

Buffalo Theatre Ensemble
Presents



Moonlight and Magnolias
by Ron Hutchinson
directed by Kurt Naebig

Characters

David O. Selznick
Ben Hecht
Victor Fleming
Miss Poppengul

Setting

A Hollywood Studio lot, in the office of legendary producer David O. Selznick.

Time

1939

Synopsis

Synopsis excerpted from Dramatists Play Service

1939 Hollywood is abuzz. Legendary producer David O. Selznick has shut down production of his new epic, *Gone With the Wind*, a film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's novel. The screenplay, you see, just doesn't work. So what's an all-powerful movie mogul to do? While fending off the film's stars, gossip columnists and his own father-in-law, Selznick sends a car for famed screenwriter Ben Hecht and pulls formidable director Victor Fleming from the set of *The Wizard of Oz*. Summoning both to his office, he locks the doors, closes the shades and on a diet of bananas and peanuts, the three men labor over five days to fashion a screenplay that will become the blueprint for one of the most successful and beloved films of all time.

Production History

Moonlight and Magnolias was originally produced in New York City by the Manhattan Theatre Club on March 3, 2005, Lynn Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer. The World Premiere was produced by The Goodman Theatre, Chicago, Illinois on May 15, 2004, Robert Falls, Artistic Director; Roche Schulfer, Executive Director

Directors Note

A triumph of will. Order out of Chaos. Three weeks into shooting a movie version of “Gone With the Wind”, the most popular book of all time aside from the Bible, David O. Selznick fires director George Cukor and gathers a new writer and director in his office for five days and nights of banana and peanut fueled re-writing. From it came a script for what was to be the most successful* movie of all time.

Francis Ford Coppola: *Anything you build on a large scale or with intense passion invites chaos.*

Bob Dylan: *Chaos is a friend of mine.*

John Cheever: *Art is the triumph over chaos.*

* In dollars adjusted for inflation

About the play and the playwright

All bios excerpted in their entirety from the Playhouse Theatre Company Study Guide.

British playwright and screenwriter **Ron Hutchinson** is the author of *Rat in the Skull*, premiere at Royal Court Theatre 1984, Chicago's Wisdom Bridge Theatre, The Public Theatre, Mark Taper Forum and revival, Duke of York's Theatre 1995; an adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *Flight* at the National Theatre 1997; *Burning Issues*, Hampstead Theatre Club 1999; *Beau!*, Theatre Royal, Bath, national tour and Haymarket, Leicester Square 2001; *Lags*, national tours 2002-03; *Believers*, for Playbox Young People's Theatre, 2003; *Head/Case*, Royal Shakespeare Company 2004; and *Moonlight and Magnolias*, Goodman Theatre, Chicago 2004 and Manhattan Theatre Club 2005. Mr. Hutchinson lives in Los Angeles where he is a writer/producer for features and television. Winner of an Emmy for *Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story*, starring Ben Kingsley in 1989, his latest projects include the miniseries *Marco Polo* and *The Ten Commandments*, *The Tuskegee Airman*, *The Burning Season*, *Traffic* (nominated for three Emmys in 2004) and rewrites on Fox Pictures' remake of *Flight of the Phoenix*.

DAVID O. SELZNICK



(May 10, 1902 – June 22, 1965)

Producer, writer, and Hollywood legend, David O. Selznick was an iconic figure of “the Golden Age of Hollywood.”

Selznick was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on May 10, 1902 to Lewis J. Selznick and Florence Sachs Selznick. Lewis Selznick was a jeweler, but he became fascinated by the fledgling motion picture industry. He moved the family to New York City and in 1914 founded World Pictures Corporation, a film distribution company.

David Selznick attended Columbia College and then joined his father’s company as an apprentice, working there until his father went bankrupt. The younger Selznick moved to Hollywood in 1926 and used his father’s connections to obtain a position at MGM Studios as a story editor. He moved to Paramount Pictures in 1928 and in 1931 joined RKO as Head of Production.

His most notable films at RKO include *King Kong* (1933) and *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), which marked the film debut of Katherine Hepburn. Selznick had been opposed to the casting of Hepburn, but director George Cukor over-ruled him (a rare loss for Selznick, at a time when the producer truly controlled all aspects of production). In 1930 he married Irene Gladys Mayer, the daughter of MGM co-founder and movie mogul Louis B. Mayer. They had two sons, Daniel and Jeffrey, and divorced in 1948.

In 1933, Selznick left RKO to form his own production unit at MGM, where he produced such classics as *David Copperfield* (1935), *Anna Karenina* (1935) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935). He struck out on his own in 1935, forming his own production company, Selznick International Pictures, which distributed through United Artists. Selznick International Pictures produced only 11 films over five years, but two of those films, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940) won back-to-back Best Picture Oscars,

making Selznick the only producer in movie history to achieve that feat. *Rebecca* was Alfred Hitchcock's first American movie, and though the two men fought bitterly over Selznick's creative interference over his films, the movie launched Hitchcock's career.

After *Rebecca*, Selznick closed his studio and took some time off, loaning his stars out to other studios for large fees, and putting together talent packages for other producers. He returned to producing his own films in 1944 with *Since You Went Away*, a movie about the women left behind in World War II that he adapted himself. Other notable successes included *Spellbound* (1945), *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *The Third Man* (1949). He married actress Jennifer Jones in 1949 and switched his attention from controlling movies to controlling her career. Their only child, Mary, committed suicide in 1976. Jones later became a mental health activist and counselor. He only produced five more films between 1950 and his death in 1965.

Gone With the Wind was by far Selznick's greatest success. It was, in fact, one of the greatest successes in Hollywood history, grossing more money than any other film in history (in relative terms). It won ten Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay (the award went to Sidney Howard), and helped earn Selznick the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award. Selznick later sold his interest in the movie to investor John Hay Whitney for \$200,000.

BEN HECHT



(February 28, 1894-April 18, 1964)

Author, playwright, journalist and Academy Award-winning screenwriter, Ben Hecht was one of the most prolific writers of his generation, penning hundreds of screenplays, stories, articles, columns and plays over the course of his career. He was born on February 28, 1894 in New York City, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants. His family moved to Wisconsin when he was young and after a brief period at the University of Wisconsin, he moved to Chicago where he worked as a reporter for the *Chicago Journal* and *Chicago Daily News*. At the end of World War I, he was sent to Berlin to report on the political unrest that formed the basis of his first novel, *Erik Dorn*. He returned to the *Chicago Tribune* to pen a daily column that formed the basis of his book *1001 Afternoons in Chicago*, one of the classics of print journalism. He continued to write short stories and in 1923 formed his own newspaper, *The Chicago Literary Times*. The newspaper failed, leaving him bankrupt and he moved to New York City, where he received a telegram from his friend and fellow writer Herman J. Mankiewicz, encouraging him to come to Hollywood: "Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots." Hecht heeded the call and ended up at Paramount Studios. One of his first screenplays,

Underworld (1927), won the first Academy Award for Best Original Story. In all he worked on dozens of movies, either as a credited screenwriter or an uncredited rewrite or dialogue contributor.

He worked with director Alfred Hitchcock on such classics as *Spellbound* and *Notorious*, with additional uncredited work on *Foreign Correspondent*, *Lifeboat*, *Rope* and *The Paradine Case*. One of his favorite collaborators was Charles MacArthur, with whom he shared a second Academy Award for their screenplay, *The Scoundrel* (1935). Hecht and MacArthur also wrote the classic plays, *The Front Page* and *Twentieth Century*, and collaborated on the screenplays for *Crime without Passion*, *Gunga Din*, *Wuthering Heights* and the movie adaptation of *The Front Page*. After MacArthur's death in 1956, Hecht wrote a loving tribute to his long-time friend in the biography, *Charlie: The Improbable Life and Times of Charles MacArthur*.

In all, Hecht was nominated for six Academy Awards for Best Story or Screenplay: *Underworld* (winner), *Viva Villa!*, *The Scoundrel* (winner), *Wuthering Heights*, *Angels over Broadway*, and *Notorious*. *Wuthering Heights* was defeated by another screenplay that Hecht had played an uncredited but instrumental role in writing: *Gone with the Wind*. In 1981 the Writers Guild of America honored him posthumously with the Laurel Award for Screen Writing Achievement.

Hecht was a passionate Zionist, who worked tirelessly during World War II to raise awareness of the Holocaust, and decried the failure of the Allied and Jewish leaders to take steps to rescue European Jews. He was a supporter of the Irgun, a paramilitary Zionist group that carried out attacks against the British establishment and Arab settlements, until the group disbanded in 1948.

Hecht was working on the screenplay for the original *Casino Royale* when he died of a thrombosis on April 18, 1964.

VICTOR FLEMING



(February 23, 1883-January 6, 1949)

Born in La Cañada, California on February 23, 1883, Victor Fleming was an Academy Award winning director and one of the forgotten greats of Hollywood's Golden Age.

Fleming began his film career as a stuntman, putting to good use earlier careers as a mechanic and racecar driver. He soon moved to the other side of the camera, as an assistant cameraman to director Allan Dwan and by 1915, director of photography. He worked with Dwan and D.W. Griffith on several of Douglas Fairbanks' movies and his first movie as a director, *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919), also starred Fairbanks. Fleming became known as a man's director, directing a series of rugged action movies in the 1920s. One of his early talkies, *The Virginian* (1927), made Gary Cooper a star and the men remained lifelong friends. Yet he was equally successful at directing women. "He got things out of me that were different from anything I had done before," Ingrid Bergman told *The London Times* in 1971. "What more can an actor want?" Clara Bow said of him: "Of all the men I've known, there was a man."

Fleming joined MGM in 1932 and directed a mixture of steamy comedies and dramas (*Red Dust* and *Bombshell*) and family adventure classics (*Treasure Island*, *Captains Courageous*). He was the favorite director of Clark Gable and when the filming of *Gone With the Wind* ran into trouble, Fleming was brought on to bring the situation under control. He left another troubled production, *The Wizard of Oz*, just short of completion to take on the task of bringing Margaret Mitchell's blockbuster to the screen.

He didn't think much of the picture, though. Legend has it that when producer David Selznick asked if he wanted a straight fee or a percentage of the proceeds, Fleming replied: "Don't be a damn fool, David. This picture is going to be one of the biggest white elephants of all time." *Gone with the Wind* went on to become the highest grossing film (in relative terms) in history and won Fleming his only Academy Award for Best Director.

Fleming's career declined in the 1940s and he died of a heart attack on January 6, 1949, just after the release of his final film, *Joan of Arc*. Although the film, starring Ingrid Bergman opened to mixed reviews and lower-than-anticipated box office, it received seven Academy Award nominations, winning for Costume Design and Cinematography. Producer Walter Wanger also received an honorary award for the movie, but refused it in protest of the film being left out of the Best Picture nominations.

His name may not be a household word, but Fleming is the only director to have two films in the top ten of the American Film Institute.

Things to think about prior to performance:

- What do you imagine the process of writing a film script is like?
- What are your first impressions as you enter the theatre? What does the set make you think will happen in this play?
- Have you ever been in a high-pressure job situation? What was that like? Would you do it again?

Things to watch for in performance:

- What are the props in this production? How do these objects draw you into the world of the production?
- How do individuals' memories of a particular event agree or differ? Who's telling the truth, or is it their perspective that is different? Why?
- Why does Ben Hecht think it's inappropriate to set the play in the Old South?
- Why is Victor Fleming so difficult? What do others say about him, and what does he reveal about himself?
- Why must Victor Fleming and David O. Selznick act out the book for Ben Hecht?
- How does the lighting designer, Jon Gantt, show the passage of time? How do the other designers (Costumes, Makeup, Props and Set) do the same?

Things to think about after the performance:

- Many playwrights deal with traditional themes, which are arguably true for such themes as trust, marriage, love, etc. What do you think the theme of this play is? Is this relevant today? In what way(s)?
- What characters ultimately change? How do they change?
- Why was the character of Miss Poppengul in the play? What does her character accomplish for the playwright?
- Choose any two characters from the play – for instance Hecht and Fleming; compare and contrast them. Consider the values that each character represents and how their presence influences our perception of ourselves.
- How did the choice of music, or sound design, by Michael Moon contribute to the overall feel of the show?

Other Analysis “Tools”:

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, WHAT happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is ‘about’?
- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for his work?

Moonlight and Magnolias has a preview performance on Thursday, September 17th in Theatre 2 of the McAninch Arts Center. The play is approximately one and one half hours in length, including one ten minute intermission.

Please join us for a **pre-show discussion on Thursday, September 17th, 6:45 – 7:15 pm** preceding the preview performance, in McAninch Arts Center, **Room 139**. Note that pre-show discussions will include the director and designers, and will be a discussion of the approach to this production.

There will be a **post-show discussion following the Friday, September 25th** performance. The post-show will be with director, cast and crew, and will be fielding questions from the audience.

We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!