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<td>長崎大学教養部紀要 人文科学篇 1984, 25(1), p.151-169</td>
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<tr>
<td>発行日</td>
<td>1984-07</td>
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<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/15193">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/15193</a></td>
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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON’S INTRODUCTION TO HOLLYWOOD, II*

LEROY ROBINSON

John Howard Lawson’s short-term contract at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Motion Pictures Corporation was renewed in late 1928.

Early in 1929 Lawson and his wife and small son moved to Playa del Rey in western Los Angeles.

Lawson says that he and his wife Susan had more economic security than they had had since their marriage began.

The Lawsons had more and closer friends than they had had in New York. Their general atmosphere was more relaxed than it had been in the East.

“This was a simple matter of economics,” Lawson says, “but it affected our way of life and psychological condition in myriad ways—all stemming from the fact that we had a regular weekly income”.

* The first part of this article appeared in Keiei to keizai, March 1984.

1) Lawson altered this last noun phrase from “a regular and lavish weekly income”.
In early 1929 Lawson and his friends did not worry much about politics. They thought that “there were no controversial issues that seemed urgent enough to demand debate or incite emotion”.

As for M.G.M. studio politics, Lawson makes an indirect comment on that subject when he refers to a letter from Em Jo Basshe asking Lawson to “talk to some of the moguls” about a job in Hollywood for him. Lawson says that he did not have much access to the “rulers” of Hollywood.

Lawson notes: “One of the rules of Hollywood requires that everyone function in accordance with his status and his relationship to management... A writer cannot plead for a friend, or urge some personal or aesthetic matter, in any way that suggests an influence which he does not have”.

Lawson made the case for Basshe as well as he could. He “felt ashamed by the knowledge that /his/ recommendation meant nothing”.

Lawson was pre-occupied with his own career, thinking that his “star was in the ascendant”.

Lawson had arrived at M.G.M. when the motion picture company had decided to produce talking pictures.

2) On the other hand, when the wife of New Masses editor Mike Gold went to Hollywood to raise money for the magazine, the Lawsons “assembled” a group of people to listen to her appeal for funds: “All of us made contributions which were neither so small as to seem stingy nor so large as to show serious interest”.
Irving Thalberg was grooming Lawson to work as a screenwriter in talking pictures. Thalberg recommended Lawson to Cecil B. DeMille, who was about to make his first film with sound, *Dynamite*, about a love affair between a high society girl and a coal miner.

DeMille requested Lawson to write the screenplay for *Dynamite* as a matter of "typecasting", for Lawson's *Processional* (1925) had been about coal miners, one of whom was driven by "untamed violence".

Lawson respected DeMille's "showmanship", which was "more sensitive to public taste and more cognizant of public issues than the more static views of most Hollywood leaders".

In planning *Dynamite* DeMille "realized that spoken dialogue required a substantive theme, a clash of characters and ideas". DeMille chose "a capital-labor" theme. He did this not only "as a means of securing a dramatic conflict" but also "in recognition of the increasing unemployment and labor unrest". 3)

But the "mandatory" concept of the motion picture industry could not be deviated from. DeMille "transferred" the theme of *The Pagan*--the society girl and the "savage"--from Polynesia to the U.S.A.

In DeMille's outline of *Dynamite*, the society girl is bored by her rich fiance, so she flirts with a coal miner who appeals to her. The three are then trapped in a mine by an explosion.

3) In the late twenties, Lawson says, DeMille's mind "had not yet hardened into a reactionary mold".
The men fight each other. The men realize they must save the woman. The heroism of the miner saves all three. The woman returns to her social class.

Lawson says that the story conferences about Dynamite were almost the same as those about The Pagan. One difference was that DeMille “was shrewd enough to see that a film with dialogue must have a realistic tone, in contrast to the romantic mood of silent films”.

DeMille chose actors according to this realization. In “a daring innovation”, DeMille chose two actors with only stage experience--“a risk that only DeMille would have been permitted to take”--whose style was in contrast to the rich man’s “unchanging stiffness, inherited from the silent films”.

As for Lawson’s script, DeMille “flattered” Lawson on it. Lawson “concealed” his own “dissatisfaction” from DeMille. Lawson had not written with any “conviction”. He had done a “craftsman’s job”.

But when Dynamite was released, Lawson was “dismayed”. The original story of Dynamite was attributed to Jean MacPherson. Lawson’s scenario was not credited. Along with Jean MacPherson and Gladys Ungar, Lawson was given credit for writing the film’s dialogue.

Lawson pointed out to DeMille that he had written most of the screenplay. DeMille agreed that Lawson had written almost all of it, but he would not discuss the matter with Lawson.

Lawson says that the industry’s system of giving or not giving credits had “disastrous effects” on the “morale and compe-
tence” of screenwriters at the time.

Lawson adds:

From his own point of view, DeMille proceeded logically. Jean MacPherson was a wispy, middle-aged woman who was a permanent part of his staff. She occasionally twittered at story conferences. She may have been an effective contributor to silent films, but she was a frightened stranger in the world of sound. I assume that DeMille dictated the outline of Dynamite, but she probably sat with him and made suggestions. He felt obligated to her and she was useful to him. But she would have been angry if he had given her only the original story credit. She needed a dialogue credit.

Lawson continues:

Gladys Ungar had been called in for a quick polish on the script. Since I was classified as a writer of tough, colorful speech, it was considered desirable to introduce a touch of wit and sophistication in the society scenes, and Gladys Ungar was a specialist in repartee. She deserved credit for additional dialogue, but DeMille did not want to make this distinction because it would have forced him to give a subordinate credit to Jean MacPherson. It would have been fair to give me sole credit for the screenplay, but DeMille was incapable of thinking in these terms: his experience made him feel that he alone was responsible for the film—the writers were the instruments of his will.

Lawson goes on to say that, although DeMille would have considered it “beneath his dignity” to change the credits, DeMille was appreciative of Lawson’s work. DeMille “made amends in his own flamboyant way”. DeMille was master of ceremonies
for the Carthay Circle Theatre premiere of *Dynamite* and, seeing Lawson arrive, he interrupted his presentation of the stars of the film and called Lawson up to the stage and introduced him with “glowing praise”.

Despite DeMille’s tribute (unusual tribute to a writer in Hollywood) Lawson felt that he could not adjust himself to the conditions of screenwriting. He felt that he did not want to have “a permanent place” at M.G.M.

Lawson urged his agent Harold Freedman to sell *Death in an Office* as soon as possible so that Lawson could get back to work in the theater in New York.

Freedman said that *Death in an Office* needed to be rewritten before he could show it to producers. Freedman advised Lawson to stay in Hollywood a little longer and “learn the trick of how to handle the situation sufficiently to be able to put over your points”.

Lawson stayed. He could not leave M.G.M. without breaking his contract. And he had had a raise in pay. His economic goal was “clearer”: He wanted to build up his financial reserves in order “to secure /his/ freedom”.

The summer of 1929. The Lawsons “seemed to have settled into a soporific routine”.

The only thing that disturbed their family was the death of their small dog Trader Horn run over by a Pacific Electric car. This was a blow to the Lawson’s three year old son Jeffrey.

Francis Farragoh gave the Lawsons a white wolfhound,
“sleek and beautiful”, but “she had too much style and not enough warmth, and she could not replace Trader Horn in Jeff’s affections”.

Lawson says that the wolfhound symbolized their new status: The dog chewed up a borrowed copy of Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Lawson had compared Lawrence’s novel to his Dynamite.

The similarity of themes made “shockingly clear” the contrast between the truth of the novel and the dishonesty of the film—especially to a writer “who had consciously compromised the truth of art”, Lawson himself.

Lawson says:

This betrayal provided the serenity of our lives. I could not indulge in lamentations or accusations against the film industry. I could be bitter about American society in general, but I had written my name on the contract with M.G.M. If I regarded it as a pact with the devil, I had not been ignorant of the terms, and the devil had kept his part of the agreement. Everyone in the motion picture industry had signed a similar compact and suffered a comparable debasement.

The fall of 1929. The Lawson’s second child was born.

Sue Lawson’s mother Mary Edmond came from Waco, Texas, to stay with the Lawsons. John Howard Lawson recognized his mother-in-law’s “rare spirit”, but he did not make an effort to establish “an intimate contact” with her, possibly influenced by the “rebellious aloofness” he felt toward his father.

Lawson says that Mary Edmond was similar in many ways to Simeon Levy Lawson in spite of her different background.
“She had the same moral certainties, the same faith in values which were no longer operative in our society,” Lawson says. He was “antagonistic” to these values because they did not work for him. His “deeper trouble”, he says, was his “creative frustration”, which made him “self-centered”.

The Lawsons named their daughter Jacqueline.

Simeon Levy Lawson preferred a name “harmonizing” with Lawson. His letter to the Lawsons “revealed thoughts that preoccupied him on his lonely walks along the sea”.

Simeon Levy Lawson’s letter contains the following hope for his new granddaughter:

She may have a great career before her, and something does depend upon a name...There is an advantage in having it short, ringing and euphonious. Inside of twenty-five years...half the members of Congress...will be women, and probably you will see a woman President of the United States. It might be advisable to give my grand-daughter a good chance to help redeem the country from graft and corruption.

The Lawsons changed the name of their daughter from Jacqueline to Susan Amanda Lawson.

But Lawson smiled at the letter from his father, “only vaguely touched by the lively spirit of a man approaching his seventy-seventh birthday”.

Lawson did not share his father’s optimism concerning the United States.

Lawson repeats that he was “caught in a web of false secu-
rity"—a "modest Dolce Vita..., the assurance of a settled life, the profitless profit of studio routine".

He had no intention of staying in Hollywood. But he had no definite plans for the future.

*Dynamite* was commercially successful. Lawson was assigned to write a similar screenplay for *The Ship from Shanghai*, "a more melodramatic version of the conflict between the society girl and the primitive brute".

Lawson describes the story of *The Ship from Shanghai*:

A millionaire hires a sailing ship to take his family from Shanghai to San Francisco. The crew of the ship is a gang of criminals. They intend to seize the ship. When they do, their leader wants to take the society girl for his mistress. She defends herself with such spirit that he is moved to admiration and even love. Eventually, the society girl outwits the pirates and saves her family.

The director of *The Ship from Shanghai* was Charles Brabin, a silent film director, now making his first talking picture, "an ordeal fraught for him with danger and hope".

Brabin invited Lawson to his home in Beverly Hills. They sat in the garden and talked. "Brabin loved to talk", Lawson says, "and he talked wisely and well". They talked about art and philosophy.

And Brabin and his famous actress wife Theda Bara told Lawson stories of their old days in Hollywood. The Brabins had "a kind of sincerity", Lawson says, that made them "both
touching and enormously likeable. They were “charming people”, but, Lawson says, “they belonged to another epoch”.

The Brabins had a lot of money, but they wanted to be what they had been in silent films. They wanted to be restored to their “lost eminence”. They wanted to understand and conquer the new Hollywood of talking pictures.

“I”, Lawson says, “came to them as an ambassador of change. I had been assigned, not just to write the film, but to renew their youth by giving them the key to the strange world of sound”.

“But”, Lawson adds, “I had no key”.

Lawson could not help the Brabins, because he could not tell them “a simple cruel truth”--The Ship from Shanghai was “a rusty melodrama, outmoded before the advent of sound”.

Brabin saw The Ship from Shanghai as the story of a sex conflict. He saw this conflict in the threat of rape and the woman’s strategies in avoiding it--“which Brabin described in words that reminded /Lawson/ of Theda Bara’s silent film roles as a femme fatale”.

Lawson opposed this melodramatic tendency. “I succeeded in endowing the pirate leader with a hatred of the rich and a Freudian psychosis, which led him to go mad and jump overboard. It was not a happy solution”. This characterization “clashed” with the methods of the director, who directed the physical action of the film with “the hand of a master”, but who did not understand that spoken dialogue required a different style of acting from that of silent films.
Lawson was given sole credit for writing *The Ship from Shanghai*.

Upon its release in April 1930 the film was "derided" by film critics (with whom Lawson agreed) but "welcomed" by film audiences. It was a commercial success.

Lawson's prestige at M.G.M. was "enhanced".

But, late in 1929, had come what John Howard Lawson calls the "Crack of Doom". It came "gently" like "a far rumble of thunder in a cloudless sky".

Black Friday, October 25, 1929.

"It took me many months, and really years, for me to understand, or at least to begin to understand--I am still engaged in that task--that Black Friday inaugurated a crisis which is still with us", Lawson comments in 1964.

But Black Friday, October 25, 1929, was an ordinary day at M.G.M. Lawson was again working on another movie about rich people and poor people.

The story of *Our Blushing Brides* was "preposterous". But the opportunity to write it was "one of the prime assignments of the year" at M.G.M.

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4) This is the tentative title of a chapter in Lawson's unfinished autobiography (c. 1964), which his daughter Susan Amanda Lawson has permitted to read and which is the basis for this article.

5) After Black Friday, Lawson says, "it was the kind of film that would not be made again in just this way".
Lawson was assigned to collaborate with Bess Meredith⁶ (“one of the most respected screenwriters of the silent days”) in the development of an original story.

Producer Hunt Stromberg, according to Lawson, expected Bess Meredith to provide the “conventional cinematic technique on which he relied” and Lawson to provide “touches” of strong dialogue and sexual frankness.

Lawson notes that in the first year of talking pictures this “recipe” had proved “serviceable”—“one part old-fashioned sentiment and one part up-to-the-minute cynicism”.⁷

Lawson and Bess Meredith “invented” (Lawson’s quotes) a story “straight out of the 19th century”: “Cinderella breaks through the class barriers, but only after a frantic fight to preserve her virginity”. A poor working girl defends her virtue and is rewarded with marriage to a rich man. Her two poor girl friends are “betrayed by ‘passion’”. One, a rich man’s mistress, commits suicide, when he marries a woman of his own social class. The other marries a middle-aged man; when he is arrested as a thief and imprisoned, she is left penniless.

On Black Friday the film makers at M.G.M. were in the

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6) Lawson describes Bess Meredith as “a cheerful collaborator.” She was “unimaginative, but workmanlike, and unpretentious”. She thought only “in terms of the silent film”. Her ideas about dialogue were “like those of a child learning to talk”.

7) One of the basic themes of all Lawson’s dramas is opposition to cynicism.
middle of a big scene at a millionaire's estate—"a terrace with marble stairs and balustrades and many fountains". Several hundred models are taking part in a fashion show. They appear in "a succession of costumes, modern evening dresses, risque bathing suits, and French Second Empire dresses with colored wigs".

The poor girl, one of these models, wears a French Second Empire costume—"partly", Lawson says, "to suggest the gap between her real self and the aristocratic world she has entered".

The rich son of the millionaire takes the poor girl through a series of gardens to an artificial lake. A boat carries the two of them to an island. Here the young man has built "a luxurious love-nest in the branches of a tree".

Lawson and Bess Meredit "struggled" with "the awkward mechanics" of the lake and the boat and the tree house--the kind of scene possible in silent films. "But it was impossible to write dialogue which justified the girl's ignorance of the man's intentions while they walked and boated across the lake and even climbed into a tree".

Lawson and Meredith went to the office of producer Hunt Stromberg to discuss this problem on one of "the hectic days" following the Black Friday Stock Market Crash. Stromberg was talking on the telephone almost constantly as he listened to reports of "the madness in Wall Street".  

8) Lawson had never bought stocks, but in late November 1929 he almost got caught up in the madness, too. His friend, screenwriter Samuel Ornitz, had studied the stock market and "made such a convincing analysis
Lawson tried to discuss one line of dialogue with Stromberg between the latter's many telephone conversations, a line that, Lawson says, affected him "like a personal insult"—"You seem like some gorgeous creature of the French court... who stepped out of a dream". Lawson suggested "a more intimate" line. "Stromberg, with one ear to the phone, putting down stock quotations, shouted at me that intimacy would kill it: 'He respects her, he treats her like a dream, that's why she believes in him'".

"It is hard," Lawson says, "to convey the seriousness of these discussions. Vested interests were at stake, and Stromberg spoke of the line with the respect that is due to a million dollars".  

(the market had reached its low and was now going to go up) that no one could doubt him". Lawson and Ornitz and other screenwriters met almost every day for a few weeks at a Hollywood stock broker's office at 7 a.m. (These daily trips before dawn were "exhausting", Lawson recalls.) Lawson listened to specialists "in a baffled effort to make some sense" out of what they were saying. He bought a few stocks. He saw their prices go down. "I decided that the depression had not reached bottom and there might not be a bottom to it". Lawson kept the stock he had, but "abandoned" the market.

9) For Christmas 1929 Lawson gave Stromberg a toy ticker tape which gave out real stock market quotations. Stromberg "saw nothing funny about it, but fell to studying the quotations..."

10) Lawson was "so distressed" by Hunt Stromberg that even at home he spoke about him "constantly". One day "when the M.G.M. lion made
Both Lawson and Stromberg were affected by their disagreements about dialogue for *Our Blushing Brides*.

Stromberg decided that Lawson was incorrect in his approach to dialogue. Stromberg asked Edwin Justus Mayer to add "a lighter touch" to the dialogue being written by Lawson and Meredith. Stromberg did not tell Lawson that he had done this. "It was not customary," Lawson says, "to inform writers of such matters". But Mayer told Lawson about it. They both laughed. Mayer made "minor changes" in the dialogue.

Lawson and Meredith finished the screenplay. Then Lawson learned that the credits were: "Scenario by Bess Meredith and John Howard Lawson. Dialogue by Bess Meredith and Edwin Justus Mayer".

Lawson says he "felt incapable of even a routine protest". Mayer was his friend and needed the screen credit, "and the obscure intrigue...could not be brought into the open" without harming Mayer.

Lawson asked Stromberg to release him from his contract. Stromberg refused, saying that a release was not possible at that time.

Stromberg had already decided that Lawson and Bess Meredith should work together on a new screenplay.

*The Sea Bat*: A criminal masquerading as a minister of the gospel is hiding from the police on a tropical island. He desires

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a visit to the studio, I took Jeffery to see the animal. Jeffery stared at the caged lion for some time, and then asked, 'But where is Stromberg?". 
a native girl, threatening to betray his disguise. "This variant of the conflict between corrupt civilization and primitive feeling . . . had the added advantage of a final undersea battle between the bogus clergyman and a giant squid, which was reproduced in rubber in a tank at the studio", Lawson ironically adds.

Lawson says that his own battle with The Sea Bat "was as painful as the actor's ordeal in the tank, and it lasted even longer".

The spring of 1930 turned to summer.

Lawson felt that every day he spent at M.G.M. was wasted.

He had more money than he had ever had. He had learned "useful lessons" in Hollywood. Now he wanted to return to New York.

He hoped that in the fall Death in an Office could be produced.

About this play, Lawson's agent Harold Freedman had written confidently that Lawson had gotten rid of "a certain desire for experimentation". Freedman was mistaken, Lawson says. Lawson's "advanced education in the necessity and danger of compromise" in Hollywood had made him "not less but more rebellious, more determined to break down the walls that enclosed the theatre".

In May 1939 Lawson received another letter that promised "more understanding" of his work as a playwright, a letter from director Harold Clurman, then looking for plays for the Theatre Guild.
Clurman was enthusiastic about *Death in an Office*. This play, Clurman said, had "a psychological interest new in Lawson's work" that "bespeaks an enrichment of your art and an added strength in your temperament". *Death in an Office* was "alive with suggestion", the main character "real, complex, eminently characteristic...". Clurman added that he thought that Lawson had not mastered "the realistic technique...the dramatic narrative method, practiced since Ibsen". Clurman told Lawson to combine the traditional method with Lawson’s own lyric feeling: "the poetic form (not necessarily expressionism) is more expressive of your talent".

Lawson, long accustomed to being misunderstood in the theatre, was happy to read a "sympathetic statement" about his "most perplexing" problems as a playwright--"psychological depth and the relationship of poetic form to reality".

Lawson was not convinced that a solution to his problems lay simply in a "more realistic technique", but he read into Clurman’s letter "more than was really there--a community of interest which was between the lines and not in the actual words".

*The Sea Bat* was already under production. Lawson was writing lines to be dubbed in later--"a laborious technical job".11)

But Lawson immediately told Hunt Stromberg that he was going to leave Hollywood in two weeks.

Stromberg asked Lawson to finish the dubbing work in two

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11) "I had to run and re-run each scene of the action sequences so that the words were exactly timed to fit the visual movement".
weeks. He told Lawson that only Irving Thalberg could release Lawson from his contract.

A few days later Lawson was called to Thalberg’s office for an explanation of his request for release. As Lawson talked, Thalberg flipped a coin in the air. Lawson recognized that Thalberg did not believe that he had written *Death in an Office* before he came to M.G.M. Thalberg was annoyed, but his annoyance “was modified by his respect for anyone who had outsmarted him”.\(^{12}\)

Thalberg offered to keep Lawson under contract and give him a long leave of absence. Lawson said that he did not want to return to M.G.M.

“There was a change in Thalberg’s manner. He could forgive my interest in my plays—that was a matter of money—but my desire to sever my connection with M.G.M. was disloyal”.

Thalberg, flipping his coin in the air, studied Lawson. Lawson says, “I could see him reach the conclusion, in seconds, that *Death in an Office* was only an excuse and that I had made a deal with another studio”.

Thalberg was “too Olympian to show any displeasure”. He told Lawson that he would have the necessary legal documents prepared at once.

As Lawson left Thalberg’s office, he realized that he “was closing the door on everything that Thalberg offered”.

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12) It was then customary that a work written during a writer’s period of contract to a motion picture studio BE the property of the studio.
Lawson concludes: "It was a great deal".

In June 1930 John Howard Lawson thus ended his first two years in the motion picture industry. He thought that he was escaping Hollywood. "But I would be back within a year".

(Received April 12, 1984)