The Ghost of Thalberg: MGM 1946-1951

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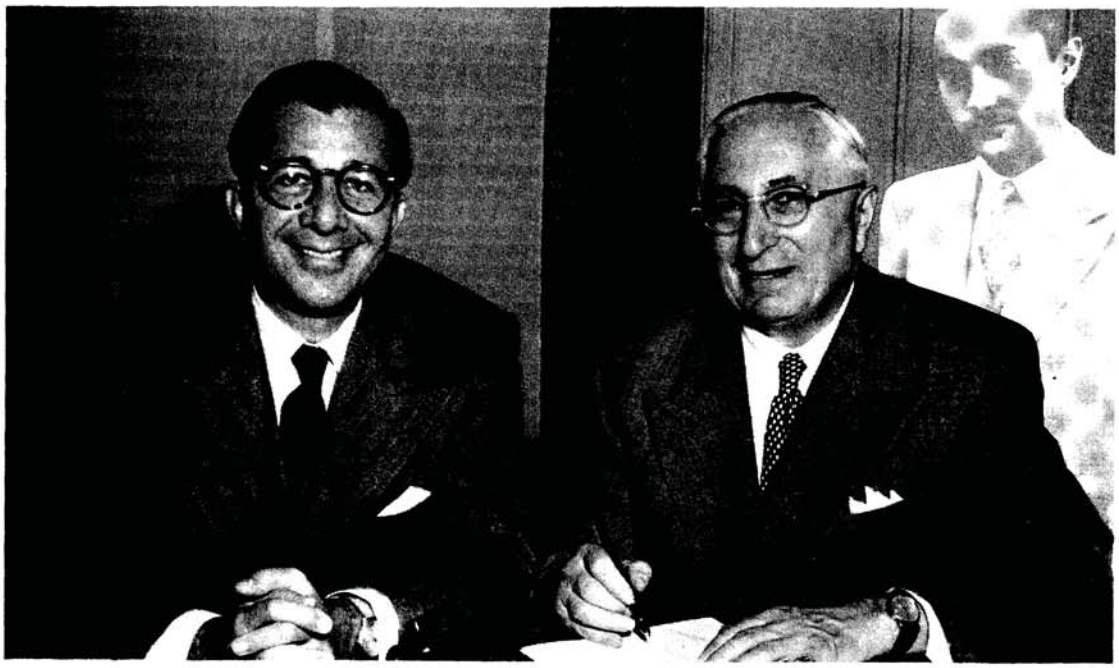

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In the late spring of 1951, the man who was reputed to be the most powerful figure in Hollywood placed a call to New York, demanding to talk to his boss. For twenty-seven years, since the foundation of the company which bore his name, Louis B. Mayer had been in charge of the MGM studio, but now his authority was being questioned in his own house. A young man whom he had befriended brought to the studio and installed as production chief had rebelled against his benefactor, ignoring the advice and even the commands of the movie tycoon per excellence. Even more frustrating was the fact that in order to solve the problem of Dore Schary — the ungrateful protegé — Mayer was obliged to speak with his arch-enemy, Nicholas Schenck.

To request a decision from New York — this was incredibly galling for the "King of Hollywood," forcing him to recognize, once again, that MGM was only relatively autonomous, and that the "King" was at best only the duke of a province owned (and lately operated) by The Company — Loew's Inc. And "Nick Skunk", as Mayer liked to call him, was the president of Loew's. When Schenck came to the phone, the enraged L. B. laid down his ultimatum: "It's either me or Schary," he stated. "Which?"[1]

Mayer's resignation from MGM became effective on August 31, 1951. Schenck had chosen Schary. From that day forward, it is said, Mayer dedicated his life to revenge. It is fitting that the story of the fall of a tycoon coincides with the decline of the studio he seemed to consider his own personal fiefdom. This is, however, the story of MGM, the company, not of Mayer, the man. And since Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is, in so many ways, the symbol of all that the movies were or could have been, the postwar story of this studio is necessarily the history of the decay of Hollywood, the industry.

It was perhaps inevitable that Mayer should be pushed from his seat of power, given the transformation of the film studios from production factories to general contractors/clearing houses for "independent" productions. As every industry matures, its autocrats are usually replaced by a team of more faceless individuals. But if the story of industry is generally one of the loss of tycoons (the man replaced by the logo, the stamp of the boss overlaid by that gloss which is called the company "image"), the post-war history of MGM is remarkable because, more than that of any other film company, it is still the story of the willful individual, the financial auteur. Schenck and Mayer are long in thier graves, but MGM is today controlled by a single man — Kirk Kerkorian.

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1946 was the best year in the history of the film industry. 1,692 billion dollars were taken in at the box office, 100 million patrons went weekly to the theatres (compared with an average of 20 million today), and 20% of the average dollar spent on recreation went to the movies (compared to less than 3% now). MGM (and Loew's Theatres) fully shared in the general prosperity. The company's prestige and income were the highest of any in the film in-

MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY (1962)

QUO VADIS (1951)

dustry— a happy situation which had existed more or less continuously since the late 1920s. Although Irving Thalberg (already the patron saint of Hollywood) was dead, the two Russian immigrants— Schenck and Mayer— still ruled the company from their offices in New York and Culver City, respectively. The MGM hits of 1946 included three Arthur Freed musicals: George Sidney's THE HARVEY GIRLS with Judy Garland ($4.35 million rentals), Richard Whorf's TILL THE CLOUD'S ROLL BY ($4.5 million) and the Minnelli-supervised ZIEGFIELD FOLLIES ($4.0), which featured the only number, scene and shot in which Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly ever danced together ("The Babbitt and the Bromide"). Though Minnelli's exotic YOLANDA AND THE THIEF failed despite the presence of Astaire, Victor Saville's THE GREEN YEARS brought in $4.6 million , and THE YEARLING (Clarence Brown directing) was good for another $5.2 million. The only surprise in this archtypical slate of MGM hits was Tay Garnett's THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE ($4.0 million) with John Garfield and Lana Turner—a film too obsessive, cynical and tawdry to seem comfortable at the same studio which released Joe Pastenak's production of HOLIDAY IN MEXICO (George Sidney directing) the same year for another $4 million in rentals. But POSTMAN aside, it was business as usual at Culver City and business was booming.

Never again was MGM to field so many hits. An idea of the declining fortunes of both the studio and the industry can be gained by an examination of Variety's cumulative list of "All-Time Rental Champs" published each January. Since a film must gain $4 million in U.S. and Canadian rentals to gain admission to this annual Variety chart, we arbitrarily define as a smash hit of the Forties any film which matches this amount. ("Rentals" are defined as the money returned to the distributor by the theaters; total theatrical "grosses"— the "boxoffice" figure— would be $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 times this amount, while the studio's "net profit" on any given film would be the money left over after subtracting the costs of production, distribution/publicity and studio overhead from rentals.) Although $4 million is today near the average domestic rental on a film (many features would lose money on such a modest return) only the most extravagant films of the Forties failed to be profitable at such a level, considering that foreign rentals were yet to swell the total.

By the end of 1947 it was apparent that MGM was in trouble. Only two Metro releases (THE HUCKSTERS and GREEN DOLPHIN STREET) attained the $4 million mark in rentals, compared to seven in 1946. Small comfort that the studio was not alone in its troubles: Hollywood's total number of $4 million hits in 1947 was only six films, drastically shrunken from the twenty-two of 1946. Though 1948 tallied eleven features in the smash category (four of them from MGM) in the following year only five films (including MGM's total of two) brought in $4 million or more. In just two years, the estimated weekly attendance at the movie theatres dropped by a sharp 16 million (or 16% off the 1946 peak). Meanwhile, those who still retained the film-going habit paid less, in real terms, for the privilege. A vicious surge of inflation reduced the value of each ticket sold at the same time as the costs of production, distribution and theatre operation spiraled upwards. To sum up the situation, though total theatrical receipts in 1948 (measured in inflated dollars) were off only 11% from the boom year of 1946, the real drop in domestic revenues (constant 1946 dollars) was about 27%.[2]

In the face of a collapsing domestic film market, the studio bosses decided, incredibly enough, the deprive themselves of all rentals from their largest foreign market. This seemingly suicidal move came in response to a 1947 decree of the British Chancellor of the Exchequer that, in order to stem the flow of capital to the U.S., 75% of all American film company earnings in that country would be heavily taxed. Hollywood immediately vowed to force Britain to its knees by cutting off the supply of American films. In unconscious echo of the doctrines of Marx and Brecht, the studio bosses seemed to believe that their theatrical product was a species of dope— its users were addicts who could not be deprived of their opiate without ultimate surrender to the unconditional surrender of the supplier. But films— even Hollywood films— are not food, fuel or heroin. The success of the film embargo was a limited one. The English did not come to terms, and a few years later the flow

BATTLEGROUND

of films from Hollywood was quietly resumed. In the interval, the loss of revenues from the United Kingdom only deepened the industry's crisis.

Stabbed in the back by the perfidious English, abandoned by millions of domestic viewers, clubbed by runaway inflation, Hollywood also felt betrayed from within. In September, 1947 began the trial of "The Hollywood Ten" by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. In an effort to expose and extinguish all Soviet dupes in the industry, Sam Wood (president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals) and Nicholas Schenk cooperated to draw up the infamous blacklist which relieved the accused from employment in Hollywood. With hundreds already thrown out of work by industry cutbacks, the atmosphere of panic which surrounded the witch-hunt could hardly contribute to the calm and efficient production of new films which alone could save Hollywood.

For the studios knew nothing except how to make (and sell) movies. Faced with declining sales and rising costs, an industry typically tries first to produce the product more cheaply, or to refine it in details, without changing the basic ingredients of past successes. Of course, someone must be blamed for the flood of red ink: the ax falls on both white and blue collared workers, "new blood" in infused into the business, executives are deposed, and in the wild search for scapegoats the industry's wrath is unleashed on the "reds", on the British, etc. Yet at this first, panic stage, the essential business of the organization remains unquestioned. As late as 1950, Nicholas Schenck could tell The New York Daily News, "So far, television hasn't hurt the boxoffice. Good pictures do business as always."[3] Hollywood's mood in these years was one of grim retrenchment. It took nearly a decade before the film companies finally despaired that the movies would ever retrieve the 100 million movie-goers (per week) of 1946; not until the late 1950s did the studios begin to search for new sources of income. Records, music publishing, broadcasting stations, hotels and casinos (MGM) and pinball machines (Columbia)— the mere mention of such operations in the Hollywood of 1947-48 would have drawn laughter at best. The business of movies was movies, for better or worse, and it was with a melancholy longing that the showmen looked from their own clay feet to the Golden Age of Thalberg. Viewed from the depths of post-war Hollywood, the "boy" producer achieved the stature of a god. With tears in his eyes, Louis B. Mayer recounted endless stories of Thalberg's "genius" from his cream-colored office in the Irving Thalberg Building, while the industry's most cherished Oscar was The Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award.

To close this catalog of sorrows, the "Consent Decree" of 1948 must be mentioned. However unfortunate the timing of this order might seem, it had been widely forseen in Hollywood. Since the 1930s the Department of Justice had been charging "monopoly", demanding that the producing-distributing branch of the industry divest itself of its exhibition arm. Negotiations between Hollywood and Justice had sporadically continued throughout these years to arrange just how and when the theatre-chains would be spun-off from the studios. In 1948, Hollywood finally "consented" (admitted no wrong) the inevitable. After RKO caved in, the rest of the industry gradually followed. Although instant divestiture was not demanded by the government, the sure knowledge that production/distribution would have to go it alone could only deepen the gloom of post-war Hollywood.

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"Hollywood is in a hell of a state," wrote Val Lewton in 1948. "RKO is practically closed down; Universal is on the verge of bankruptcy... The only place where there seems to be any hope whatsoever is at MGM."[4] But if there was a glimmer of optimism in Culver City, it was only because the studio's financial condition had become so perilous that even Louis B. Mayer— when threatened by Schenck- was forced to take action. Studio operations for the fiscal year ending August 31, 1948 were $6.5 million in the red, while gross income (not yet profits) for Loew's— the parent company— had fallen from the $18 million of 1946 to a precarious $4 million in 1948. By the Fall of 1947 the New York office, which usually maintained a hands-off policy vis-a-vis the studio, was putting the pressure on Mayer.

Apart from the crisis at his studio, 1947 had already been a critical year for Mayer, marked by the deaths of his brother Jerry (purchasing agent at MGM) and his great friend Frank Orsatti. Though Orsatti's chosen profession was that of talent agent, he was more famed for his parties in Santa Monica, where he was rumored to act as a procurer. Crowther writes— somewhat primly— in his Mayer biography that Orsatti was "a questionable individual even by tolerant Hollywood standards,"[5] but Mayer seemed to thoroughly enjoy their association. The same year Margaret Shenburg Mayer (married by L. B. in Boston when he was a rising star in the junk business) sued for divorce. When the court ordered a settlement of more than $3 million, Hollywood's leading horse-breeder was obliged to begin to liquidate his racing stable.

Since 1938 Mayer had been in the thoroughbred business. What began as a hobby soon developed into a passion. Those requesting an interview with the boss at Culver City were often told that Mayer could be found at "Stage 14"— the code word for the Santa Anita race track. In those years when the studio ran smoothly and profitably, Mayer seemed to lose interest in baiting producers, chewing-out writers and whipping the stars into line. After initial losses breeding and racing thoroughbreds, Mayer quickly organized what became one of the most profitable horse-factories in America. Once, at the studio, he complimented Greer Garson by comparing her to Busher— the Mayer filly which was named the Horse of the Year. Characteristically, at the height of his success Mayer began to lose interest in horses. It was without tears that Mayer began to auction off his animals with a spectacular sale at the Santa Anita track on February 27, 1947. By liquidating his entire operation over the next two years, Mayer was able to pay off Maggie and realize a handsome profit besides, paving the way for the acquisition of a new wife, the former actress Lorena Layton in December, 1948.

Meanwhile, Schenck was insisting that something be done to stem the studio's losses. In September 1947, at the same time as the HUAC hearings, Mayer cut the MGM staff by 25% and scrapped the executive producer system. The idea seemed to be closer personal control over all productions; producers were to come directly with their requests and apologies to Eddie Mannix, Benny Thau, or L. B. himself. But this reorganization was recognized by both Schenk and Mayer as merely a stop-gap measure. Mayer's day-to-day control over production had been sporadic at best, and many felt an experienced foreman was needed at Culver City to reorgan-

ize the reigning confusion. In other words, MGM required another Thalberg. The studio was caught in its own personality cult; Mayer and Schenck sought a man, not a policy. Having deified Thalberg, they tried to revive him. Mayer made overtures to David Selznick, Walter Wanger and Joseph E. Mankiewicz, but each refused the opportunity to serve as Metro's messiah.

On July 1, 1948, Dore Schary was installed as vice-president in charge of production at MGM. The annointed savior had been RKO's production chief for the past year and was also a Metro alumnus. In the months since Howard Hughes gained control of RKO, Schary had known nothing but frustration. Not only had Hughes closed down virtually all filmmaking activity at RKO, but had expressly forbidden Schary's pet project: BATTLEGROUND, a story of the Battle of the Bulge. When Schary moved to MGM, the scripts of BATTLEGROUND and IVANHOE came with him.

Compared to the flamboyant and passionate Louis Mayer — an outrageous poseur whose very life was a show — Schary projected the image of Serious Purpose. He reminded Lillian Ross of a Saint Bernard, again of a Sunday School teacher, yet Schary's earnest stance was rendered palatable by a genial, almost "countrified" way of expressing himself. Though he was at the center of the alarms and hysteria of all Hollywood, Ms. Ross discovered in Schary, "a man who seems to be favorably disposed toward the entire world."[6] If one can picture Jimmy Carter's blend of evangelical purpose and "down-home" charm swollen to 6 foot proportions, wearing horn-rims and tweeds, and issuing from Newark, New Jersey, one is close to a portrait of Dore Schary.

After working as a caterer (his family's business), a necktie salesman and a recreation director for a hotel in the Catskills, Schary landed on Broadway as a bit actor and part-time playwright. In 1932 he was signed as a contract writer for Columbia— this due to the influence of Walter Wanger, who was under the impression that Dore was the name of a woman. After twelve weeks and $1200, Columbia dropped Schary's option. After several months of groping in Hollywood, Schary became a member of the writing team on several MGM productions: BIG CITY, BOYS TOWN (which won him an Academy Award), YOUNG TOM EDISON and EDISON, THE MAN. The writer first met Louis Mayer in 1941 while pushing a typical project he had written about the persecution of a U.S. factory worker by Nazi spies. JOE SMITH, AMERICAN would be a "little picture" about "the little man", and Schary wanted to direct it. He would later explain to Lillian Ross that "my favorites are the simple, down-to-earth pictures, the ones about everyday life."[7] Mayer had no appetite for wasting the time of Schary's producer and patron— John Considine— on such a small picture, but was enthused by Schary's dream of "quality" B pictures as a minimum-risk training ground for fledgling Metro directors and stars. The next day at the Hollywood Park race track, Mayer endorsed Schary as head of a new unit which would produce nothing but small pictures. After supervising JOE SMITH, AMERICAN; JOURNEY FOR MARGARET; and LASSIE COME HOME for MGM, among other films, Schary joined Selznick's "independent" company to produce THE FARMER'S DAUGHTER and THE BACHELOR AND THE BOBBY-SOXER ($4.5 million rentals), then moved to RKO, where his most famous film was CROSSFIRE.

By Hollywood standards, Schary was considered an "intellectual", an "idealist", and the leading "liberal" of the period. As production chief at RKO, he had already run afoul of Mayer and Schenk by opposing the industry's blacklist. In production matters, Schary's so-called liberalism was expressed in a penchant for allegorical projects with the flavor of medieval morality plays. During his term as head of the MGM "B" unit Schary insisted on transposing the fight against Hitler, Mussolini and Fascism into a film of the Western genre, STORM IN THE WEST. When Mayer refused to approve the project Schary chose to stand on his principles, and was soon released from his duties at Metro. From these two episodes, Mayer had reason to suspect that Schary might perhaps be too "serious" to reign as procuction chief of an entertainment factory, too stubborn to be a good subordinate, too "pink" for Hollywood's political climate. Yet Schary was devout about motherhood and Judaism (Mayer's two sacred cows) and was a proven production executive. According to Arthur Freed, "L. B. always believes in getting somebody smarter than himself. The average fellow wants somebody not as smart... He's the only man who never got panicky in a crisis...and the only executive who always thought in big terms."[8] Mayer was not frightened of Schary; from the days of Thalberg his power had been based on the achievements of his executive officers, and on his ability to control them. Schary was intelligent, polite, respectful. Like Irving! Like a son! Why should there be problems?

> Schary, in turn, believed that Mayer could be handled:
> I know this man. I know Mayer because my father was like him. Powerful. Physically very strong. Strong-tempered and willful. Mayer literally hits people. But my father made this guy look like a May party.[9]

As Dore Schary took over the reins of production he announced to The New York Times, "I will make daring and controversial pictures at MGM," a statement immediately qualified by, "We will make respectable pictures for a respectable world...in which intolerance, hate and venality are dispensed with."[10] Schary's premier example of daring was given as MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY— an intended remake of the solid anti-fascist MGM hit of the Thirties. He explained to interviewers, "Others can make the so-called 'arty' pictures, most of which are based on sordid themes, but I prefer to be associated with pictures like JOE SMITH, AMERICAN...I don't think art is four-letter words written on bathroom walls."[11] MGM would have no problem living with a species of intellectual who out-Mayered Mayer in his piety.

Schary's appointment as chief of production was greeted with sighs of relief by many of MGM's producers. Pandro S. Berman, for one, dreaded every interview with Mayer. "What can you do with him?", he complained to Vincente Minnelli:

> He calls you into his office and starts telling you the kind of stories you ought to make. He writes them on the spot and acts them out for you...getting down on his knees and crying...there are only so many pictures you can make about mother love. He's the biggest ham in America. If he sees he's not getting over to you, he gets sick or complains of shortness of breath or falls on the floor clutching his heart. If he still hasn't won the point, he'll call for the doctor. In the meantime, you've wasted half the day.[12]

In contrast to Mayer, Schary was believed to be a man you

QUO VADIS (1951)

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

could reason with.

The primary reason for Val Lewton's optimism at Metro ("The only place where there seems to be any hope...") in mid '48 was the impending arrival of Schary. Following two years of frustration at Paramount, Lewton hoped to be given his freedom; Schary, after all, was a champion of the "B" picture, Lewton's specialty. Schary was expected to make a "wholesale cleanout" of MGM's deadwood, according to Lewton, who little expected to be included in that category. Yet at Metro Lewton was left to die on the vine, producing only one film (PLEASE BELIEVE ME) in 1949, after which his option was dropped.

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Although he was technically Louis B. Mayer's subordinate at Culver City, it was soon evident that Schary considered his boss to be not Mayer, but Nicholas M. Schenck And Schenck had reason to be pleased with his new chief of production. After one year of Schary, the studio showed a profit of around $300,000 for fiscal 1949 (compared to 1948's $6.5 million loss). Schary's BATTLEGROUND project was a huge success ($5.06 million total rentals), and three films released in 1950 (KING SOLOMON'S MINES, ANNIE GET YOUR GUN, and Minnelli's FATHER OF THE BRIDE) passed the $4 million mark in rentals to put the studio's total operations $3.8 million in the black for fiscal 1950. Faced with the overwhelming success of his "find", Mayer grew petulant and irritable as his influence waned. As Schary played openly for the favor of Schenck, the two clashed over Schary's production plans. Mayer had given grudging approval to BATTLEGROUND, confident that Schary would fall on his face. When that film turned out to be one of Metro's biggest grossers ($1.6 million in negative cost, $5.06 million in rentals), Mayer was appalled to realize he had given Schenk evidence that his presence as studio boss might well be superfluous.

The parallel with Thalberg was too close for comfort. Like the production "genius" whose mantle he had inherited, Dore Schary had become less Mayer's partner than his rival. But however ominous the omens, Mayer refused to play Saul to Schary's David. To counter the adulation given the new hero of MGM, Mayer sought to prove that his box-office instincts were unimpaired. The next test was during the preproduction of QUO VADIS?. Schary characteristically saw the film as an allegory: Nero as Hitler, the martyred Christians as German Jews. Sam Huston was to direct. Mayer was revolted by this ideological conceptualization of a picture he felt should be simply a spectacle, but accepted Schary's suggestion that the dispute be settled by an appeal to Schenck. In a preview of his ultimate decision to discard Mayer, Schenck approved the Schary version. Eventually, the team of Sam Zimbalist and Huston decided against making a film of ideas. QUO VADIS? was filmed Mayer-style under Mervyn LeRoy, grossing some $12.5 million. Yet meanwhile, events at the studio continued to prove that Mayer was considered expendable.

In an interview with Lillian Ross, Schary intimated that he considered Mayer to have no real function at MGM, no place in the chain of command. He explained, according to Ms. Ross, that:

> Mr. Schenck, in New York, decided on general policy— the number of pictures to make each year, and which ones, and at what cost. The how he leaves completely to me. Of course I'm in close touch with him all the time. There's not one thing that goes on in this studio that he doesn't know about. He knows the place inside out. (Exactly what Mayer did at the studio was not so clearly defined.) He calls me and tells me what he thinks of the pictures.[13]

In a second interview, after Mayer's resignation, Schary professed to be mystified by Mayer's refusal to lie down and play dead at the studio. "He's rich. He's healthy... I don't know what the hell he got mad about. He could have been so happy here." The deal, as Schary understood it, was that Mayer would gratefully turn over all powers to his new production chief, then write himself out of the picture. "He said," Schary claimed, "that he planned to leave the studio and retire in one year, two years, or, at the most three years." Schary implied that Mayer later attempted to renege on the agreement. "Mayer once said to me, 'Wouldn't it be better if you had men with years of experience to sit down with you and help you make decisions? Wouldn't you like it better?' I said no. This job has to be a one-man operation. There has to be one boss. He [Mayer] listened to everybody and came up with a piece of junk."[14] At any rate, according to Schary, Mayer had absolutely no cause for bitterness.

But if Dore Schary was confident that he held the upper hand at MGM, others were not so sure. The producer Gottfried Reinhardt (son of Max) explained in 1950, "Our King is not without power. I found...that you need the King's blessing if you want to make a picture." There was visible evidence that Mayer was still on top, explained Reinhardt: "I have a washbasin but no shower in my office. Dore has a shower but no bathtub. L. B. has a shower and a bathtub."[15] In Los Angeles, water was everything.

If forced to bet on the eventual winner of the power struggle, John Huston would have chosen Mayer:

> L. B. is tough. He's never trying to win the point you're talking about. His aim is always long-range — to keep control of the studio. He loves Dore. But someday he'll destroy Dore. L. B. is sixty-five. And he's pink. And healthy. And smiling. Dore is about twenty years younger. And he looks old. And sick. And worried. Because L. B. guards the jungle like a lion.[16]

For his part, Mayer seemed fully aware that his position as head of the studio had become more shadow than substance. One day in 1950 he passionately complained to Arthur Freed of the contrast between the sainted Thalberg

and Schary:

> They used to listen to me. Never would Irving Thalberg make a picture I was opposed to. I had a worship for that boy. He worked. Now they want cocktail parties and their names in the papers. Irving listened to me. Never satisfied with his own work. That was Irving. Years later, after Irving passed away, they still listened. They make an Andy Hardy picture.

The great films— the films which made money— moved the heart, not the intellect. It just didn't make sense to Mayer: Nick Schenk was supposedly a businessman, a shrewd one, and business was boxoffice; yet in supporting Schary, Schenk was putting "taste" before profits. L. B. exhuberantly declaimed to Freed and Ross:

> Entertainment! It's good enough for you and I and the boxoffice. Not for the smart alecks. It's not good enough any more... Not good enough. Don't show the good, wholesome, American mother in the home... No!, (he cried.) Knock the mother on the jaw! (He gave himself an uppercut to the chin.) Thow the little old lady down the stairs! (He threw himself in the direction of the American flag.) Throw the mother's good homemade chicken soup in the mother's face! (He threw an imaginary plate of soup in Freed's face.) Step on the mother! Kick her! That is art, they say. Art!...
>
> John Huston. He was going to do QUO VADIS? What he wanted to do to the picture! No heart. His idea was he'd throw the Christians to the lions. That's all. I begged him to change his ideas. I got down on my hands and knees to him. I sang 'Mammy' to him. I showed him the meaning of heart. I crawled to him on hands and knees. Ma-a-ammy! With tears. No! No heart! He thanked me for taking him off the picture. Now he wants THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE. Dore Schary wants it. All right. I'll watch. I don't say no, but I wouldn't make that picture with Sam Goldwyn's money.[17]

The money was not Goldwyn's but Schenck's. Mayer hated the whole idea of THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE. There was no "story", no love interest, no star. And yet, after announcing his opposition to the project, Mayer approved it. Why? Though Reinhardt said the picture was impossible without the King's approval, Mayer probably suspected that if he refused, Schary and Schenck would prove his impotence by filming it anyway. According to Schenck, the issue was already settled no matter what Mayer decided. Though Schenck claimed (after the film was released) that he suspected RED BADGE would fail at the boxoffice, he was committed to Schary, therefore to Schary's favorite projects: "How else was I going to teach Dore? I let him make the picture. I knew the best way to help him was to let him make a mistake." It made no difference to Schenck that Mayer was probably correct in his opinion that RED BADGE would flop. "Louis remained opposed to making the picture... Eventually, I had to support Dore."[18] In approving RED BADGE, Mayer merely accepted the inevitable, perhaps retaining the hope that once the film was rejected by the public, his "I told you so," might expose the new Thalberg as just another ten day wonder, leading to a resurrection of his own prestige.

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE began filming on August 25, 1950, with Reinhardt and Huston not quite believing they were actually making a picture opposed by Louis B. Mayer. MGM production No. 1512 was not a cheap film ($1.65 million negative cost), and the first previews went badly. Mayer expressed the opinion that to release the film would merely throw good money after bad, but Schary, supported by Schenck, claimed release would add to Metro's prestige, whatever the boxoffice. Schary was so inspired by the picture that he wrote a lofty narration to introduce

Nicholas Schenck and Dore Schary, 1952

it, informing the audience that RED BADGE demanded all the respect payed to Art of the highest order. However, all tinkering failed, and RED BADGE rapidly sank to the bottom half of double bills, tolerantly written off by New York as a training-film for Schary.

There were still triumphs for Mayer in those days when the "smart-alecks" were running Pictures. "Opera!", he exclaimed to Lillian Ross. "Mr. Schenck tells me they don't like opera. We made a picture, THE GREAT CARUSO. Look at the receipts!... But Mr. Schenck says they don't like opera!"[19]

According to Mano, the studio's chief barber, "L. B. cried at the preview of THE GREAT CARUSO. Six hundred tears they counted."[20] Mayer's partisans claimed that every tear Mayer shed at a preview meant another $10,000 returned by the film. (Final rentals were $4.53 million.)

Mayer won a small victory when Schary caved-in to his objections on Ben Hecht's script of EUROPA AND THE BULL. Mayer insisted, of course, that it had no "heart". But another of Schary's pet films, GO FOR BROKE, proceeded despite L. B.'s sarcasm: "I remember Pearl Harbor," he protested to Lillian Ross. "Dore wants to make pictures about Japs. All right. I'm through trying to tell him... Last week, who went to see the picture? All the Japs! This week, the bottom fell out of his boxoffice."[21] If Mayer could not dislodge Schary, he could still hope that, if given enough rope, the "genius" would hang himself. A few more disasters like RED BADGE and even Schenck might begin to see reason.

There seemed no reason why this situation at Culver City could not continue indefinitely. Though Schary's star was still rising, as chief of production he ran all the risks. Mayer could sit back playing the charade of advise and consent, secure in the knowledge that he had outlasted the real Thalberg and that in the 27 years of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's existence, Nicholas Schenck had never dared to depose him. It was therefore with legitimate shock that Hollywood learned on July 23, 1951 that Mayer was leaving the studio.

The issue which led to his resignation concerned Mayer's prestige more than his power. Some time previous, it had been suggested that Schary (and other MGM executives) be given stock options as a reward for services and an incentive for future performance. According to Mayer's biographer, Bosley Crowther, L. B. "generously recommended" that the options be granted. In early 1951, Schary was pleased to receive the opportunity to purchase $100,000 shares of Loew's stock over the next six years. If he chose to exercise his option, Schary would pay only the current price of $16.50 per share, no matter what valuation the market might give them. In other words, for every point Loew's, Inc. rose on the New York Exchange, Schary stood to gain $100,000. Mayer was enraged not by the gift to Schary but by the fact that Schenk told him nothing about it. The options were dispensed directly from New York without allowing Mayer the privilege of handing out the favors he had recommended. Once more, Mayer's authority as head of the studio had been by-passed by Schenk, his title proven a mockery. He was determined never to let it happen again. After expressing his intentions to J. Robert Rubin of the New York office ("Nick and Dore want the studio. Well, they can have it and choke on it"),[22] Mayer laid down his ultimatum to Nicholas Schenck, who knew exactly what to do about it.

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After Mayer's exit, MGM continued much as before. Arthur Freed's SHOWBOAT was the top hit of Summer, 1951, and in the Academy Award ceremonies of 1952 AMERICAN IN PARIS (Freed/Minnelli) won six Oscars, while the producer himself received the coveted Irving G. Thalberg Award. Dore Schary continued to push "serious" pictures: JUPITER'S DARLING booked $2.2 million in red ink, while the pious PLYMOUTH ADVENTURE lost $1.8 million. There was a joke about Schary at Culver City: "We used to be in the entertainment business, but we have sold our souls for a pot of message." Schary remained chief of production at MGM just as long as Schenck remained president of Loew's, Inc. While production losses were partially masked by $11.5 million gained from reissues of GONE WITH THE WIND, Schenck bribed stockholders into quiescence by declaring dividends in excess of earnings. But a $4.6 million studio loss in 1956 could not be hidden so easily. When it was discovered that an intricate web of Schenck's relatives cluttered Loew's payroll, certain Wall Street interests and corporate raiders became convinced that the corporation was worth more dead than alive. The gathering of vultures planned to close the studio, sell MGM's celebrated film library to television, and dispose of the large real estate holdings for whatever price this prime property might bring. Such rumors and revelations resulted in a stockholders' revolt. In December 1955, Schenck was kicked upstairs to Chairman of the Board, but continued his machinations during the presidency of Arthur Loew— son of the founder. After Joseph Vogel replaced the reluctant Loew as president, both Schenck and Schary were summarily fired.

In the years following his resignation, Louis Mayer threatened to become an independent producer on the Selznick model, then dabbled in Cinerama with Lowell Thomas. But in late 1956, greatly excited by the troubles of "Nick Skunk" and the loathsome Schary, the old man (now 72) began scheming with an ex-producer of DRAGNET and a Canadian road-builder to regain control of MGM. During the bitter struggle of the next year, the studio was often on the brink of falling into the hands of L. B. and his allies. The issue was finally decided October, 1957. On the 15th of the month Loew's stockholders voted, by an overwhelming margin of 7 to 1, to reject the Mayer takeover. On October 29, Louis B. Mayer died of leukemia.

END

Footnotes

[1]Bosley Crowther, Hollywood Rajah (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 286.

[2]"An End of a 25-Year Film Decline?" Variety, May 10, 1972.

[3]Charles Higham, Hollywood at Sunset (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), p. 75.

[4]Joel Siegel, Val Lewton (Viking Press, 1973) p. 93.

[5]Crowther, p. 260.

[6]Lillian Ross, Picture (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962) p. 29.

[7]Ross, p. 115.

[8]Ross, p. 206.

[9]Ross, p. 31.

[10]Higham, p. 58.

[11]Crowther, p. 281.

[12]Vincente Minnelli with Hector Arce, I Remember it Well (Garden City; Doubleday, 1974), p. 216.

[13]Ross, p. 201.

[14]Ross, pp. 238-240.

[15]Ross, p. 28.

[16]Ross, p. 20.

[17]Ross, pp. 33-35.

[18]Ross, p. 272.

[19]Ross, p. 210.

[20]Ross. p. 213.

[21]Ross, p. 214-217.

[22]Crowther, p. 286.

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