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Broadway in Hollywood: Film Producer David O. Selznick and His Theatrical Ties in the 1940s

Milan Hain

Abstract

This article examines the theatrical activities and connections of famed Hollywood film producer David O. Selznick. Based on a study of archival materials and articles in the contemporary U.S. press, the author reconstructs Selznick's relationship to the theatre and argues that it was characterised by ambiguity. On the one hand, the producer used the theatre as a source of acting talent and a training ground for honing the skills of his contract actors; on the other hand, the theatre represented a burden in terms of time and financial resources, and its positive impact on Selznick's business and creative activities was limited, given its relatively modest audience appeal, especially compared to the mass appeal of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

Key words

classical Hollywood, Broadway, studio system, star studies, stardom, acting, David O. Selznick, prestige

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This article explores the theatrical activities and connections of influential film producer David O. Selznick, who is closely associated with the golden era of Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s. The text builds on my extensive historical research, which culminated in a monograph focusing on Selznick's strategies in the field of star development (HAIN 2021). My research has argued that the producer succeeded in his role as a maker of both films and stars largely because he was able to build a specific corporate brand that effectively distinguished his independent production company Selznick International Pictures (and later David O. Selznick Productions) from the competition represented mainly by the vertically integrated major Hollywood studios such as Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, MGM, and RKO. The strategy relied above all on an emphasis on quality and prestige, which in Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework represent what is known as symbolic capital.¹ Selznick systematically accumulated symbolic valorisation through several tactics, which included: (1) a focus on adaptations of literary originals and avoiding film genres with a lower cultural status (comedy, Western); (2) the accumulation of recognition in the form of awards and accolades in the press; (3) the careful coordination of publicity and promotion of his contract stars, which was to avoid association with consumer products and a cheap (commercialised) version of glamour; and (4) the cultivation of his stars' acting skills and versatility, which could be achieved, for example, by associating them with the 'legitimate stage' (HAIN 2021: 257–275).

The aim of this text is to elaborate on Selznick's creative and business interactions with the U.S. theatrical environment. As I will demonstrate, Selznick, who from 1935 operated his own independent production company, made use of the theatre in a number of ways. Broadway was for him a hotbed of talent, from which he consistently recruited new members of his illustrious star 'stable' with the help of his New York associates. Cynthia Baron (2016: 112) has noted that with the advent of talking pictures, theatres became a major source of talented and skilled performers for Hollywood studios, and Selznick's company was therefore no exception. The producer also forged close ties with geographically more proximate theatre venues, particularly the Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara (some 90 miles from his company's headquarters in Culver City), where his actors could hone their acting techniques and gain confidence in front of a live audience. In the late 1940s, Selznick financially supported the activities of the La Jolla Playhouse founded by several of his contract players, led by Gregory Peck. Finally, the association with the theatre served as a means of enhancing Selznick's own prestige, which, as I have already noted, became a key attribute of his corporate brand. Although attendance at U.S. theatres declined dramatically in the 1930s and 1940s, and 'film reigned supreme', the theatre was still considered a more

1 According to Bourdieu (1984: 291), symbolic capital refers to the resources or assets that individuals or groups possess in a social field, which enable them to gain power, influence, and social status. It encompasses non-material and intangible assets such as reputation, prestige, honour, recognition, credentials, titles, and qualifications, which hold value within a particular social context. Symbolic capital operates through social recognition and validation, allowing individuals or groups to assert authority, dominance, and social distinction. Significantly, symbolic capital can be often converted into financial terms.

respected form of cultural production, and a professional association with the stage could strengthen one's symbolic capital (BARON 2016: xviii).

I also argue that Selznick's relationship to the theatre was not entirely one-sided and positive. While stage acting was often an artistically fulfilling activity for his actors, the time-consuming theatre schedule could interfere with film commitments or other activities that Selznick intended for his performers. Moreover, even in the case of a successful stage production, the audience impact was limited compared to the mass appeal of the film medium. In what follows, then, I analyse Selznick's ambivalence towards the theatre based on a thorough study of archival documents, particularly the talent files which are part of the extensive Selznick Collection at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and articles in the contemporary U.S. press. I am primarily interested in the role of theatrical activities in the broader context of Selznick's independent production company's operations from the late 1930s to late 1940s. To this end, I reconstruct the producer's decision-making process and describe his professional relationships with his contract players. The article amounts to a 'catalogue' of the possible uses of Selznick's theatrical connections as well as instances of interference with star development, a key activity for the producer throughout the 1940s. In the first part, I describe how the milieu of the stage served as a source of talented and well-trained actors who could, given a proper treatment, become stars in Hollywood. I follow this by detailing how actors already working for film could benefit from theatrical experience to enhance their acting techniques. Another type of benefit was an increase in corporate prestige and strengthening of Selznick's brand, which I deal with in the third section. Finally, I summarise the negative aspects of the issue, where the theatrical activities, due to their time-consuming nature, may sometimes have become more of a hindrance to the development of the film careers of Selznick's contract actors. Throughout the article, I use as examples the careers of prominent members of Selznick's acting stable, particularly Ingrid Bergman, Jennifer Jones, Dorothy McGuire, Vivien Leigh, Gregory Peck, Joseph Cotten, and Alan Marshal.

Theatre as a reservoir of talents

Theatre scholar Thomas Postlewait noted that

the history of [U.S.] theatre since the 1930s cannot be separated from the history of Hollywood. The dynamic relation between theatre and film, Hollywood and New York, shapes the development and significance of theatre – aesthetically, socially, and economically. In other words, much of the history of Broadway occurred in Hollywood. (POSTLEWAIT 1993: 249)

Cynthia Baron came to similar conclusions in her ground-breaking book *Modern Acting: The Lost Chapter of American Film and Theatre*, devoted to the development of acting methods from the 1930s onwards. Baron (2016) observes the historically close

relationship between Hollywood and Broadway, which manifested itself in a reciprocal transfer of people, concepts, and ideas:

If one considers that the actors, directors, playwrights, and other theatre professionals who found work in sound cinema actually continued to apply the craft knowledge and experience they had acquired in theatre, it is possible to see how studying studio-era Hollywood enhances and extends an understanding of American theatre. (BARON 2016: 9)

Given these enduringly close ties, it is surprising that academic reflection of the relationship between U.S. film and theatre (with the possible exception of the film and stage musical) is relatively sparse (KUNZE 2017: 1).

For Hollywood studios, the theatre was an important resource of acting talent. With the coming of sound

theatrical venues would become the primary training ground and audition site for actors who went on to find work in studio-era Hollywood. [...] the transition to sound made actors with theatrical training valuable, for they had learned to speak clearly but naturally, without regional accents unless called for by the part. They were also likely capable of the kind of script analysis needed to create performances that conveyed characters' evolving inner experiences through the pitch, intonation, and rhythm of their words. (BARON 2016: 112)

As trained acting professionals became valuable commodities, Hollywood studios, through designated talent scouts, closely monitored developments at leading theatres on Broadway and elsewhere. According to a January 1934 issue of the leading trade journal *Variety*, 'an estimated 70% of actors [...] came from the New York stage' (KUNZE 2017: 5).

Selznick's independent production company Selznick International Pictures (SIP) played a leading role in this starting in the late 1930s, when it began to focus on developing its stable of stars (HAIN 2021: 21). As I will show, most of its members came from, or had some experience with, the theatre. Selznick and his associates paid attention to beauty pageants and various entertainment shows, but they concentrated most of their efforts on the stage, because that was the area with the greatest potential to discover a skilled actor or actress who would best meet the medium's demand for creating a believable fictional character and thus align with the studio's brand based on quality and prestige. Looks were important, but even more important were photogenicity (a quality different from beauty) and talent.² As the producer stated in 1943 on behalf of his contract actress who was not considered as particularly pretty by the industry standards: 'Dorothy McGuire is [...] worth more than a hundred genuine beauties' (HRC 985/9).

² In her book *The Star Machine*, Jeanine Basinger defines the basic requisites of stardom (see BASINGER 2007: 3–4).

Because Selznick was busy most of the time producing films and negotiating deals on the West Coast, he relied on his representatives in New York to find new talent. His most important collaborator in this regard was Katharine ‘Kay’ Brown, who became responsible for several key discoveries during her time at Selznick’s company (HAIN 2021: 19). Brown’s activities included regularly attending Broadway openings and maintaining close contacts with leading personalities of the New York theatre scene.³ Whenever she came across a promising individual, she gave notice to Selznick, who could then order a screen test. A positive result could lead to the signing of an exclusive seven-year option contract and a move to the other side of the continent. In addition to Selznick’s people actively seeking out new talent, his company received numerous offers from aspiring actors, ambitious parents, and managers of various fledgling theatre companies. Yet, these offerings usually went nowhere, because Selznick preferred proven individuals who had already made some kind of professional breakthrough (HAIN 2021: 268).

From her office on Madison Avenue, Brown had only a few blocks to Times Square, around which New York’s most important theatre venues were concentrated. During her tenure with Selznick’s company, which lasted until 1942, she was instrumental in the engagement of several promising personalities, who were soon transformed into valuable stars. These included Gene Kelly, Dorothy McGuire, Gregory Peck, and Ingrid Bergman. In Bergman’s case, the impetus for signing the contract was her role in the Swedish film *Intermezzo* (1936), which she reprised in Selznick’s 1939 Hollywood remake. The others, however, were discovered in the theatre.

In January 1941, Kay Brown saw a stage musical comedy *Pal Joey* from the book by John O’Hara with music and lyrics by Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart. She immediately informed her boss about the talented actor Gene Kelly, who played the title role: ‘I certainly think he is excellent in *Pal Joey*, and a magnificent hooper’ (HRC 911/4). Seeing great promise in the twenty-eight-year-old performer, Selznick signed him to a long-term contract in July of the same year and intended to cast him in an upcoming Alfred Hitchcock film (also under a long-term contract to him) or a film adaptation of *Pal Joey*. Neither plan came to fruition, however (the rights to *Pal Joey* had earlier been bought by Columbia), and Selznick sold Kelly’s contract six months later to MGM, which was eminently interested in him as a welcome addition to its musical unit centred around producer Arthur Freed (HAIN 2021: 127–131). Brown and Selznick’s instincts were correct – Kelly’s first film at MGM, *For Me and My Gal* (1942), made him a star, and the press proclaimed that he was ‘the hottest thing in town right now’ (SCOTT 1942: 37). He went on to become a leading personality in the musical genre and retained that status for at least another 15 years.

³ Brown’s other domain was the search for literary material for filming purposes. According to J. E. Smyth, she ‘crisscrossed the country with assistants Dorothy Modisette and later Elsa Neuberger, identifying and optioning the best books on the market’ (SMYTH 2018: 64). In this way, Brown secured the rights to Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* for Selznick, which became the highest-grossing film in Hollywood’s history. She was also involved in obtaining the rights to Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. Both films won back-to-back Oscars for Best Picture in 1940 and 1941, respectively.

Just two weeks after the initial information about Kelly, Kay Brown reported another discovery to Selznick:

CLAUDIA BY ROSE FRANKEN OPENED LAST NIGHT WITH GIRL NAMED DOROTHY MACGUIRE [sic!] THAT REALLY CAN ACT AND REALLY IS WORTH BREAKING YOUR NECK ABOUT. SHE IS PERSONAL CLIENT OF LELAND HAYWARD AND HE WILL HANDLE DEAL. LIKEWISE CLAUDIA IS A PLAY WORTH PAYING MONEY FOR. (HRC 855/12)

After several roles in commercially disappointing productions, McGuire came to prominence with the title role in the Broadway stage adaptation of the novel *Claudia* by Rose Franken, who also directed the production (HAIN 2021: 96). In addition to Brown's ecstatic review, Selznick also received a positive reference from his trusted contract director Robert Stevenson, who in a telegram recommended acquisition of the property including a large part of the cast headed by McGuire 'WHO IS SUPERBLY CAST IN AN INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT PART' (HRC 855/5). Selznick immediately initiated negotiations with both Franken and the actress' agent, Leland Hayward, and eventually succeeded in obtaining both her services and the rights to the film adaptation (HAIN 2021: 98). Unlike Kelly, McGuire remained with Selznick and became an important part of his star stable, even though she never appeared in a film personally produced by him and instead was regularly loaned out to other studios. Her film debut was indeed the film version of *Claudia*, after Selznick sold off the rights to Twentieth Century-Fox in November 1942, and it ended up a critical as well as a commercial success (HAIN 2021: 102–103).

Kay Brown also informed Selznick about promising young actor Gregory Peck, who in early 1941 was still studying at the Neighborhood Playhouse Drama School under the tutelage of the acclaimed Sanford Meisner and Robert Ross. Brown had 'a very strong hunch about this boy' (HRC 568/5) and recommended doing a series of screen tests with him. Selznick agreed but was not satisfied with the result:

I am sorry to have to say that I don't see what we could do with Gregory Peck. Maybe a big studio could use him, but we would have great difficulty in either using him ourselves or in getting other studios to use him that didn't have him under contract. He photographs like Abe Lincoln, and if he has a great personality I don't think it comes through in these tests. (HRC 3344/3)

Selznick did not become interested in the actor until a year and a half later, when Peck had finished his studies at the Neighborhood Playhouse and had completed a tour of Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* alongside Katharine Cornell. Most of his stage productions failed from the commercial standpoint, but his performances were praised by the press (MOLYNEAUX 1995: 6). For example, he earned all the plaudits for his difficult role in *The Morning Star*, with *Variety* stating that he portrayed his character 'flawlessly' (WATERS 1942: 42). At that time, however, other Hollywood studios

were already interested in Peck and Selznick had to settle for a non-exclusive contract. Thanks to the ingenious tactics of agent Maynard Morris, the actor ended up having commitments with MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, and producer Casey Robinson (HAIN 2021: 134–135). Even so, Peck became a prominent face of Selznick's acting company, particularly through his roles in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and *The Paradine Case* (1947). As I will show below, his stage work meant a great deal to him, and with Selznick's help he strove to develop it in parallel with his successful film career.

Joseph Cotten also joined Selznick's company after an extensive experience at the theatre. In 1934 he met Orson Welles, who hired him for the farce *Horse Eats Hat*, prepared under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project. Later, the two worked closely together in Welles' and John Houseman's Mercury Theatre which was active both on the stage and in the radio. Finally, between March 1939 and March 1940, Cotten starred in an extremely successful Broadway production of Philip Barry's comic play *The Philadelphia Story*, where he performed the role of C. K. Dexter alongside Katharine Hepburn in over four hundred performances (HAIN 2021: 139). For the purposes of the successful film adaptation, produced by MGM and directed by George Cukor, he was replaced by the star of the moment Cary Grant, but Cotten still managed to make his film debut when Orson Welles cast him in *Citizen Kane* (1941). By the time the actor joined Selznick's studio in 1942, he had therefore behind him commercially successful or artistically acclaimed projects in both film and theatre.

Other members of Selznick's star stable, Alan Marshal and Vivien Leigh, also had extensive theatrical backgrounds. In all, engaging actors based on their theatrical experience was standard practice for Selznick's company. In retrospect, the producer rated his success in selecting these individuals very highly. In June 1948, he stated that 'of all the talent that I have interviewed in years in New York, there are only a few about whom I have any regrets' (HRC 617/1). These included Beatrice Pearson, Patricia Neal, Montgomery Clift, and Marlon Brando.⁴ About the latter two, he wrote that 'the combination of the attractive personalities, great experience, enormous acting ability and charm of these two actors does not come along very often' (HRC 617/1). While Pearson starred in only two films in her short career, Neal, Clift, and Brando went on to become important Hollywood stars and Selznick's sense of recognising promising talent was thus again vindicated.

Theatre as Training Ground and Laboratory

The theatre functioned not only as a reservoir of new talent for Selznick, but also as a training ground for actors he had already brought under contract. As Cynthia Baron pointed out, in the era of the Hollywood studio system, it was widely accepted that

4 As early as 1944, Anita Colby, whose responsibility it was after Kay Brown to monitor Broadway theatres, informed her boss that 'there is a young man named Montgomery Clift [in the stage play *The Searching Wind*]. He is excellent' (HRC 856/19).

there was no fundamental difference between film and stage acting: ‘Acting manuals, interviews, and other records [...] indicate that actors working in the 1930s and 1940s saw screen performance as essentially connected to acting in theatrical venues of various types’ (BARON 2016: 219). Acting in the theatre could thus help refine one’s acting craft, strengthen confidence and (in facing a live audience) eliminate stress or stage fright. Moreover, a well-chosen and well-timed engagement in the theatre could fill in the idle times in a performer’s schedule and bring the employer a profit, however modest compared to the money being made in the film business.

Of Selznick’s actors, Ingrid Bergman, Gregory Peck, Jennifer Jones, Alan Marshal, Joan Fontaine, Vivien Leigh, and, later, Louis Jourdan all played in the theatre at one time or another during their contracts with the producer. In the early 1940s, the task of coordinating their theatrical activities was delegated to John Houseman, who had been involved with Orson Welles in the Federal Theatre Project in the second half of the previous decade. For the 1941 season, Selznick and Houseman established a partnership with the Lobero Theatre in Santa Barbara, chosen for its good reputation and proximity to Los Angeles. An article in *Variety* announced Selznick’s ambitious plans:

David O. Selznick goes strawhat this summer, with a lease on the Lobero theatre, John Houseman as production associate and a stock company comprising his own Hollywood contract players, supplemented by picture and stage names. Idea is to produce a program of weekly legit shows which will give Coast players an opportunity to act during the hot months without hopping across the country. [...] Selznick said shows that click in Santa Barbara would be routed across the country before playing on Broadway. (VARIETY 1941: 2)

The bold scheme to break into Broadway did not materialise, but Selznick’s summer stock company still garnered attention. Jennifer Jones, still under her married name of Phylis Walker, appeared that season in William Saroyan’s one-act play *Hello Out There*, which began its week-long run at the Lobero Theatre on 10 September 1941. The part of The Girl was primarily meant to improve her technique, which she continued to work on with acting coach Sanford Meisner (GREEN 2011: 207). Her work paid off when she received favourable notices and, not long afterwards, won both an Oscar and a Golden Globe in her very first film role under Selznick’s tutelage – the heroine of *The Song of Bernadette* for which she was loaned out to Twentieth Century-Fox.

Theatre training was considered suitable for both newcomers and seasoned film performers. Margaret Tallichet came to Selznick’s attention as an aspiring actress with minimal experience. Kay Brown described her as ‘a most lovely looking girl and an excellent photographic subject’ and suggested that she be cast in ‘small parts in our various films in order to give her the necessary experience to carry an important minor role by the end of next year’ (HRC 985/13). However, Selznick’s company, unlike major Hollywood studios such as MGM and Paramount, produced only a small number of films a year, and so opportunities for Tallichet were limited (HAIN 2021: 80–81). Therefore, it was arranged that she would receive acting training at the Washington Civic Theatre and stock companies in Louisville and New Orleans. She also attended

lessons with Benno Schneider aimed at eliminating flaws in her technique, which included ‘a lack of grace and physical coordination in moving about the stage’ (HRC 985/13). Tallichet made significant progress and was subsequently briefly considered as a candidate for the role of Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). However, she soon married director William Wyler and abandoned her promising acting career (WILSON 2014: 52).

Shirley Temple may have come to Selznick when she was only fifteen, but unlike Tallichet, she was already an experienced actress with ten years in Hollywood behind her. However, the producer wanted to update her star image as America’s sweetheart and make her a respected actress in line with his corporate policy. A theatrical engagement was intended to do just that because, as Selznick claimed, ‘it improves their technique and efficiency to occasionally be refreshed by audience contact’ (HRC 3345/12). He was also aware that Temple’s ‘entrance into the theatre would be a tremendous event’ from the publicity standpoint (HRC 584/5). Plays considered for Temple’s theatrical debut included *Junior Miss*, *Kiss and Tell*, and *Cabbages and Kings*, ‘charming and curious combination of a young love story with satirical comment on problems and topics of today, told in terms of Alice in Wonderland’ (HRC 584/5). In the end, she did not appear in any of them, although she did star in the film version of *Kiss and Tell* (1945) for which she was loaned out to independent producer George Abbott.

For the most part then, Selznick agreed with the industry consensus that film and theatre acting were not fundamentally different but, on the contrary, mutually reinforcing. Bette Davis, one of the most acclaimed actresses of her generation, put it succinctly when she wrote, that ‘an actor’s adjustments to the specific demands of a production context are “merely quantitative”, because stage and screen actors all “work with the same tools. Our craft requires slight modifications in them, that is all”’ (Davis quoted in BARON 2016: 220).

Sometimes, however, the influence of theatre on film acting could have been perceived negatively, especially in situations where the film medium (due to close-ups, etc.) demanded a quantitative toning down of gestures or vocal expressions necessary on the theatre stage. After her American debut in *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), Ingrid Bergman was perceived as the rare personification of simplicity and authenticity, which, among other things, originated in her seemingly effortless and natural acting style (HAIN 2021: 70). But Selznick was afraid that she might lose this freshness: ‘The one quality that she has above all others is an untheatrical quality, and this is the one thing we can tear down very easily if we start mixing her in with a lot of theatre people’ (HRC 3336/2). When he was considering signing a long-term contract with Dorothy McGuire, who had hitherto worked only on the stage, he noted with concern ‘her idiotic and exaggerated mannerisms, which are no doubt due to her inexperience, and to the success that she has probably had in getting away with this stuff on the stage’⁵

5 In another memo, Selznick wrote: ‘The girl has got to undergo pretty substantial revisions in her technic [sic] before a performance of this kind would be acceptable on the screen. She has the “cutes” to a great extent [...] and that prop smile of hers plus the showing of the teeth, etc. and all the other exaggerations and emphasis that she gives is in my opinion way overboard for screen purposes’ (HRC 292/2).

(HRC 292/2). When, already as Selznick's contract actress, she was preparing for her film debut in *Claudia*, based on a play she had been acting in for two years on Broadway, she had to devote considerable energy to adjusting her acting style to the demands of the screen (HAIN 2021: 96–97). For the most part, however, Selznick did not question the benefits that theatrical training entailed for a successful career in film.

Theatre as a Source of Publicity and Prestige

In addition to enhancing the film acting skills of Selznick's contract players and having a positive effect on their performances, theatrical training also presented an opportunity to reinforce the producer's corporate brand based on quality and prestige. Selznick's company pursued several strategies to build and strengthen its reputation as an organisation that strived for only the highest artistic standards (its motto read 'in the tradition of quality'), one of which was its association with more respected forms of cultural production, namely literature (through adaptations of celebrated novels), and legitimate stage. The involvement of Selznick's actors in the theatre, supported by a well-chosen publicity strategy, led to the accumulation of symbolic capital, which the producer could also monetise financially at an appropriate moment (HAIN 2021: 257–275).

A role in a stage production of a well-known and respected material might have been advantageous for an actor who was not doing particularly well at the time. In the early 1940s, for example, Alan Marshal's career hit a dead end. Selznick registered little interest from other studios in his services, to which he responded by, among other things, casting him in a September 1941 production of George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* at the Lobero Theatre opposite Academy Award winner Janet Gaynor who came out of her retirement for this occasion (HAIN 2021: 120). The production, directed by experienced actor Cedric Hardwicke, was well received by the press and Marshal's performance was particularly acclaimed. Hedda Hopper in the *Los Angeles Times* showered him with praise, adding that 'now David [Selznick] has himself a new star' (HOPPER 1941: 9). Following the positive reception, interest in Marshal was at an all-time high. Selznick wanted to capitalise on the momentum and fuelled the actor's publicity with various articles in the press, including fan magazines. Not long after, the producer received several interesting offers for Marshal from MGM, Warner Bros., and Paramount, one of which led to a major commercial and critical hit in the romantic drama *The White Cliffs of Dover* released in 1944 (HAIN 2021: 121).

The theatrical experience was to have a similar effect on Ingrid Bergman's burgeoning career. In mid-1941, the actress had only three modest U.S. projects to her credit and could not yet count herself among the leading Hollywood personalities (she had yet to have her breakthrough success in *Casablanca* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* – both released in 1943). The title role in Lobero Theatre's *Anna Christie*, the first play to be staged as part of Selznick's collaboration with the venue, conveniently coincided with the opening of MGM's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941), where she played a supporting

role. Appearing in a quality theatrical production was meant to raise her profile and bring her to the attention of the public and the film industry (HRC 3335/16). This was accomplished. As the press reported, more than half of the 700 attendees were ‘Hollywood-ites’ and ‘when half of Hollywood treks 90 miles to see a play, it must be something. It was!’ (MODERN SCREEN 1941: 30–31).

The favourable response pleased Selznick who noted that Bergman was on her way to becoming a star, ‘which I honestly think is unparalleled in star management where there has been no apparently great individual picture success like that of [Vivien] Leigh in [*Gone with the Wind*] or [Joan] Fontaine in *Rebecca*’ (HRC 3335/16). Mastering a demanding role on stage also made it easier to promote Bergman as a skilled and versatile actress whose success was not based solely on her attractive looks. This dimension of her star image became more prominent in later years, when she became one of the most celebrated actresses of her generation (she was nominated for three consecutive Academy Awards between 1944 and 1946, and won once for *Gaslight*).

Selznick’s entire 1941 season at the Lobero Theatre was highly regarded. As quoted by Mary Mallory, *Variety*, for example, said it was ‘the most elaborate program ever passed out for a legitimate attraction’ (MALLORY 2015). Outside of the Lobero Theatre association, theatrical credentials were also an important source of publicity for Joseph Cotten (in particular, his association with the Mercury Theatre and Orson Welles and his role in the Broadway hit *The Philadelphia Story*), Vivien Leigh (the part of Ophelia in the London Old Vic’s production of *Hamlet*), and Dorothy McGuire (722 performances in the title role in *Claudia*). By contrast, Gregory Peck may have had extensive theatre training behind him when he joined Selznick, but none of his productions ended up a box office success (MOLYNEAUX 1995: 50–60). That did not stop him, however, from becoming one of Hollywood’s most promising newcomers during the war. In 1945, for example, *LOOK* magazine named this ‘handsome graduate of several Broadway flops’ the ‘screen-discovery-of-the-year’ (LOOK 1945: 64).

A few years later, in 1947, Peck became the guiding force of the La Jolla Playhouse, a summer stock company founded in his hometown in the northern part of San Diego.⁶ David O. Selznick welcomed his initiative and supported it financially with a \$15,000 investment.⁷ The La Jolla Playhouse became in a sense a continuation of the 1941 season at the Lobero: the productions mixed Selznick’s contract actors (in addition to Peck, the casts included Dorothy McGuire, Jennifer Jones, Joseph Cotten, and Louis Jourdan) with complete newcomers, for whom it was an opportunity to showcase their potential. The troupe’s activities were characterised by an intimate, community atmosphere where ‘experienced actors work with stagehand kids, guiding them, helping them learn, keeping their flame alive’ (O’SHEA 1950: 86). But Peck also saw the theatre’s capacity to improve his own skills. He confided to *Time* magazine in 1949: ‘Hollywood is a vacuum in which criticism doesn’t exist. The only way you can

6 Initially, Peck and his partner Mel Ferrer considered starting their theatre company at Santa Barbara’s Lobero Theatre (FISHGALL 2002: 122).

7 The company was briefly called the Selznick Actors’ Company before adopting the name ‘La Jolla Playhouse’ (FISHGALL 2002: 123).

get a really honest opinion of your work is to get in front of an audience that pays to see you. Then you know in a minute if you're bad' (TIME 1949: 59).

For Selznick, the association with the La Jolla Playhouse was a welcome source of publicity and further evidence that he cared about his contract players striving to develop their acting craft and aspire to the highest artistic values. The theatrical connection enhanced the producer's own prestige. By contrast, the economic aspects were secondary for him. His players were always released for a few days' run only, which ruled out the possibility of the productions becoming commercial hits. As Mary Mallory reports, the partnership with the Lobero Theatre meant a loss of \$10,000 to \$15,000 for Selznick, and the La Jolla Playhouse's activities were not profitable either (see FISHGALL 2002: 128; MALLORY 2015).

Theatre as interference

For many Hollywood performers, working for the theatre was professionally more satisfying than film acting. The theatre offered day after day close contact with a live audience, which was presented with a continuous performance, whereas film shooting took place in bits and pieces on a sound stage with only the cast and crew present, and by the time the result was finally offered to audiences on the movie theatre screen, the actors were already preoccupied with another project. Some actors might have also appreciated the collaborative nature of theatre and the sense of community that came with working closely with a cast and crew. As reported by *Time* magazine: 'Many Hollywood stars are stagestruck. To fill their yearning for the feel of an old-fashioned stage, some cinemactors take an occasional fling at Broadway. Others settle for Eastern summer stock or the hopeful little theaters that spring up in & around Los Angeles' (TIME 1949: 59).

Despite the above-mentioned benefits to his company and the individual careers of the members of his star stable, Selznick's relationship to theatre remained more ambivalent than unreservedly positive. This is due to his specific role as a producer and head of his own studio who had to consider the artistic/creative as well as the business/financial aspects of his activities (VERTREES 1997: 8–9). His reservations were twofold: a more extensive theatrical engagement might have interfered with the making of a film, which remained his priority at all costs; and the commercial returns and audience impact of theatre were very limited compared to the mass appeal of cinema. This can be demonstrated by the examples of Selznick's contractees Ingrid Bergman and Vivien Leigh.

Before she achieved success in *Anna Christie*, Ingrid Bergman was released in 1940 for a New York staging of Ferenc Molnar's *Liliom* alongside Burgess Meredith. But Selznick soon regretted this move. As he stated in an inter-office memorandum from June 1940: 'We must all face the fact that Ingrid is simply not in demand and that all the time she was doing LILIOM damaged us in that the initial impression made by her in INTERMEZZO has been largely wasted' (HRC 3335/14). Therefore, whenever

he was faced with the decision of whether the actress would benefit from a theatre engagement (however prestigious) or a film role, he chose the latter, purely because of the power of audience impact. As he stated in January 1942, prior to Bergman's breakthrough roles in *Casablanca* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: 'Ingrid could do three great plays in New York, and be exactly where she is, miles behind Joan Fontaine, which is most regrettable, because I think there is every reason to believe that she could do at least as big as Fontaine' (HRC 3336/4). After *Casablanca* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Bergman was one of the most sought-after and admired actresses in America, with her theatrical performances having an insignificant (if any) part in that accomplishment.

Selznick was not averse to short theatrical engagements, ideally those that moved from city to city in order to spread prestige in a word-of-mouth fashion across the country. If there was a chance of a quality film, however, the theatre was side-lined, as its short- and long-term commercial impact was usually negligible. As remarked by Peter C. Kunze, 'star labor was far too valuable to expend on the stage' (KUNZE 2017: 797). After *Anna Christie*, Bergman returned to the theatre only after her contract with Selznick expired in 1946. For her performance in the Broadway staging of Maxwell Anderson's *Joan of Lorraine*, she received the first-ever Tony Award. In 1948, she reprised the same role in a film directed by Victor Fleming, but her cultural prominence never equalled her best years with Selznick.⁸

Vivien Leigh had even greater theatrical ambitions than Bergman. After the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in December 1939 and her Oscar win in February 1940, she was one of the most in-demand actresses in Hollywood. Selznick wanted to take advantage of her position and actively sought suitable film roles for her, but Leigh consistently preferred working for the theatre. With Selznick's reluctant approval, she secured a part in the production of *Romeo and Juliet* alongside her lover (and husband since 31 August 1940) Laurence Olivier, but it closed after 35 performances. Not even this fiasco deterred Leigh from further theatrical aspirations. Selznick attempted to use her interest in the staging of the drama *Mary Adelaide* (and his exclusive rights to her film as well as stage roles) to get her to accept one of the film assignments he had chosen for her, but to no avail. Moreover, the war intervened in their working relationship: in December 1940, Leigh accompanied Olivier on a trip to their native Britain, making her communication with Selznick (and the latter's enforcement of his business plans) very difficult. The actress continued to refuse Selznick's offers of film roles, instead starring in the successful production of *The Doctor's Dilemma*. Selznick complained that Leigh 'adores the legitimate stage and dislikes pictures' but not even a lengthy suspension without pay made Leigh change her mind (HRC 3340/6). The seven-year collaboration resulted in only two films – in addition to *Gone with the Wind*, Leigh starred in the production of *Waterloo Bridge* (1940), on loan to MGM. Any

⁸ This is evident, for example, in the annual rankings of the most popular stars compiled by exhibitors. Bergman was featured in the top 25 each year between 1944 and 1948 (with her highest position being second place in 1946) and did not reappear on the list until 1957. See 'Top Ten Money Making Stars Poll' (WIKIPEDIA CONTRIBUTORS 2022).

further benefit to Selznick was purely symbolic, by virtue of his association with the celebrated actress.⁹

Later, the extent of stage work was one of the disputed points in the negotiations for a new contract for Dorothy McGuire (the actress eventually refused further collaboration with Selznick). Overall, the archival materials (memos and correspondence) make clear that theatre was of different importance to the producer and his contract players. While for ambitious performers like Peck, Leigh, and McGuire, the theatre represented a lifetime passion and professional fulfilment that filmmaking did not provide (or provided to a lesser extent), for Selznick, theatrical engagements were a two-sided affair: for in addition to opportunities to improve his stars' skills and increase his company's prestige, they also presented the threat of clashes with film assignments and inefficient use of resources in a medium that had limited audience impact compared to film.

Conclusion

As I argued in the preceding text, theatre was never a self-sufficient goal for Selznick – as opposed to many of his contract actors, who saw stage activities as a suitable complement to their work for film or even a more professionally satisfying form of cultural production. For the producer, theatre was most of the time merely a useful tool for discovering acting talent; for enhancing his contract players' performing skills and confidence when getting ready for film assignments; and for reinforcing his corporate brand based on quality and prestige. His relationship with the stage was therefore fraught with ambiguity. At some points, the positive side of things seems to have prevailed which led to intensifying his ties with the theatre (his successful season at the Lobero Theatre, his support of the La Jolla Playhouse), while at other times he was more perceptive to the negative aspects (for example, during his uneasy collaboration with Vivien Leigh). This is also why his association with the theatre environment remained inconsistent throughout the years and was instead characterised by ups and downs.

As a postscript and further elaboration of the above, I would like to conclude with a short overview of Selznick's unsuccessful attempts at producing his own theatre shows. At first glance, these activities might seem to contradict the previous statement that theatre was never a self-contained goal for Selznick. However, the surviving documents show that he was more concerned with solving his company's progressively more dire financial situation than with artistic fulfilment (HAIN 2021: 177). His first project – ultimately unrealised – was an attempt to mount a Broadway musical adapta-

9 Leigh's professional cooperation with Selznick and her theatrical ambitions are described in detail in my chapter 'Beyond Scarlett: The Collaboration between Vivien Leigh and David O. Selznick after *Gone with the Wind*' in the upcoming collection *Vivien Leigh: 'I'm not a Film Star, I'm an Actress'*, edited by Arnaud Duprat and Corinne François-Denève, Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2023. The description used here is based on the more detailed explanation in the said chapter.

tion of *Gone with the Wind*. Selznick seriously entertained the idea in the first half of the 1940s, after the enormous success of his spectacular film and during the period of his prolonged production hiatus. Although he strongly believed that the project could be commercially successful, it ultimately fell through due to a confluence of reasons, chief among them the resistance of the original novel's author Margaret Mitchell and her husband (see KUNZE 2017).

The show 'Selznick Stars of 1950', on the other hand, was indeed staged in several cities in the U.S. The program featured a selection of second-rate personalities from Selznick's star stable at the end of the 1940s, namely Louis Jourdan, Rhonda Fleming, John Agar, and Rory Calhoun, who, under the leadership of theatre producer Paul Small, performed in a variety show consisting of short acting scenes and musical and dance numbers. Attendance was poor during all the performances, and it is evident from the reactions in the press that the standard of the programme was very low. The owner of a theatre in Kansas City, which was to become the next stop on the troupe's tour in late 1949, let it be known, that he

DEFINITELY WOULD NOT CONNECT THE NAME OF SELZNICK WITH A SHOW OF THIS TYPE. A NAME RESPECTED IN THIS BUSINESS AND WHICH TOOK YEARS TO BUILD IS BEING HURT AND IT IS HURTING THE YOUNG PLAYERS WHO ARE IN IT. (HRC 568/8)

In the end, ironically, the connection with the theatre damaged Selznick by costing him money ('Selznick Stars of 1950' did not turn out a profit) as well as his reputation, without delivering the desired benefits his company had sought with greater success in previous years (HAIN 2021: 210–212). On the contrary, the fiasco dealt another blow to the producer and contributed to his professional decline in the post-war period.

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