "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" and "The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing."

Back to that recent *Variety*. The bible of show biz says that the returns on Metro's three summer releases—"Billy the Kid" and "Cat Dancing" and "Shaft in Africa"—were "grim." Various Hollywood observers said all along that selling props and back lot acreage is no substitute for making movies. If Aubrey produces more "highly selective quality films" like those most recent examples, Leo the Lion will be a species more endangered than even the most pessimistic students of the cinema scene had thought.



a new director, a new scenario writer, and a new star, Ramon Navarro.

"Be sure to get plenty of camels in it! Lots of camels!" shouted Mayer as the party set out. Things continued to go wrong in Rome, even with all that fresh talent. A galley was set afire for a battle scene, and the extras aboard it were instructed to jump into the sea. According to Bosley Crowther, the flames got out of control, the terrified extras "tumbled pell-mell into the sea," and it became apparent that many of them had lied when eager to make a few Lire, they had sworn that they could swim.

Rescue launches had apparently saved the day for all hands, but when the extras had changed back into their street clothes and left for home, "Three sets of unclaimed clothing were found remaining in the dressing room." It was felt that Mussolini's police wouldn't take kindly to the idea of Hollywood killing Italian workmen, so "the unit manager secretly rowed the telltale bundles out to sea that night and sank them in a weighted bag." Two days later the missing extras, still in the costumes of Roman soldiers, showed up and demanded their clothes: "They had been picked up by a fishing vessel and landed down the coast. The unit manager happily reimbursed them for the loss of their things."

Garbo shrinks fat

After many other traumatic events, including a riot between Pro-Fascist and Anti-Fascist workmen, the "Ben Hur"

coined "Garbo-Gilberting" as a synonym for love-making.

The romance was over and done with by the time sound came in; then "Garbo talks!" became a magic slogan, and John Gilbert was laughed off the screen. His voice sounded high and squeaky, the fans decided, especially when he cried "I love you! I love you! I love you!"

Gable pastured

Clark Gable, who became "a new kind of hero" when he slammed Norma Shearer around in "A Free Soul" (1931), went on to become the biggest male box-office draw in movies. He was bitter about being "put out to pasture" when his contract expired in 1954 and Dore Schary, who had succeeded Mayer as studio head, decided in an economy move that the 53-year-old star's \$520,000-a-year salary was prohibitive.

Joan Crawford, the first star to be discovered and developed exclusively by M-G-M and a real durability champ, recently said, "Clark Gable was the king of an empire called Hollywood. The empire is not what it was—but the king has not been dethroned, even after death."

Judy Garland. Is there anybody who doesn't know that up to the very last minute they planned to cut "Over the Rainbow" out of the classic "Wizard of Oz"? Judy once said that she and Mickey Rooney, her frequent co-star, were kept "working days and nights on end. They'd give us pep pills to keep us up after we were exhausted. Then they'd take us to the studio hospital and knock us cold with