

in and out of the movies gerald pratley

When Adolph Zukor died this year at the magnificent age of 103, none of the tributes and assessments of his career published in Canadian newspapers (which, running true to form, were simply picked up from their US sources) mentioned the fact that the once-aggressive and all-powerful Zukor was one of the architects of our present misfortunes in motion picture production.

Our limited histories tell of Mr. Zukor's entry into exhibition in Canada with Paramount's Famous Players company, how he bought up the cinemas and put out of business those exhibitors who resisted him, by simply building a bigger cinema next to them.

With the entire production of the Hollywood studios available to him, he swept across the country and starved of their movies and their audiences those who would not sell. Those few who did resist lost everything, as there was nothing Zukor wanted once he built his own cinemas. Former independent theatre owners then went to work for him.

The federal and provincial governments of the time didn't care, not understanding the importance of a Canadian presence on the motion picture screens. Politicians considered a few short subjects as being sufficient and proper Canadian participation in the somewhat vulgar business of film production.

It's interesting to pause and reflect what the outcome for Canadian filmmakers might have been had our cinemas not fallen under American domination. (By the time Odeon came on the scene, the damage had already been done.) In the absence of government regulations on quotas and levies, there would have been little difference. Exhibitors the free world over are all alike. They play films which are easy to come by, familiar to audiences, and most likely to make them wealthy. American films fulfilled these requirements, and anything domestic was dull and suspect.

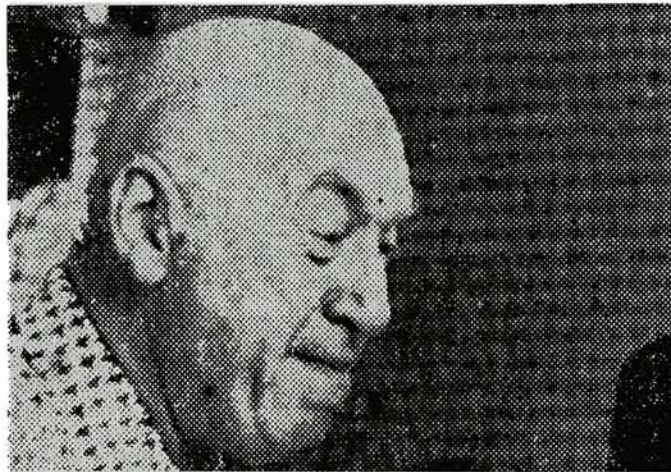
Even if there had never been a circuit called Famous Players, but one under a different name wholly owned by Canadians, it would probably have shown mostly American movies, or those coming through American distributors, and shunned Canadians programs — just as the cinema's present-day equivalent, the television station, prefers to do. If all the distri-

buting companies had remained Canadian and all the cinemas had remained under Canadian control, with each working together to present the best films from all producers, including Canadians, what would the situation be like today? Would our filmmakers have risen to the need? Would our 'expatriates' have stayed home?

What effect in social, political, and psychological terms would this have had on audiences, who now, as a result of 75 years of American films, know the USA and its habits, history, places and procedures, better than their own? We can hardly blame Zukor for all this, of course, because we let it happen — in the name of free enterprise!

It's of little use to wonder about what might have been. Now it is too late; but with pay-TV and the large-screen TV system around the corner heralding the demise of cinemas as mass media, we could make a new beginning by learning from the past. But no one should bank on it!

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Otto Preminger was in Gravenhurst to attend the opening of the Norman Bethune House as an historic monument, and to see Carol Bolt's play, **Dr. Norman Bethune On Board the S.S. Empress of Asia**. For more than three years Mr. Preminger, being fascinated by the story of the remarkable Canadian doctor, has been trying to raise the money in Canada to make a film (from Rod Stewart's book) on location in British Columbia. Bearing in mind that the Saskatchewan



Otto Preminger

government has invested heavily in Alan King's film of **Who Has Seen the Wind?**, might not the BC government be inclined to follow its example? Or was Dr. Bethune of the wrong political stripe? Preminger has Donald Sutherland in mind to play Bethune.

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Motion pictures have come to be accepted as part of the arts, but time and time again they are omitted from matters relating to the arts. At a discussion of the responsibilities of the critic, held at the National Arts Centre recently, no film critics from Canada or elsewhere appear to have been invited. If they were, they either said nothing or the reporters for the newspapers considered them unworthy of being mentioned.

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When a group of irate US senators proposed counter-measures to Canada's revised tax laws relating to advertising on US border TV stations, one of their suggestions was to ban the import of Canadian feature films! One is tempted to ask them, what feature films?