



Lights, Camera, Action!

The industry — money, love, power, and Oscar

By DAN MERKUR

To be rich and famous and to exert not inconsiderable influence is the standard for success in the film industry — money, love, and power in a nutshell. In an immeasurably competitive world, the movies provide one of the great challenges with their unrivalled mobility. From stunt man to star and director in ten years' space is not unknown, and the earnings are quite attractive. A man might strive for artistic excellence and immortality through the celluloid, and garner a million dollars per picture, and hordes of admirers, and might then politely ask his way to public office, or else endorse, and thereby guarantee the election of, his favourite candidate. Or he might invest as many have, in land and industry and use his power to that end.

Chaplin best known

Is it not incredible to note that Charles Chaplin, as the Tramp, is quite probably the best known figure of this century.

The honours paid a movie queen, even a well-faded movie queen like Lillian Gish, Katherine Hepburn or Gloria Swanson — has anyone been paid such honours in private and by the public since Louis XIV?

Hearst and Pulitzer were journalism in their time, and there are always the Hughes', Hunt's, Getty's and Co.; but there is something about the movies (clearly seen by Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Chandler and others), a style, a grace, a playing with the fine points of human aesthetics — the quirkiest, most demanding market basis of all — as well as a nerve-rendering struggle with bureaucrats, lab technicians, inventors, property men, electricians, soundmen and artists all sensitive and high strung as a stable of thoroughbreds: writers, actors, directors, photographers, architects, couturiers, make-up specialists. It is a tricky business, with fortune or ruin riding on every project — you're only as good as your last picture — but the stakes are unrivalled and the competition and the danger are keen.

The thirties and forties

In the thirties and forties, when Hollywood was synonymous with the movies, when the Warners, Louis Mayer, Harry Cohn, Jesse Lasker, Adolph Zukor, Carl Laemmle, Darryl Zanuck, CB de Mille and others were personally able to support the picture making at their respective studios, when the 20 or 30 or 40 million spent annually at each studio was studio money, and not, as it is today, a tax write-off for a major corporation like Gulf and Western. If Paramount loses dough, the U.S. gov't foots most of the bill; if it makes, Gulf and Western pays a dividend.

But the heart and soul of the industry is gone; the stakes are smaller and the likelihood of another David Selznick are slim. Top man in the film industry is no longer a film man; he's a VP for an oil or insurance corporation.

Still, there is a lot not to be overlooked. John Wayne, after all, is able to command an hour on the tube to argue patriotism,



The spirit of Oscar

manages to nominate and endorse political candidates, and even cruises around on a private yacht that has seen other days as an American destroyer — all on the basis that he is a big star with small talents who hung around long enough to land a dozen decent roles over the years and make a legitimate reputation. And let us not forget that when Hollywood isn't volunteering a Duke Wayne picture, Wayne gets out old Batjac Productions (his own outfit), calls in the boys from the backroom and makes The Alamo or The Green Berets, patriotism served up to order.

The Oscars

The Oscars are another force to be considered, because they are a (usually) coveted prize in the movie game because they mean increased receipts for the film, and a higher salary for the prizewinner in the future. They also mean prestige of sorts, as well as being a testimonial of professional affection, a contradiction in terms.

The Oscars, as well, bolster Hollywood's image as the world film capital. Which it is. Oh, Cinecitta makes as many films, and so do Japan, France and Germany, and many of them are better, but the eyes all turn to California — Antonioni, Polanski, Truffaut, they head west. Didn't Godard say that the dream of every French

auteur was to make Spartacus in Hollywood with Kirk Douglas and 10,000 extras? And so the Oscars are narcissist.

Since the beginning, the realities of the Oscar have been gossiped, scandal-mongered as though no one was supposed to know that they are awarded for a lot of political reasons that have nothing to do with excellence of achievement. A film like Hello, Dolly with the success of an entire studio riding on it, and with hundreds of workers whose salaries might be higher in future if Dolly were a success (so they could claim partial responsibility), a film like that has a lot of votes being cast by the cast and crew for financial reasons, by their friends for reasons of amity, and by studio people because they need the picture to succeed. Oscars in any of the top departments mean an extra few million in box-office receipts, and in the case of Dolly an Oscar to Streisand meant more tickets sold to Funny Girl, (which was still in release), so Columbia was behind Dolly as well as Fox, and UA, I believe, had On a Clear Day ... awaiting release, whose success hung directly on Hello, Dolly. It didn't do well either.

Other forces at work are the film community absolving themselves of guilt over having bypassed an actor for a previous performance, or for having insulted someone socially. Then again there is the

feeling:

"Well, doncha think it's Charlie's turn?"

"Bill did a better job."

"Bill's got three. Charlie don't. He's a good guy, been around a while."

So Charlie gets it.

About those nominations

Have you ever noticed which films receive nomination, again in the big categories: film, director, and acting. As a general rule (there is an exception or two annually) the films are of two sorts: the studio formula-pictures — big, sometimes huge, big stars, big studio, very expensive — often likely to be a plum, and needing the Oscar to break even at the box-office; and the small semi-independent picture, sometimes made, always released by a major distributor. (The major distributors seem to keep the Academy a closed shop, as last year with Z, whose American distributor, an independent, forced its way into the Academy's privy.)

There are good solid reasons for this. Firstly, much of film-making is a matter of faith. The backers simply must believe in the abilities of the film crew to make a saleable film. And so with the Oscars, Hollywood shows faith by backing the old money and respecting the new.

Of course, Oscars also go to whoever pays for the best ad-

vertising in the trade papers and the L.A. press, and so Oscars go to the bigger stars, with more money from the distributor and out of their own pockets to buy them. If they lose, they are still well advertised and since you sell your name as much as your face, it pays off anyhow.

And since the trade unions and guilds are virtually sealed, the Academy has an elitist membership. With the benefits of TV airing, forty years of history, and the affluence of the American movie-goer, the Oscars mean more in a dollars sense than Cannes or Venice or any of the others. And let us have no delusions about Film and Art. Film-making is a business of power and fame, with stakes high enough to attract financial geniuses of a high order — Thalberg, Seznick, Goldwyn (instinct no doubt), not to say Chaplin, Pickford, Disney and Hughes.

It's all for money in the end

Think of Walt Disney: of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, of Mickey, and Disneyland; and of Chaplin: the little Tramp, a kind heart always being kicked in the ass. Now the Oscars remind you Disney traded sentiment for millions of dollars treating an army of illustrators like flunkies, and was an arch-capitalist with a good hand in government; and that Chaplin, secure in the affection of millions, people and greenbacks, preached socialism not communism, arrogantly, issuing instructions, then took a king's exile, all the while exploiting his films to their fullest.

The Oscars audaciously let us come too close to Hollywood. They let us see the scars beneath the make-up. They remind us of the realities behind the movies. George C. Scott, an actor evidently with scruples, keeps away and Time magazine skirts the issue. The movies have a power yet to be reckoned and reckoned with, but it doesn't lie with Ali McGraw being in her 30s, or Barbra going funky, nor with Godard, unhappily. There is an incoming tide of romanticism to cover the corporate finances behind them and others. There can be no aesthetic of the cinema that fails to consider the full scope and power of the film art; and wanting to make westerns and love stories like so many do, is getting to be a real hassle.

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Current Gossip: The major critics are having a terrific time of it with the New Realist's John Simon blasting both the New Yorker's Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris of the Village Voice, who have a long standing feud, in an introduction to his book. Then the Times invited Sarris' reply and then Simon's further volley, printing them opposite each other. Now Richard Shickel of Harpers defends Miss Kael, shotguns Sarris, dry gulches Simon, bushwhacks Willima Pechtor of Commentary, and rides off with Manny Farber, who gets around. Mr. Stanley Kaufmann of The Republic, who lectured at York two weeks back, watches.

"So what's reviewed this week?"

"Nothing."

"Not Teeth in Valdez, Kate in Coco, or Swanson ...?"

"Nothing."