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John Howard Lawson’s Introduction to Hollywood, I

LeRoy Robinson

When the New Playwrights Theatre closed down at the Cherry Lane Playhouse, John Howard Lawson returned to his house in the country, where there was "balm for the tired mind": "The Spring brought its colors and sounds. The coming and going of the tide in the bay suggested the pulse-beat of time, not frenzied but comforting in its ordered rhythms".¹)

Lawson's two years as a Playwright-Director of the short-lived NPT had left him with "painful scars" but had brought him closer to knowledge of himself and of his place in the world.

Whatever Lawson had learned from the past two years had to be "fulfilled" in "words on paper" - - "the only act of will that remained clearly open" to him.

Lawson re-read what some of the serious literary critics of his generation had written about his plays of the 1920s. He accepted their "reservations". He applied their views to a "specific analysis" of his work.

Edmund Wilson had written: "Might not a critic who enjoyed Lawson's wit and his technical innovations have accomplished some-

¹ This article is based on "Identity, or the Lack of It", "Dreiser's America", and "M-G-M's America", tentatively titled chapters in John Howard Lawson's unfinished and unpublished autobiography, parts of which his daughter Susan Amanda Lawson has permitted me to use.
thing in curing him of his bad rhetoric and his bathos?"

Waldo Frank had written: "In... Processional and The International, our mirrored jungle is employed clumsily to voice a spiritual assertion which would be magnificent... if it were organic and conscious".

Lawson easily understood Wilson's criticism, but he had to figure out what Frank meant by "an organic consciousness".

In 1964 Lawson writes:

It seemed to me that my personal lack of an organic consciousness was mirrored in my plays. I had tried to impose a pattern on the confusion of the modern situation: it was an exaggerated cartoon-jazz pattern, which expressed my own inability to cope with the situation. Where I had endeavored to make "a spiritual assertion", in Nirvana, it bogged down in subjectivity, in an unhappy search for my own half-lost identity.

In 1928 it came to Lawson "with sudden lucidity" that his plays were "deficient in psychological depth". He had never succeeded in portraying a character in three dimensions. He had dealt with characters as symbols... "and I tended to think of myself in the same way".

Lawson began to wrestle with himself and the problem of his identity. He had avoided "full acknowledgement" of his Jewish heritage. His "first need" was to come to terms with the "Jewish aspect" of his personality: "I could not be American without also being Jewish".

Lawson, writing "at breakneck speed", wrote Death in an Office, whose main character had Lawson's own idealism and interest in

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2) Nirvana (1926) has not been published. The only complete summary of it is in "John Howard Lawson's Unpublished Nirvana", Keiei to keizai, Vol. 57-3, No. 148, March 1978.
social struggle - - and Lawson's own "driving desire" for recognition and money and success, which, Lawson says in 1964, can be won "only by spiritual bankruptcy and death".

In *Death in an Office* Lawson "grappled" with the inner contradiction of his main character, "the conflict between his Jewish being and the personal disintegration that is the price of success".

When he completed this play, Lawson felt "purged and strengthened".

Lawson then tried to connect himself again with the commercial theatre. In early July 1928 he brought *Death in an Office* to dramatists agent Harold Freedman, who showed the play to successful theatrical producer Jed Harris. Harris, becoming interested in the play, discussed it with Lawson several times. Lawson "was tempted by the golden prospect" of a Jed Harris production.

Lawson says in 1964 that Harris identified himself with the main character in *Death in an Office*. But, unlike Lawson, who saw the character as a failure, Harris saw him as a man "whose boundless ambition made him attractive and worthy of emulation".

Harris was willing to end *Death in an Office* with tragedy, but only because the main character "wanted too much and could not be satisfied with what he had". Harris was "mystified", Lawson says, by Lawson's emphasis on the character's betrayal of his earlier idealism.

In the end, Harris decided not to produce this play.3)

Then, late in July 1928, Lawson received an offer for a writ-

3) See a full description of this play in "John Howard Lawson's *Death in an Office,*" Bulletin of Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol 23, No. 1, July 1982. *Death in an Office* was produced in 1932 as *Success Story*, Lawson's most successful play.
ing contract from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Motion Pictures Corporation. M. G. M. offered Lawson a salary of $250 a week for a trial period of three months; according to the contract M. G. M. could hire Lawson for another year at a salary of $500 a week.

Lawson, who was in "financial distress", accepted M. G. M.'s offer.

Lawson left New York on the Twentieth Century. He looked at Yonkers, the city of his childhood, in the twilight. The next night he sat on the open observation platform of the Santa Fe Chief as it approached Kansas City.

Lawson felt "surrounded by mystery." Twenty years before as a boy of fourteen he had sat on an observation platform and wondered about the darkness of Iowa. He still knew as little as he had then about the United States. "It was a landscape of nightmare and carnival. But this left me lost and I was tired of being lost".

In Los Angeles Lawson reported at M. G. M.'s Culver City headquarters. He was given an office. While waiting to be interviewed by Irving Thalberg, Lawson walked around the M. G. M. "lot". He found "a bewildering city of assorted buildings, medieval castles, Greek temples, white-colonnaded mansions, corners of Paris streets, saloons of the Wild West—all these were facades with nothing behind them".

This was "the world of the movies". Lawson felt "trapped" in it: "I was scared of the silence, the showy facades, the absence of life". Lawson hurried back to the active part of the studio.

In 1928 John Howard Lawson took Hollywood as "an industrial

\[4\] Details of this trip, based on John Howard Lawson's childhood journal, can be found in "John Howard Lawson ; The Early Years, I", Keiei to keizai, Vol 57-1, No. 146, July 1977.
complex", a place where culture was produced for mass distribution. Lawson assumed that M.G.M. was run like other capitalistic enterprises for the purpose of making money. He assumed that M.G.M. like all American businesses was "absurd". He supposed that the managers of M.G.M. were "no more venal or eccentric" than other big businessmen that Lawson had known, some of them intelligent, some of them knowledgeable that "our society was deficient in moral and aesthetic values".

Though Lawson had written plays set in business environments, M.G.M. offered him his first opportunity "to observe an industrial operation at close range".

When Irving Thalberg got around to interviewing Lawson, Lawson found Thalberg "remarkable for his courtesy" and his ability to say "exactly what he meant".

Thalberg was also a careful listener, Lawson says, always testing people: "He wanted to surround himself with people he could trust"... as he was then trying to get complete control of M.G.M.'s film production, he put people loyal to him in important positions of responsibility.

In continuing to describe Thalberg, Lawson refers to F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*:

Fitzgerald has given us the only discerning portrait of Thalberg: Munro Stahr has Thalberg's unbelievable seriousness, his curiosity, his childish taste, his eagerness to learn, his certainty that film-making and money-making are the same thing. Thalberg may well have been "the last tycoon" in the traditional American sense, a boy-genius who combined the naivete of Horatio Alger with the cruelty and lack of scruple that were the conditions of his power.

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5) E.g., *Success Story*, set in the office of a public relations firm.
Fitzgerald says [in his notes] that Stahr "is to be miserable and embittered toward the end" and that the story must have "a bitter and acrid finish". There was a subtle emanation of tragedy from Thalberg, because he was a frail figure, because he was too intelligent, and so genuinely dedicated to false values.

In 1928 Thalberg explained the problem of sound in the cinema with "precision". Thalberg was "uneasy" about talking pictures, not sure that the movie-going public would want them, but he was fearful about releasing his latest film *Flesh and the Devil* without sound.

Thalberg described this film to Lawson with "gravity": "He saw in it the sacred promise of profits, but he also regarded it, in all sincerity, as work of art".

Thalberg asked Lawson to view this film and to suggest how to incorporate sound into it.

Lawson felt the film's romantic tone was "preposterous", but he tried "conscientiously" to do the job for which Thalberg had hired him.

Lawson wrote a dream sequence: "strange shapes" move on the screen while "phantom voices" expose the "Freudian motives" of the man and the woman.  

Lawson showed this dream sequence to the film's director Clarence Brown, who was "dissatisfied" by it. Brown explained: Lawson had violated two Hollywood "taboos"—he had used an experimental technique, and he had introduced Freudian psychology into a story whose "glamor" depended on a pre-Freudian "mystique of sex."

Thalberg listened to Brown's objections to Lawson's dream sequence. Then Thalberg read it himself, "with a concentration that

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6) Lawson had already used a dream sequence in *Roger Bloomer* (1923) and "phantom voices" in *Nirvana."
surprised us”.

Thalberg saw the sequence was wrong for his film, “but he was looking for talent, and he saw talent in it”.

Thalberg cast Lawson in the role of “disciple or servant”. As long as Lawson conformed to this role, he was likely to continue working at M.G.M. and “to move gradually to higher income brackets and more responsibility”.

Thelberg arranged Lawson’s next assignment at M.G.M. in a way that showed he had thought about Lawson’s particular talent. It was obvious to Thalberg that Lawson knew nothing about motion pictures. Thalberg decided that Lawson would get more understanding of film making by working on another silent film. Thalberg told Lawson to write titles for The Pagan.

Lawson found the technique of writing titles “intriguing”. But he thought that the producer and the director of The Pagan wanted more titles than necessary. At first Lawson argued with them, saying that “the visual action appealed to the spectator’s imagination” and that “titles flashed on the screen broke the flow of images”.

Soon Lawson learned that his sort of talk was “not suitable” for story conferences. The dependence on titles in silent films was so great that it had become a specialized and highly paid field of writing.

Lawson was instructed in the function of titles and the relationship of titles to the structure and cutting of film:

The Hollywood method of building a story was often ambiguous and piecemeal: the director would get the effects and emotions that seemed appealing, and the final statement of the theme and even the definition of the characters were determined by the words inserted as descriptions or bits of dialogue. There had been cases where the meaning of the story was changed or reversed: for example, two lovers were transformed into brother and sister by omitting a few embraces.
Lawson had to understand this method in order to work on *The Pagan*. He had to write titles not only to clarify the themes of the film but to give additional or different traits to the characters and to convey moods or attitudes that were not on the screen.

As for the people who worked in the motion picture industry, Lawson was surprised that many of them possessed "intellectual qualities" of "a higher caliber than those of people who occupied analogous positions in the [commercial] theatre".

W. S. Van Dyke, the director of *The Pagan*, for example, was "a tough-minded, cynical man who loved the adventure of making films in strange places. He had been a penniless wanderer... and had sympathized with the Wobblies... He would occasionally break into a worker's song". Like so many people in the motion picture business, Van Dyke had "a wonderful reserve of cinematic knowledge that he was never called on to use and that he consciously ignored because it was safer to do a routine job".

As for the culture of Hollywood, Lawson takes *The Pagan* as "probably the best example" of that. The origins of *The Pagan* were "a perfect case history".

*The Pagan* was a direct but bastard descendant from Flaherty's *Moana* (1926). Flaherty, capturing a "pure" vision of Polynesian life, was hired by M.G.M. to return to Polynesia to make a less pure commercial variant. The combination impossible, Flaherty resigned.

Van Dyke / who had been with Flaherty / returned to Hollywood with *White Shadows in the South Seas*. M.G.M. was so pleased with this film that Van Dyke was immediately dispatched to the South Seas again with the script of *The Pagan*, the story of thwarted love between an American society girl and a "savage" South Sea islander.

Van Dyke had a genuine feeling for the Polynesian background, and some of the exquisite photography was in conflict with the story's sticky sentiment and
false values.

The picture was silent, except for "The Pagan Love Song", which became an international hit song.

Lawson says that at first the long story conferences about The Pagan bored him, but that he became "fascinated" by them as he realized that the producer and the director of The Pagan were guided by "a concrete system of ideas which was the basis for all their decisions".

Lawson was surprised that at the story conferences the important discussions were not about dramatic or cinematic effect. The important conferences were devoted to "social theory"; Lawson puts it this way: "Every scene of the film was considered in relation to the heroine's social background, her allegiance to her own social class, or to the man's "primitive" beliefs, his training from childhood, his ignorance of money, his love of nature".

Lawson says that until he understood this "social theory" he could not talk about the film or write titles for it.

The theory, which was stated with naive simplicity..., was extremely class conscious... There were only two classes--an aristocracy who lived in dream-like elegance, and the "lower orders" who were driven by their emotions but who were otherwise contented with their lot. The middle class was skipped entirely, and the proletariat, as a class with its own interests, had not yet emerged on the stage of history...

There was no clear distinction between newly acquired wealth and inherited wealth and titles, although M.G.M. liked the glamor of European nobility. According to M.G.M.'s social theory, all rich people engaged in conspicuous consumption, which is glamorous but immoral...

The immorality of the idle rich was constantly stressed. This was an old theme in Hollywood, but... there was increasing emphasis on the "shocking"decline in sexual mores... Sexual laxity among the rich was part of their wasteful way of
life: the cinematic aristocracy was corrupt, incapable of genuine feeling, coldly intent on the pursuit of pleasure...

The poor... were decent, humble, but able to love freely because they were uninhibited by social restrictions...

This class conflict was reduced to an emotional formula: A man or woman of the upper class was attracted to someone of the other class. The attraction was passionate but hopeless, because rich and poor were fixed opposites. The situation was fundamentally the same in the present or past, in middle Europe or the never-never land called Polynesia...

Deviations from this formula would destroy the concept of an immutable social order...

In The Pagan any suggestion that the characters might display mixed motives or emotional complexities was rejected. The society girl's loyalty to her own class was a tragic necessity. The film had to make clear that the pagan man would be ruined if he deserted his native habitat. His sexuality, which was the only quality he possessed, would be lost...

The attraction of Hollywood films to millions of people lay in offering them a refuge from the modern chaos, a simple formula that "explained" the omnipotence of money and the defeat of love...

Lawson adds that whenever these social questions were discussed in story conferences, the discussants illustrated their ideas by referring to people from the studio as examples-"an actress who was having an affair with her chauffeur, a stenographer who committed suicide". As Lawson puts it, "The studio was the only social order that had any meaning to its upper-bracket employees, and its corruption and treacheries, its hierarchies of power, its crude sexuality were the only world to them".

Lawson says that Irving Thalberg had "a total acceptance" of the movie studio and its films as "the whole of life". In 1964 Lawson recalls Thalberg's "intent face" in the flickering light of a movie
screen: "He was enthralled by the most unreal moments, and he made no distinction between the filmed event and the industrial process which produced it".

Lawson says that Thalberg's romanticism was "debased" but was "the center of his being".

At the end of his three months' contract, Lawson waited "anxiously" to find out if his contract would be renewed.

One morning as Lawson was driving to work in his "rattletrap" car, he saw Thalberg sitting in the rear seat of a passing limousine. Thalberg nodded "courteously" and examined Lawson and his car with his "usual care".

One hour later Thalberg summoned Lawson to his office. Thalberg told Lawson that M.G.M. wanted to renew Lawson's contract, but, Thalberg said, Lawson was not worth the $500 a week called for in the contract. Thalberg offered Lawson a six months' contract for $350 a week. Lawson accepted this offer; "it would have been fatal to argue".

Lawson says that he soon realized that Thalberg had made the decision to alter the terms of Lawson's original contract when he had seen Lawson driving a dilapidated car. 7)

In December 1928 Lawson was required to write a "dialogue prologue" for an otherwise silent film based upon Thornton Wilder's

7 ) "I cursed the old car, "Lawson says,""and calculated how quickly I could have reimbursed myself if I had invested in a showy automobile". When Lawson's wife and child arrived in Los Angeles, Lawson met them at the train station with a Packard convertible: "It was second hand, but it had all sorts of deluxe accessories, adjustable plates of glass to protect people in the rear seats, a spotlight operated by hand on each side of the windshield, rich leather upholstery".
novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

At a story conference on the day before Christmas Lawson frankly said that he had found both the novel and the filmscript "sil­ly and pretentious".

"There was shocked silence".

Producer Hunt Stromberg said that *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was "one of the great novels of all time" and that "no one could tamper with it or question its truth".

Stromberg released Lawson from further work on this film, whose story Lawson calls "a perfect expression" of M. G. M.'s social outlook--"a corrupt picturesque aristocratic order, sanctified by religion, and the breaking of the bridge as God's absolute judgment on 'pagan' passion".

That same afternoon, Christmas Eve, the approach of Christmas was celebrated at a party--"an alcoholic dissolution of the studio's caste system".8)

Lawson says that the "abandonment of restraints, the intermingling of people who were strangers, the joyless fever, were another manifestation of the M. G. M. syndrome, an escape from escape".

Lawson says that in 1928 he was in Hollywood, but that he was outside it. He was part of it, but he could never be part of it.

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