

Memo From David O. Selznick, Selected and Edited by Rudy Behlmer. Introduction by S.N. Behrman, Viking Press, New York, 1972. Cloth \$18.75.

It seems that David O. Selznick suffered from a tragic flaw that is common to many great men of exceptional intelligence. It was beyond his capacity to grasp the reality that other men in his world of commercial film were not blessed, or cursed, with his obsessions. These obsessions were fed by a neurotic drive for power. Selznick did not want power isolated from the many other facets of life, he wanted power as a recognition of his personal worth. His contemporaries were impressed with a title, often an euphemism to justify a high salary or to denote a hanger-on, who was related to an executive of the company.

When Selznick joined M.G.M., he was Louis B. Mayer's son-in-law; Irving Thalberg was recognized as the greatest producer in the business. Selznick had taken on a war. In his war there were a number of battles. His greatest opponent was of course himself. Had Selznick not been drawn to his battles at Metro, he may have formed his own company, many years before he finally accomplished this, his early ambition. At Metro he battled with the stigma of being a relative and of being a threat to Thalberg, which gave him much to be anxious about. His talent was readily recognized, but, he had production battles over budgets and script decisions that arose from divided loyalties, rather than from the realities of production. Out of his intelligence and the friction it produced in his life; out of the battles he fought against personal injustice; out of his obsession with perfection — the memorandums, cables, private letters and autobiographical remarks were created.

"The difference between myself and other producers is: I am interested in the thousands and thousands of details that go into the making of a film. It is the sum total of all these things that either makes a great picture or destroys it." What Selznick did not add was the observation that he loved his own obsession.

The thirty-six years of memorandums reveals a man who came out of a literary tradition. His father was a dominant figure in his thinking. Dickens was revered in the home. The classics of Victorian literature had a lauded place in the family affections. The art of writing attained a mystical quality in the young David's mind. When such is the case, the excuse for writing is soon found. The memo was thought to be the most effective way in which to record and communicate feelings, hopes, ideas and later — dictums of manners and behaviour. The memos are, as expected, highly literate, informative and very entertaining. Behlmer was confronted with about two thousand file boxes of material to edit into a book.

Selznick never spared his words, but he knew how to wield them. Out of this literary tradition and a reverence for his father's taste came his choices for motion pictures. Perhaps Selznick unwittingly did a great disservice to the concept of "film as film;" he tied the motion picture securely to literature and possibly this tie cannot be broken. It grew to be immensely profitable and producers today look for best-sellers on which to base a production. *Gone With the Wind* is his best known picture to the present generation, but *David Copperfield*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Anna Karenina* and *Rebecca* were

members of a thoroughly researched formula for Selznick's obsessions, loyalties and background.

It would be a disastrous mistake to think of *Memo from David O. Selznick* as a nostalgic journey into the past. The book is among the first of what looks like a bumper crop of well-written, well-researched film books. Books on directors, producers and stars were often written by followers and fans and not by writers who earned a living by writing. Now that the market is exploding with books on the cinema, publishers have finally responded to a demand: to bring works on the motion pictures to the public by properly experienced research and creative writers. The wiser publishers are producing volumes that are worth adding to a serious reader's collection of film books, since nostalgic works are often unreliable and unsatisfactory. *Memo from David O. Selznick* is not in the latter category.

The book teems with remarks on the now great. These were not intended as a cut-up (the sort of remark that is so popular today) but in many cases as a serious evaluation of the performer under consideration. When Fred Astaire was considered in 1933 Selznick was enthusiastic, but he had the thought that others may not agree: "... but I feel, in spite of his enormous ears and bad chin line, that his charm is so tremendous that it comes through even in this wretched test." To Gregory Ratoff (the book contains a splendid *Cast of Characters* defining their works etc.) in 1935 — "—you will have to get over to Marlene some facts which I doubt she at present appreciates... that she is no longer even a fairly important box-office star." To William Herbert, Publicity Director for Selznick International in respect to Ingrid Bergman's work and publicity. "When I found it necessary to switch cameramen... from *Intermezzo* (to put) him on *Rebecca*, tears came to her eyes and she wanted to know if it would hurt his standing, because after all he was a very good cameraman and it didn't matter if she was photographed a little worse — she would rather have this than hurt him." Then the other side of the memo emerged. "All this is completely unique. I think (it) would make a grand angle of approach to her publicity."

Selznick was troubled often by the title of a picture. (Studios paid a bonus for a title an executive could suggest that would bring in more at the box-office.) *Rebecca* was no exception. "I think" he memoed, "that it is pretty difficult to know of anybody walking into your office and suggesting that you call a picture *Rebecca* — unless it was made for the Palestine market—" To Alfred Hitchcock, June 1939. "It is my unfortunate and distressing task to tell you that I am shocked and disappointed beyond words by the treatment of *Rebecca*." The treatment was made by Philip MacDonald and Joan Harrison under Hitchcock's supervision. Selznick told Hitchcock that the Best Seller did not need an original script and that to remain faithful to the book was the only course anyone could take. Selznick pointed out that a suggested scene was "... cheap beyond words, and old fashioned into the bargain." He pointed out to Hitchcock that Orson Welles had adapted it very successfully for the radio. "A clever (Welles) showman, he didn't waste time and effort creating anything new but simply gave them the original."

The memo is a long one. In the light of the present knowledge about the picture it would seem that Rebecca would not have been memorable if Hitchcock had not been restrained by his producer. It is interesting to note that Selznick got an Academy Award on the picture and that Hitchcock does not recall it with much affection in his interview with Truffaut. In fact he recalls the story about the two goats who are eating up cans containing the reels of a film taken from a best seller. One goat says to the other, "Personally I prefer the book". When Selznick had troubles with John Huston in making, *A Farewell to Arms*, Huston wanted to stick to the book. Selznick thought otherwise. The memo is long. The discussion on the script treatment fascinating. Selznick stated his view. "You have some strange phobia against short scenes. Short scenes are at the very essence of good motion-picture making, and one of the great values that we have in this medium. . . ."

The 468 pages of *Memo from David O. Selznick* is valuable to the filmmaker, the fan and the general reader. Between its covers lies the product of David O. Selznick's battles, large and small, with his master - perfection. Blessed with creative insight, he mastered the discipline of objective self-analysis. Cursed with a naïve view of his fellow man, he suffered endless frustrations in his endeavours. What David O. Selznick was prepared to do to accomplish his goal was not the stuff of ordinary men. He was not an ordinary man.

His last memo talked about *Tender Is the Night*. Selznick tried to save it from disaster, but he couldn't. "Great films, the memo reads, "successful films, are made in their every detail according to the vision of one man, and through supporting that one man, not in buying part of what he has done. Often, using a portion of his concept is worse than if you used none at all. . . ." Again his taste, insight and his integrity was impeccable. In modern parlance he knew where it was at, he got it together and he kept it together to the end. He died, at the age of sixty-three after five heart attacks, in 1965. Here, indeed, was a man. ●



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