

## **Mark Vieira, *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince***

### **Study List**

Minimum Reading Assignment: chapters I = 1, 2, 5, 6, 7; II = 10, 13, 15, 16; III = 18, 19, 20, 22, Epilogue. (Just over half the book)

#### **1. The Boy Wonder**

General Manager Universal Studios under Carl Laemmle.

He stands up to the formidable Erich von Stroheim! – establishes the tradition of the omnipotent producer.

#### **2. A Funny Little Man**

Thalberg moves to Metro films; for now he is the darling of LB Mayer.

Louis B. Mayer's idea of a good film.

Thalberg's routine: script goes through several story conferences with producer before approval.

#### **3. Three Shaky Little Stars**

He hires Norma Shearer; her "wandering eye"; her closeness to Irving.

Merger creates MGM – Metro, Goldwyn, and Mayer.

#### **4. A Studio Style**

Thalberg: tendency to give his writers and directors their way if they insist; he is no dictator; also "every great film must have one great scene".

Irving dates several stars.

"He who Gets Slapped" MGM's first big hit.

#### **5. Wicked Stepchildren**

Stroheim's 'Greed' – "militaristic will", artist's ego, and runaway costs; Irving concludes must keep tight rein on directors.

The making of the original 'Ben-Hur' -- \$4 million! But a smash hit.

#### **6. A Business of Personalities**

Irving is overworked – he personally supervises (too) many films; he has a heart attack.

He is paid a lot of money.

## **7. Top of the Heap**

MGM makes huge profit in 1926.

61-62: The Thalberg procedure for making a film – from selecting the script; the treatment; the script; the script conferences; selection of star; selection of appropriate director; oversight by a producer; Thalberg's own direct participation, etc.

King Vidor's 'The Big Parade' 1926 – superior film; huge success.

Greta Garbo signed by Mayer; her first films were a smashing success.

Thalberg begins to date Norma Shearer.

## **8. "More Stars than There Are in Heaven"**

Thalberg refuses to accept flattery from employees; he wants frank discussion with them; he works extremely long hours.

He cultivates the star persona of Garbo (71); hot on-screen chemistry with John Gilbert.

Creation of the Academy of MPAS in 1927

Norma Shearer lands her man: married in 1927.

"Talking pictures are just a passing fad."

## **9. The Golden Silents**

Thalberg hires and cultivates more stars: Joan Crawford, Maurice Chevalier, Lillian Gish.

King Vidor's second masterpiece, 'The Crowd'.

Public's infatuation with talking pictures. Thalberg and Vidor: just when we have perfected the silent film art form, everyone rushes to get on the sound picture bandwagon; runaway technology!

## **10. All-Talking, All-Singing, All-Profitable**

Irving is desperate for a hit: thus the making of 'The Broadway Melody' (1929) as the first Hollywood musical.

The relationship between Thalberg and Mayer begins to sour – power and salary; both jockeying for position with the New York bosses.

97-98: Regrets about the passing of silent films.

Transition to sound is difficult for many MGM actors: while Shearer (Irving's wife) and Joan Crawford emerge immediately as major sound stars, John Gilbert voice and acting have the "gum chewers" tittering.

MGM makes 'Hallelujah for "prestige": one of very few Hollywood movies about Blacks.

Boss Nicholas Schenck tries to sell MGM to Fox, but the independence of MGM is saved by the Justice Department.

## **11. The Production Code**

Irving likes to hang out with/work with writers; his relationship with Frances Marion. Adapting to sound shooting, the silver “camera blimp” is introduced to the MGM soundstages. Irving sends Sam Marx to New York to find playwrights for writing acceptable scripts! While Gilbert’s career fades (squeaky voice and histrionic gestures), Garbo makes her first talkie, ‘Anna Christie’; Thalberg himself comes up with famous slogan, “Garbo Talks!” Shearer gets Academy Award for risqué ‘The Divorcée’ 1931; son born to Irving and Norma; Norma is now the Queen of Hollywood with the pick of plum parts.

## **12. Visiting Royalty – 1931**

Irving is known to respect writers, give them rein (“If it isn’t for the writing, we’ve got nothing.” 147); but he always has the final say. MGM makes blockbuster ‘Trader Horn’, a big money maker. Decline of the silent stars: Gilbert goes from bad film to bad film; Buster Keaton loses independence, his films suffer under MGM, although he makes money! The story of Lenore Coffee (144-47) shows Irving’s dictatorial tendencies; male chauvinism. Thalbergs take a rather nerve-rattling trip to Europe in 1931. Irving defends the practice of reshooting scenes to preserve the quality of the film. The careers of Clark Gable and Joan Crawford progress. Irving uses retakes and previews to make Garbo’s ‘Mata Hari’ 1931 into a big hit; MGM called “retake valley”. (182) Conflict brewing between previously friendly Mayer and Thalberg over money.

## **13. New Morals for Old**

Frances Marion on Hollywood in the Depression (161) Scott Fitzgerald hired, but no success as a writer – alcoholic binges and he hates collaboration. Thalberg’s personality: decisive – his decisions were final; although well read, he was overawed by people with advanced degrees; insecure about his fragile health (nitroglycerine tablets); Myrna Loy thought he was beautiful with deep eyes. He assigned writers to work on a script considering them of first importance; he had them work in teams; he met constantly with them in story conferences to see how they were doing on an important script; he made concrete story suggestions to the writers; intense story conferences on multi-star ‘Grand Hotel’: e.g., to start the film with tracking shot through the lobby or the several conversations on the telephones. (169-177) The Studio has problems with the (studio) censors over ‘Red-Headed Woman’. Thalberg’s reliance on sneak previews in order to gauge audience reaction to his films. His consistent involvement in the conception, filming, and marketing of ‘Grand Hotel’ 1932.

## **14. The Right to be Wrong**

Norma Shearer: in a regal (favorable) position because of her marriage to the boss; her tension with Joan Crawford; her seriousness about her profession – “self-improvement”. Irving’s political conservatism: despises Communists; wants no radicalism at MGM.

Irving makes some mistakes.

He hires the famous Barrymores – John (“the Profile”), Lionel, and Ethel – from Broadway. He spends large amounts of money filming ‘Rasputin and the Empress’ 1931. Irving constantly involved in script conferences to make the film work. Contrasted with his writers, he doesn’t give a damn about historical accuracy, but dramatic impact is what counts. The tsarist characters living in the USA hit MGM with an expensive lawsuit. Ethel Barrymore hates Hollywood. (196)

## **15. Hollywood Icarus**

David Ogden Stewart’s appreciation of Thalberg’s contribution to his scripts. (200)

The fragile, although talented Paul Bern; although sexually inactive himself (undersized genitals?), he was drawn to exotic, unstable young women; when the precocious Jean Harlow expected him to proposition her, he talked to her about wine and read the works of Joseph Stalin; much against Irving’s wish – he was close to Bern – , Bern and Harlow get married! It doesn’t work out: Bern commits suicide.

Thalberg, who saw Bern as sort of father figure, very depressed by Bern’s suicide.

Meanwhile, Irving gets Harlow and Clark Gable together in two hits – ‘Red Dust’ and ‘China Seas’ that combine the masculine appeal of Gable with the girlish sexiness of Harlow.

Thalberg’s relationship with Mayer is falling apart; he tells Nicholas Schenck that he feels overworked and underappreciated and wants his power confirmed and his money increased. He gets more money from Schenck, and then the ‘Fortune’ article (218) appears attributing the success of MGM to Thalberg and not to Mayer. Mayer is angry at the “cult” of Thalberg among those working at MGM.

Thalberg suffers another serious heart attack – 1932. Mayer ready to strike.

## **16. The New Setup (1932-33)**

Mayer and Schenck strike back against Thalberg and decide to reorganize the studio, bringing in a system that would have six autonomous producing units under executive producers answerable only to Mayer and hiring David O. Selznick to be independent of Irving and produce his own films.

Thalberg replies with letter to Mayer objecting (in vain) to the new set-up (226-29). Mayer responds with his usual hypocritical protestations of eternal affection (230-32) and Thalberg seems resigned (233).

While in Europe Thalberg receives a letter from Mayer abolishing his position and protesting that he is doing it all for Irving’s sake; he still says that he feels that Irving is his own son. Albert Lewin as a loyal Thalberg man.

Although tempted to leave and form his own production company, Irving set to accept the new arrangement: he will make A films and still be in charge of Norma Shearer’s career.

## **17. Honor with Credit**

Weekly attendance rebounds in 1934.

The rise of the censors in response to "filthy pictures". The Legion of Decency formed and Joseph Breen ("militantly devout Catholic") put in charge of the Hayes Office; "thinks that all Shearer pictures should be carefully watched." The Catholic boycott very effective in Philadelphia where Catholic archbishop denounces from the pulpit. (255) Production Code Administration created; now self-censorship has teeth.

Hearst Castle at San Simeon: "a feudal castle right out of the Arabian Nights". (F. Marion) Shearer's friction with Marion Davies overcome; followed by visit to San Simeon.

The making of "The Merry Widow"; starring Maurice Chevalier, directed by immortal Ernst Lubitsch. The Breen Office chops it up with 13 awkward cuts!

Feud between Norma-Irving and Hearst-Davies; Marion wants to play 'Marie Antoinette'!

Irving into politics: as right-wing Republican who almost excuses Hitler; he produces anti-Upton Sinclair filmettes to help defeat him in 1934 election.

### **18. "To Hell With Art" 1935**

The chapter gives a good idea of what a typical day in the life of Thalberg was like – frenetic! Thalberg wants a movie that will make money ("To Hell with Art").

How Irving works teams of writers (268-70); frustrating for many writers, who rarely get credit. LBM still insists that he demoted Irving for the sake of his health and his family! (272)

Irving and Norma have a very active social life; delight in Garbo's impressions of Mayer; plays bridge with Chico Marx and Sam Goldwyn – for high stakes – wins \$14,000.

Thalberg hires the Marx Brothers; their antics (282!); he develops "A Night at the Opera". They test the jokes on the road before shooting the film.

Irving focuses on 'China Seas: working with Harlow; and yielding to the director who resents having Thalberg present on the set (284-91). The film is very successful.

Difficulties of making 'Mutiny on the Bounty' – tension between Clark Gable and Charles Laughton.

### **19. "Napoleon Thalberg"**

L.B. Mayer's obnoxious behavior – ill-tempered, sentimental, hypocritical, insulting.

D.O. Selznick leaves MGM to head his own studio (Mayer furious).

The Breen Office has the power to veto movies in the planning stages if considered offensive.

Thalberg extremely right-wing on the possibility of union organizing in Hollywood – "Napoleon Thalberg". He believes Communism much worse than Nazism. (309) Tells his subordinates, "We live in a paradise." (303)

When the writers organized the Screen Writers Guild, Thalberg is furious – one of the rare occasions he loses his temper; he opposes them at every step, and even threatens that he will close down the studio, if they go on strike. (?!) He maneuvers to undermine the radicals. He does however change directions and relents after a while.

### **20. A Feverish Energy (1936)**

Thalberg passes on the competition for 'Gone With the Wind'.

Irving the script doctor: how he focuses the character of a story ('Goodbye Mr. Chips', 321-22) – good woman turns a failed man into a successful one.

Decides to make 'The Good Earth' in California with Caucasian actors, even Paul Muni who says that he looks as Chinese as Herbert Hoover; he has several writers working on the script; an enormous budget, lavish sets; fabulous special effects and editing make it a gripping epic; film big success.

Thalberg gives Garbo vehicle, 'Camille', to the savvy George Cukor; Thalberg has several writers work on it (with script conferences in which everyone is free to express their opinion); wonderful performances from Garbo (perhaps her best) and Laura Hope Crews.

## **21. A Labor of Love**

Irving insists on (obsessed with) making 'Romeo and Juliet' starring Norma Shearer, despite Mayer's opposition and Shearer being about 20 years older than Juliet; he often comes to the set during shooting.

Leslie Howard, who plays Romeo, is also much older than his character; John Barrymore problematical because of "ten years of debauchery" (he has to be transported to the set each day from his rehab facility); directed by George Cukor.

Joe Breen warns Thalberg about injecting a "hot bedroom scene" into the film.

Much comedy from the drunken antics of John Barrymore.

The film gets lukewarm reviews; and it was way too expensive (\$3 million) to make a profit.

August 1936: Thalberg exhausted and depressed by the "failure" of the film.

## **22. The Gods Are Jealous**

Albert Lewin: You are too successful; "The gods hate people like you. They're probably hiding behind that wall with a great big bat."

David Lewis says that Irving is always willing to listen to subordinates who disagree. (360)

Irving and Norma go to Del Monte Lodge in early September; Irving gets a cold, improves momentarily, but relapses with pneumonia when he resumes his killer schedule in Los Angeles. Doctors called in; despite their hope that he will recover, he dies on September 14, 1936.

Mayer starts sobbing when he meets Shearer; Mayer and Thalberg are never reconciled.

Funeral on September 16; buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery.

## **23. Unfinished Projects**

Irving's estate a cool \$4.5 million before taxes.

Most of Thalberg's followers – Lewis, Lewin, Stewart, etc. – soon left MGM.

Mayer wants Thalberg's shares of MGM's profits; Norma (as his heir) resists, and Schenck finally orders Mayer to compromise with her.

## **24. Marie Antoinette**

High expense in preparing the film for Shearer; 11 writers!  
Shearer attracted to pretty boy Tyrone Power, but she resists getting involved.  
Producer Stromberg decides not to film in Technicolor, since it would have inflated the cost even further; he is later forced out of the production by Mayer.  
No-nonsense speed demon Woody Van Dyke directs the film.  
Shearer has the power to force reshooting scenes that she does not like.  
Film a commercial success, but still loses quite a bit of money.

### **Epilogue**

“The thoughtful, quirky, innovative cinema of Irving Thalberg dies with him.” (395)