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JOHN HOWARD LAWSON’S RETURN TO NEW YORK, II

LeRoy Robinson

John Howard Lawson had spent two years in Hollywood learning the craft of screenwriting at M. G. M. under the supervision of Irving Thalberg.

He had begun making more money as a screenwriter than he had ever made as a playwright—much more.

But the stifling conditions of work at M. G. M. frustrated his creativity.

He decided to return to New York to take up his career in the theatre again.

He hoped that The Social Whirl and Death in an Office, plays he had written in 1926 and 1928 before going to Hollywood, would be produced on Broadway.

When he consulted with Harold Freedman, his literary agent, he realized “there was no immediate prospect of production”. He says, in 1964, “I was effectively cut off from the theatre”.

He “retired” to a rented house in Mount Sinai, New York. Then he and his wife decided to buy a home of their own.

* * *

Upon his return to New York in late June 1930, John Howard Lawson went to Belle Harbor to visit his 72-year-old father, Simeon Levy Lawson, then in retirement.

John Howard Lawson found that his father, “older” and “seemingly smaller”, had managed to gather “all his physical strength in his frail
body” and was “startlingly alert”.

Lawson and his father walked along the Boardwalk. They spoke about the economic depression. Simeon Levy Lawson was “certain” American capitalism had entered “a phase of permanent decline”; he predicted further economic breakdown and social conflict.

The Lawsons spoke about the Communist-organized demonstrations of early 1930 that had involved over a million working people in many American cities. John Howard Lawson says that in 1930 he “sympathized” with the mass protest, “but it did not affect my conscience”, nor did it call for his own involvement. “It was too far from my experience, too impersonal, to appeal to my moral sense”, as the Sacco-Vanzetti case had done in 1927.

It is “droll”, Lawson says in 1964, that in his play The International of 1928 he had foreseen “a wholesale catastrophe”, but in 1930 he “could not see anything more than a vague warning of catastrophe in the concrete manifestations of suffering and discontent”.

Lawson says this was the “essence” of his psychological condition in 1930. His earlier “vision” of catastrophe in The International was “subjective”. He could not relate his “private vision of doom” to a public reality that was “beyond the reality” of his imagination.

He was too preoccupied with his private fortunes to identify himself with the suffering of strangers. He was deeply concerned with his “own being”. His two years in Hollywood had deepened his “sense of alienation”, had “insulated” him from reality. During his “confinement” at M. G. M. he had deferred his “search for identity”.

He had achieved “a kind of identity”--he possessed a small amount of money in the bank. (“And it was a triumph to tell my father that I could give him anything he might need. He thanked me and said he had plenty for his modest requirements”.)
Lawson wanted money for the things it could buy and because money made him "respected". But he had achieved social respect "by the sacrifice of my own self-respect". In 1964 he says the guilt he felt in 1930 was "more like a dull ache than a bleeding wound". He did not accuse himself, but he had a great desire for "self-justification". The way to "prove or rediscover" his identity was in the theatre. "The two plays were myself--or all that I knew of myself".

In Mount Sinai, Lawson found "solace" in the old house, in the "summer quietude", and "the tides rising and receding in the bay".

He began to rewrite his two plays, but he did not have "a feeling of urgency" as he wrote, and he had no definite goal. He was only "obsessed" with the need of their production.

Lawson and his wife than decided to buy their own home in the country. It seemed "imperative" to him to have a place of his own. "There is not much that is sublime, and more than a touch of the ridiculous, in an artist's determination to establish his own identity by securing a mansion in a green landscape". (Intellectuals, like other Americans, Lawson says "have adopted this method of finding, or inventing 'roots' in their native soil".)

In their "elegant" Packard touring car the Lawsons "explored" all the areas within 100 miles of New York City "in that first desperate summer of breadlines and farm enclosures".

The Lawsons' desires were "not modest". They wanted an old colonial house, ample grounds, and water front, on sea or river or lake.  

They did not find anything suitable, so the Lawsons extended their

1) The main character of Death in an Office, produced as Success Story, had wanted and achieved the same kind of colonial mansion but had discovered it did not satisfy him.
search to upstate New York and Connecticut. In Old Lyme they looked at a place consisting of hundreds of acres of woodland at a very low price, "but the roof of the house had fallen in, and the water was a ghostly lake about a mile wide, with stumps of dead trees in the brackish fluid". When the Lawsons observed this "melancholy" scene, they felt they had invaded a story by Edgar Allan Poe.

The Lawsons briefly interrupted their search for a home in July 1930, when John Dos Passos and his wife drove down from Cape Cod to spend a few days with the Lawsons at Mount Sinai.

"It was a joyous reunion", Lawson says. "There was the laughter and drinking and excited arguments that gave us a shared emotion, a sensation of perfect fellowship".

But Lawson and his wife were troubled by "a subtle difference". Lawson says: "We could not question our fellowship--it was an eternal thing among the three of us" (Lawson and his wife and Dos Passos). "But there were now four of us, and there was little that promised everlasting confidence in our relationship with Katie. She laughed as much as we did, but there was an air about her which might have been shyness or just a hint of disapproval".

John Dos Passos had just published The 42nd Parallel, which seemed to Lawson, in 1930, to have a quality new in the work of his friend--"the pattern of incidents that had been episodic in Manhattan Transfer formed a historical movement that went back to the dawn of the twentieth century".

Lawson says that he himself had lacked this "sense of history"; he felt "mortified" that Dos Passos possessed so much knowledge that he lacked:

"It was Dos Passos' knowledge, or his ability to apply it, that enabled him to see the depression with a hard uncompromising grasp of its historical scope. His
view resembled my father's, but Dos Passos was more embittered and even less optimistic. He spoke of the dangerous decline in industrial production, accelerated during the spring and summer of 1930, and the accompanying increase in bank failures. Dos Passos was skeptical about the Communists, but he saw no other force that could mobilize the poor and dispossessed. He said the Communists needed an expert publicity man to sell their ideas. This was a proposal which he made in a magazine article, and it was a half-serious expression of his feeling that advertising had corrupted the American soul, and that the people could be moved more easily by slogans than by political realities.

That summer in 1930 Dos Passos "stirred" Lawson about matters that he had not considered very much, but "the search for a house was more pressing than the growing rate of bank failure"

In Mastic Beach, the Lawsons found the place they wanted--"a colonial mansion, facing a lovely meadow, surrounded by 21 acres of forest and grassland".  

This "unbelievable" estate was for sale at what seemed to the Lawsons "an unbelievably low price: $16,000". Lawson did not bargain. He signed an agreement to buy and made a down payment.

After they made the down payment the Lawsons discovered that the only heat in the house was provided by fireplaces, that there was no

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2) Lawson describes this estate in detail: The waterfront was only a creek, but it gave access to Moriches Bay. A mile across the bay was a strip of sand dunes and the Atlantic Ocean. The interior of the house was "enchanting". The house was too big for the Lawsons' needs--four master bedrooms, eight fireplaces, a large wing for servants. Built before the American Revolution, the house was "a lucid example of the architecture of this great period: delicate bannisters on the main stairway, carved woodwork all done by hand, around the doors and fireplaces". In the cellar there were heavy iron rings where slaves had been shackled. A stable built of fine polished wood had stalls for many horses, and space for several automobiles.
plumbing (there was an outhouse), and that there was no electricity.

The Lawsons had to contract with carpenters and plumbers and electricians to improve their property.

They had to buy their own "extremely costly" electric power plant. The Lawsons did not have money enough to pay for half of their expenses.

Lawson faced "the primary contradiction" inherent in his buying a house: "I could not maintain it, or even move into it, without going back to Hollywood to pay for it".

The necessity of returning to Hollywood was "appalling" to Lawson. Fortunately, Lawson heard from his literary agent that R. K. O. was planning a film Bachelor Apartment for which William Le Baron, in charge of production at R. K. O., had recommended Lawson as screenwriter.

Lawson offered to do the screenplay for $10,000 on the condition that he be permitted to write in New York and go to Hollywood only once to discuss its revisions. Le Baron accepted this offer.

Lawson was "pleased" by Le Baron's "confidence" in him; he knew it was "justified". At M. G. M. he had gotten the training "essential" to this kind of job: "I had no respect for the sex intrigue which was the story, but I had respect for my own craftsmanship".

Lawson thought that working at home, "without studio interference", he could do better than under "the painful conditions" imposed by the

3) It turned out that this price was $4,000 above the price that was actually being asked by the owner of the property when Lawson made the deal. Lawson goes into great detail about a "tangle" of legal actions and hearings before the New York State Real Estate Board that ensued before he and his wife could take possession of this property. These legal activities were caused by the irregularities of the real estate company selling the house.
industry.

At the same time, Lawson felt "an unresolved conflict" between his "quiescent creative energies" and the script he was working on--"part of the deeper conflict between the way of life we had chosen and the price, not only in money but in pride and conscience, that had to be paid for it".

In September 1930 Lawson sent his Bachelor Apartment screenplay to Hollywood.  

William Le Baron sent Lawson a congratulatory telegram.  

Lawson's literary agent then negotiated with Le Baron for a series of original screenplays. For $40,000 Lawson would do four, one more in 1930 and three in 1931, first submitting brief story outlines; Lawson would go to Hollywood once on each project for two weeks at R. K.

4) In The Screenwriting of John Howard Lawson, 1928-1947 (1975), Gary Lee Carr describes this film: a well-known playboy becomes involved with a flirtatious married woman and with an eager innocent recently arrived in the big city. In the end, the married woman is reunited with her husband, and the playboy promises to give up his philandering for the girl who loves him. Carr also quotes reviewer Mordaunt Hall's "An Engaging Philanderer", N. Y. Times, May 16, 1931: "Highly improbable though most of the action is, there is no gainsaying that it accomplished its purpose in arousing waves of merriment from an audience at the first showing".

5) Lawson says Le Baron wired him "with an enthusiasm that was characteristic of him: it was one of the best screenplays he had ever read". Lawson adds: "It was this openness that made Le Baron a bad executive. Thalberg would never have sent such a telegram". Carr (ibid.) says: "Lawson's reaction to Le Baron's wire is noteworthy in that it reveals the deep impression Thalberg had made upon him, and Thalberg with his vast powers had always fascinated Lawson. At the very least, Thalberg seemed to be Lawson's standard for executive ability".
O. 's expense. Le Baron agreed.

"This [Lawson says] may appear like a rash move by R. K. O. at time when the company was beginning to feel the full effect of the depression. From Le Baron's point of view, granted his confidence in me, it was an economical arrangement. If he could get original complete screenplays, ready to go into production, for $10,000 [each], it was only a fraction of the customary cost of the purchase of a play or a story and its development by several studio writers".

At first, Lawson considered this arrangement with Le Baron "ideal". He thought he could do a complete film script in less than two months. If he did three scripts in a year, this would give him six months to concentrate on his own work.

But--

"My thinking and Le Baron's were equally logical and equally unworkable. I could turn out one formula picture that was satisfactory, but I was not a machine, and my whole being rejected the values which the studio demanded".

Besides, Lawson adds, R. K. O. faced large deficits and a sharp decline in box office attendance, "and neither Le Baron nor anyone else knew how to cope with the situation".

R. K. O. 's policy went from "one desperate strategy" to another, and Lawson found out in each telephone conversation with Le Baron and on each trip to Hollywood that he was supposed to conform to each change.

In October 1930 the Lawsons moved into their new house.

"Everything [Lawson says] was more perfect than we could have imagined it, including the prospect of a winter in the country. We were told that we might be snowbound for days--which turned out to be the case. Our children played happily with [the groundkeeper's] children of the same age. The big house was none too large to accomodate the flood of weekend guests".

Then Lawson's father asked him to meet him in New York. Lawson "had never seen [Simeon Levy Lawson] so harassed and embarrassed."
It was hard for him to tell me that he was in financial trouble. Money had been his main means of proving his love for us, and he had offered it as if it were part of his heart”.

As soon as John Howard Lawson realized what his father was trying to say, he told him he could have anything he wanted.

Lawson’s father was in danger of losing his house on Fortieth Street and his lots at Belle Harbor. He had unpaid taxes due. His interest on loans amounted to about $4,000.

Lawson asked his father if that was all he needed for the present: “Seeing now his pride was hurt, I was ashamed of my foolish pride as I opened my checkbook and wrote a check for $4,000”.

The Lawsons had always loved the spring in the East. “But we had never seen it emerge from the dripping snows of a country winter”. The Lawsons greeted the spring of 1931 “as if it were the springtime of the world”. They “celebrated” it with “reckless expenditures” of money. Things that were “unnecessary” seemed “indispensable”.

For example, the Lawsons bought a 40-foot cabin cruiser with accommodations for four people. $1,000 was very cheap. But the boat was older than it looked. They rarely used it for long excursions. To accommodate the boat, the Lawsons had to have their creek dredged. A man who owned a dredge said he could clear the creek for $1,500. The dredge pumped noisily for weeks. The Lawsons received a bill for $2,500. The creek was only slightly improved.

For another example, the Lawsons changed the road leading to their house in order to have “a more picturesque” approach. The postmaster at Mastic proposed to plant a hedge bordering the property. “He was such a pathetic man and he needed the work so badly” the Lawsons agreed to his proposal. “There was something about the man that touched me”, Lawson repeats. Later Lawson found out that the man had been in a mental institution. Then the man was arrested for stealing money from his post office. The hedge died.
Lawson's work for R. K. O. followed "an uneven course".

He wrote a film script about four girls who lived on the four floors of an old brownstone house on New York's West Side. This was a comedy about love and the depression. Lawson made "an attempt to do honestly what he had done with such extravagant nonsense" in Our Blushing Brides at M. G. M. "But it was too honest and not honest enough". Nothing came of it.

Lawson next wrote a crime melodrama that was "too conventional to be interesting".

In the summer of 1931 Lawson went to Hollywood to discuss his further plans with Le Baron.

Bachelor Apartment was finished and "highly praised". Lawson saw it in a studio projection room. He learned that "the usual shuffling of credits" had taken place. He was credited as writer of "original story". The scenario was credited to J. Walter Ruben. Lawson says: "It was obvious that not a line or situation had been changed from my script as it was written and delivered"

Lawson complained to Le Baron. Le Baron was "so nice, so bedevilled, and so ineffectual" that Lawson felt there was no sense in making a fuss about a fait accompli. "Besides", Lawson says, "I had written two unacceptable scripts, and I was touched by his continued confidence in me"

Lawson returned to Long Island to work on his third assignment.

Not long after that, Le Baron visited Lawson in New York. He asked Lawson to put off the project he was working on. Instead, Le Baron wanted Lawson to write a film for stage comedienne Hope Williams, whom Lawson describes as "charmingly upper class, with a quality that resembled Katherine Hepburn's, but she was more brittle and had less warmth".
Le Baron wanted to build a big publicity campaign around Hope Williams; he promised Lawson a share of the publicity. Lawson and Williams were photographed together at the signing of her contract. Lawson's name was mentioned in news stories.

Lawson wrote "a perfect vehicle" for Hope Williams—a comic western: "a society girl goes through crazy adventures with cowboys and Indians".

In early October 1931 Lawson sent this script to Le Baron. Le Baron sent Lawson another telegram of congratulations.

Then the production ran into trouble.

Lawson was asked to go to Hollywood and stay as long as necessary to complete the writing of the final script. Le Baron was "distracted". He "begged" Lawson to consider staying in Hollywood until the end of the year.

Lawson agreed. "I felt an obligation", he says. He wanted "to salvage what [he] could from the mess that had developed". His future as a screenwriter, not only at R. K. O. but also at other studios, depended on his "ability to meet the crisis".

In Hollywood, alone, Lawson found that at the studio his troubles "multiplied".

The Hope Williams comic western film was scheduled to go into production. It could not be delayed without "ruinous expense".

The film's director Gregory LaCava, "a skillful, eccentric, irritable man, whose mastery of comedy was a matter of intuition and slapstick

7 ) "It seemed expensive and uncertain to transport the family to California", Lawson says. (Sue Lawson did not want to stay on Long Island during the winter and took the children to Key West, Florida, visiting Esther Andrews and Canby Chambers, old friends of the Lawsons.)
invention on the set”, was offended by “the literary humor” of Lawson’s script.

LaCava rejected Lawson’s story in toto.

Le Baron was "ruffled”. He told Lawson and LaCava to collaborate on a new screenplay. They had to finish it in two weeks.

"LaCava hated writers", Lawson says, so saw no need of one. He locked himself in his office. When Lawson knocked on the door, there was no answer, but Lawson could hear LaCava dictating to a secretary.

After knocking “repeatedly” on LaCava’s door for two days, Lawson went to LeBaron. LeBaron told Lawson not to worry. There was another good assignment for Lawson that LeBaron would discuss with him in a few days.

"When I returned at the appointed time”, Lawson says, “the executive office was vacant, and LeBaron’s name was no longer on the door”.

LeBaron’s "wasteful management”, including the sums invested in Lawson, Lawson notes, had brought R. K. O. to “the edge of ruin”.

At the time Lawson knew very little about the financial background of R. K. O. But "the conflict of Wall Street giants--a battle between the Morgan and Rockefeller interests-determined [his] situation at R. K. O."

William Le Baron was replaced.

David O. Selznick was installed as the new head of production at R. K. O. "to inject some vitality into the product”, Lawson puts it.

8 ) Lawson says: "R. K. O. was controlled by the Radio Corporation of America, and was created by R. C. A. in order to provide an outlet for their sound system, Photophone, in competition with the Bell Telephone Company and Western Electric, which had licensing agreements with all the other major film companies".
Selznick, M. G. M. head Louis B. Mayer's son-in-law, was known as "a forceful young man with a feeling for 'big' sensational material". Selznick, "dissatisfied" with the personnel at R. K. O., needed film scripts "badly". He knew of Lawson's film work at M. G. M. He knew Lawson's contract at R. K. O. required the company to pay him for the rest of 1931.

Selznick was "cordial" to Lawson. He asked Lawson to write a screenplay for Richard Bennett and all three of Bennett's daughters, with whom he had tentative agreements.

"It was a spectacular notion", Lawson says, but "The pitfalls were manifest to anyone who know anything about the Bennett family".

Lawson did not expect the Bennetts to accept any script of his--"there was one chance in a hundred". But he set to work. At the end of the year he had finished about half a film script.

Selznick then extended his contract for four weeks for $1,000 a week.

Lawson finished the script in January 1932, although he hoped he could make his work at R. K. O. last until spring.

In any case, the Bennetts had rejected the idea of performing in a film together.

Selznick did not renew Lawson's contract: "When Selznick dismissed me", Lawson says, "I made an unnecessary scene, telling him he had not even read the material. The accusation was probably true. But my anger bored Selznick. He was mildly surprised that a writer would use such a violent tone to a producer. He rose from his desk and maneuvered me to the door. I was still shouting when he closed it behind me".9)

9) Carr (ibid.) quotes from a Lawson manuscript that I have not read.
Meanwhile Sue Lawson and the children were enjoying themselves at Key West.

Along with Esther Andrews and Canby Chambers, Sue Lawson saw a great deal of Pauline Hemingway.

Ernest Hemingway was "moody and withdrawn", she wrote to Lawson.

John Howard Lawson says in 1964: "Hemingway's troubles were no doubt unrelated to mine. Yet they had the same social and intellectual origins. It was a harsh time, a time of reappraisal. Our troubles were not financial, at least in the ordinary sense of the term".

Lawson and his family had their Long Island estate, where they had spent one year.

"It was the only year when we could maintain the illusion of permanence", Lawson says.

The Lawsons kept their estate through the 1930s, and they had happy times there.

The Long Island estate, Lawson says, was "the symbol of something we needed, a life inherited from another time". "But", he concludes, "It was never ours".