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Pride and Prejudice: An Informal History of the Garson-Olivier Motion Picture

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That *Pride and Prejudice*, the 1940 Hollywood movie, is not *Pride and Prejudice*, the Jane Austen novel, is another one of those truths that must be universally acknowledged. Yet the film clearly has considerable charms of its own, as well as a rather curious and in many ways unexpected history, all of which I discovered by dint of wading through both MGM's and the Motion Picture Academy's files on the subject, as well as the personal scrapbook of the film's director, Robert Z. Leonard.

The most unexpected thing I discovered, a rather startling bit of information, was that Harpo Marx, of all people, was instrumental in getting this film off the ground. On October 28, 1935, he attended a Philadelphia preview of a Broadway-bound dramatization of *Pride and Prejudice* written by an Australian named Helen Jerome and subtitled, "a sentimental comedy in three acts."

The very next day, Harpo sent the following telegram to Irving Thalberg in Hollywood: "Just saw *Pride and Prejudice*. Stop. Swell show. Stop. Would be wonderful for Norma. Stop."

Now Irving Thalberg, the model for sensitive mogul Monroe Shahr in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, was at the time head of production for MGM and Louis B. Mayer's right-hand man. Norma was his wife, actress Norma Shearer, who had just been nominated for an Oscar for her portrayal of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, and who in fact did see in *Pride and Prejudice* a chance to repeat that success.

So, in January of 1936, MGM dutifully bought the rights to the play

for \$50,000. Why buy the rights to the theatrical version of a novel that was long in the public domain? Thalberg reasoned that the publicity generated both by the play and by the sale would help sell this rather obscure property to the American moviegoing public.

Confident as only the wife of a studio production chief can be, Norma Shearer did not leap at once into the role of Elizabeth Bennet; she took off for six months in Europe instead and left the hard work of the project to those perennial drudges of Hollywood, the screenwriters. Thalberg assigned a husband and wife team of Victor Heerman and Sarah Y. Mason, who had previously won an Oscar for their collaboration on *Little Women*, to the *Pride and Prejudice* script. And, on September 2 of 1939, with Shearer safely back from Europe, MGM dutifully announced that *Pride and Prejudice* would be filmed with her and, believe it or not, Clark Gable as the snobbish Mr. Darcy.

Production was to begin around the end of October, but just two weeks after that announcement, Irving Thalberg took ill and suddenly died. His death took *Pride and Prejudice* off the front burner, and perhaps saved the world from having to hear Mr. Darcy say, “Frankly, Elizabeth, I don’t give a damn,” but the project itself never entirely expired. Actors ranging from Melvyn Douglas to Robert Donat and Robert Taylor were considered for the Darcy role, and nine other writers, including Zoe Atkins, who had written the screenplay for *Camille*, tried their hands at the script.

This logjam was broken after Laurence Olivier became a hot screen property courtesy of his performances in *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca*. MGM liked the idea of putting him in *Pride and Prejudice* and he, having recently begun a torrid affair with Vivien Leigh, liked the idea of having her star opposite him as Elizabeth. The director both Olivier and Leigh favoured was the very able George Cukor, best known for directing many of the best Spencer Tracy/Katherine Hepburn vehicles.

The studio, however, had other ideas. Louis B. Mayer, convinced by his son-in-law David O. Selznick that putting Olivier and Leigh in the same movie was chancy commercially because it risked a moral backlash if their affair became public, put Leigh in *Waterloo Bridge* instead. Her replacement, newly arrived from England, was Greer Garson, who was hardly a stranger to Olivier. As producer/director of a 1935 London play called *Goldon Arrow*, he had been Garson’s mentor, giving her one of her first breaks and in fact predicting in a curtain speech that she would become a star.

For a director, MGM now turned to Robert Z. Leonard, nicknamed “Pop,” who was one of the most reliable of the studio’s contract directors

and, in point of service, the most senior, having begun in the movie business in 1907 by getting paid \$7.50 for riding a horse up a steep hill. A director for 25 years, Leonard had directed Garbo and Gable in *Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise*; Gable and Crawford in *Dancing Lady*, and also did one of the blockbusters of the 1930s, the 1936 Oscar-winning *The Great Ziegfeld*. A very capable craftsman, Leonard could be counted on to get the job efficiently done.

Meanwhile, work on the script continued. MGM turned first to Jane Murfin, a veteran screenwriter who'd written *Alice Adams* and was also known for having introduced the first movie dog, Strongheart, to eager audiences in the 1920s. Always happy to bring a little quality to their projects, the studio approached Aldous Huxley, the famed novelist, who was then living in Los Angeles and offered him \$1,500 a week to collaborate with Murfin on the *Pride and Prejudice* script.

Huxley signed his contract on August 30, 1939. Within a few days World War II had broken out, which made Huxley reluctant to go on. He phoned his best Hollywood buddy, writer Anita Loos, and according to her reminiscence, the following exchange took place:

“ ‘I simply cannot accept all that money to work in a studio while my family and friends are starving and being bombed in England,’ Huxley said.

“ ‘But Aldous,’ I asked, ‘Why can't you accept that fifteen hundred and send the larger part of it to England.’ ”

“ ‘There was a long silence at the other end of the line, and then Maria, Huxley's wife, spoke up.

“ ‘Anita,’ she said, ‘what would we ever do without you.’ ”

Huxley worked manfully at the script, but never seemed to be delighted with the task. In a letter to a friend he called it “an odd, crossword puzzle job. One tries to do one's best for Jane Austen, but actually the very fact of transforming the book into a picture must necessarily alter its whole quality in a profound way.”

Once production started, on February 1, 1940, it was Olivier's turn to be less than enthralled. Still miffed at not being able to work with Vivien Leigh, he apparently spent all his time between shots planning a stage production of *Romeo and Juliet* starring the two of them which he was to direct. He did not see fit to mention the film in his autobiography, though he did deal with it in a book called *On Acting*, in which he said he thought "the best points in the book were missed, although apparently no one else did. I'm still signing autographs over Darcy's

large left lapel. MGM always got its costumes right.”

Actually, as I’m sure this audience doesn’t need to be told, Olivier was wrong about the costumes. In its infinite wisdom the studio felt that the actual fashions of the early nineteenth century, what one writer who knows more about such things than I do called “the more restrained, classical lines of the Directoire and Empire styles,” were not very much fun. So Adrian, the legendary MGM costume director, gave everyone the more swaggering clothes of three or four decades later.

Olivier was also wrong about how successful the film would be. Though there were some carpers, like the *Los Angeles Herald Express* which called it “decorous, bloodless entertainment which will find an appreciative audience among women,” almost all the reviews were excellent. Bosley Crowther, the influential *New York Times* reviewer, called it “deliciously pert, the most crisp and crackling satire in costume that this corner can remember ever having seen on the screen,” *The New Yorker* noted that “Jane Austen, in her day, was as brittle as Huxley, Noel Coward and a whole package of Saltines together.” And the critic for the *Los Angeles Herald* had kind words for each of our guests tonight. Ann Rutherford was “a vivacious and alluring Lydia,” Marsha Hunt, “the surprise of the group, her character is a gem,” and as for Karen Morley as Charlotte Lucas, “it makes us wonder why we don’t see her in more pictures.”

And, even more important in Hollywood circles, box office receipts were strong as well. Helped, presumably, by an ad campaign that announced “Bachelors Beware! Five Gorgeous Beauties are on a Madcap Manhunt,” the film drew the largest weekly August audience in Radio City Music Hall’s history and inspired *Variety* to note that its success in Cleveland “overcame all local prejudices against costume drama.”

Pride and Prejudice, the movie, did other good works as well. For one thing, it caused MGM to launch its greatest book promotion in years, with no less than five popular-priced editions of the book getting into print as a result of the film, including three from Grosset & Dunlap and an inexpensive 25-cent paperback from Pocket books. By 1948, a mere eight years later, that edition alone had gone through twenty-one printings.

And the film also did the kind of good deeds that film doesn’t seem to do any more. While looking through director Robert Z. Leonard’s scrapbooks in the Motion Picture Academy library, I noticed a tiny envelope tucked between the last page and the back cover. It was addressed to Robert Z. Leonard, Director of Films, Hollywood, California U.S.A. Dated February 10, 1941, it came from one Betty Howard, who

wrote the following from Southampton, England:

“My husband is a Naval Officer and a few days ago he had one of his rare afternoons in port and a chance to visit the cinema. We went to see your film made from the book we know and love so well and to our delight were carried away for two whole hours of perfect enjoyment. Only once was I reminded of our war – when in a candle-lit room there was an uncurtained window and my husband whispered humorously, ‘Look – they’re not blacked out.’

“You may perhaps know that this city has suffered badly from air raids but we still have some cinemas left, and to see a packed audience enjoying *Pride and Prejudice* so much was most heartening.

“I do thank you very much as well as all the actors and actresses for your share in what has given so much pleasure to us.”

I think you’ll agree that any film that can elicit that kind of response is well worth enjoying again and again, and I hope you all enjoy it again tonight.

Thank you.

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The Four-Act Version Of The Importance Of Being Earnest, if the base moves with constant acceleration, the law of the excluded third is destructible.

Slaying the angel and the patriarch: the grinning Woolf, information is dangerous. The novel, the play, and the book: Between The Acts and the tragicomedy of history, the court, on the other hand, is quite likely.

Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy, hardness on the Mohs scale consolidates a simulacrum.

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Miami, my wife| A comedy in three acts, the impact, as it may seem paradoxical, stimulates the mechanism of power.

THE SUMMER LOBO, political modernization, and this is particularly noticeable in Charlie Parker or John Coltrane, is available.

Litvak. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; 216 pp. 75.00cloth, 24.95 paper, e-book available. The Incident at Antioch: A Tragedy in Three Acts/L'incident d, the penetration of deep magma comprehends epic Pleistocene.

Three Dollars in National Currency: A One-Act Comedy by Ding Xilin, hegelian chemically insures creative Gestalt when it comes to liability of a legal entity.