

## P R E F A C E

The awards ceremony of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences takes place once a year. One award, however, is not presented yearly. The Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award is presented only when the Academy's Board of Directors wishes to honor a special producer, one whose work reflects "a consistently high quality of motion picture production." Past recipients of this prestigious award include Walt Disney, Jack L. Warner, Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder, and Warren Beatty. The Thalberg award was first presented on March 10, 1938, to Darryl F. Zanuck, so current viewers of the awards may ask about its namesake. If Irving Thalberg could be magically conjured up on Oscar night, those viewers would be surprised at his attractiveness, his modesty, and his wisdom. More than seventy years after his premature death, the "Boy Wonder" continues to influence the industry to which he gave his life, yet his name is not a household word like Disney or Warner.

Viewers of Turner Classic Movies (TCM) know that David O. Selznick produced *Gone with the Wind* and that Cecil B. DeMille produced *The Sign of the Cross*; their names are in the credits. Look at the credits of *Ben-Hur*, *The Big Parade*, *Grand Hotel*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and hundreds of other Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films made between 1924 and 1936. These films survive—a vibrant component of American culture, respected, beloved, and enjoyed. Irving Thalberg supervised all of them and personally produced scores of them, but unless you know Hollywood history, you might think they were made by Leo the Lion. Thalberg

declined to affix his name to any film, simply saying: “Credit you give yourself isn’t worth having.”

This is not to say that Thalberg has been overlooked by film historians. Numerous books have been devoted to him or have dealt with him, including Bob Thomas’s *Thalberg: Life and Legend*, Samuel Marx’s *Mayer and Thalberg*, and Scott Eyman’s *Lion of Hollywood*. These books have done well by their subject, and why not? Thalberg’s story is as romantic and improbable as a silent-movie plot.

Irving Grant Thalberg, born in Brooklyn in 1899, survived a series of childhood illnesses only to be told that his damaged heart would not sustain him past the age of thirty. He coped with this death sentence as he had coped with illness—lying in his sickbed, reading the classics, seeing the characters from these books dance like dreams on his bedroom walls. Urged on by his ambitious mother, Thalberg pushed himself into the fledgling film industry. Beginning with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Thalberg brought the characters on the walls of his room to America’s screens. In 1924 he and Louis B. Mayer founded M-G-M. In 1927 Thalberg married Norma Shearer, one of the stars he and Mayer had launched, and guided her to superstardom.

Then as now, Hollywood was given to self-congratulation, but even without hyperbole, Thalberg’s achievements were impressive. Within three years, his partnership with Mayer had made M-G-M the most successful studio in Hollywood. For twelve years, virtually no M-G-M film was made without Thalberg’s imprint. His drive, discernment, and resourcefulness were balanced by an almost mystical understanding of his colleagues. He was respected—indeed, loved—by employees at every level of the corporation. He introduced the horror film and coauthored the Production Code. He innovated story conferences, sneak previews, and extensive retakes. He strove to achieve a synthesis of theater and film. He made stars of Lon Chaney, Ramon Novarro, John Gilbert, Joan Crawford, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Robert Montgomery, Marie Dressler, Wallace Beery, and Greta Garbo. To his everlasting credit (or disgrace), he established the producer—not the director—as the author of the Hollywood film.

Every well-constructed suspense film has a ticking time bomb. Thalberg’s time bomb was his health. Knowing that he was on borrowed time, he pushed himself to the limit, working sixteen hours a day on forty films a year, determined that motion pictures should be accorded the same respect as literature and drama. By age thirty-seven he was acknowledged the greatest producer in Hollywood, his films a rare blend of commercialism and taste, ratified by box office and honored with awards. Then, as he stood poised to lead the film community to new horizons,

Thalberg suddenly died, leaving a widow, two children, and a host of unfinished projects. The story of his race with the time bomb—and what he accomplished before it exploded on a sunny morning in 1936—is the one I want to tell.

In previous books I have told stories of George Hurrell, Boris Karloff, and Greta Garbo in strict chronology and detailed narrative. In each case, my archival discoveries brought a new understanding of these legendary figures. In some ways, Thalberg is as mysterious as Garbo, whose persona he did so much to create. Like her, he created fantasies while appearing detached, almost unemotional. His legend stands in equally bold relief, and his persona lends itself to hagiography, as his biographers have noted. Many interviews conducted by Thomas and Marx began with the word “genius,” and some stopped just short of calling Thalberg a saint. A few dismissed him as an opaque, icy autocrat. The human being behind the legend has eluded most historians. How did he accomplish all he did in his short lifetime? Who was he?

I believe that by combining a revised chronology, the recollections of his colleagues, and newly uncovered archival documents, I can answer these questions and find the human being behind the legend. If you were to be transported from 2010 to 1930, what would you experience as you walked the studio streets leading to Thalberg’s office? What insight would you gain about his production methods if you could go from the purchase of a play all the way to the premiere of the film he made from it? What would you learn by sitting next to him in a story conference? With this book, you will go not only from conception to execution but also into Thalberg’s confidence, hearing in his own words what he wanted to do, how he planned to do it, and most important, how he felt when he reached his goals—or did not.

I have written another book about Thalberg. *Hollywood Dreams Made Real: Irving Thalberg and the Rise of M-G-M* was published by Harry N. Abrams in October 2008. It is a visual survey of the Thalberg era with highlights of his achievements. It was not meant to be a conventional biography, but a companion volume to a more comprehensive work, as well as a guide to the Thalberg films shown on TCM and released by Warner Home Video. Irving Thalberg deserves a full-scale biography, one that details previously unexamined aspects of his professional, political, and personal lives. Foolish and sometimes hostile apocrypha have formed around his legend. Otherwise intelligent critics such as Pauline Kael have perpetuated the myth of an obsessed executive foisting an untalented wife on an unwilling public. The archival documents that form the basis of this book tell a different tale.

In my research I was fortunate to have access to most of Thalberg's films, both from TCM and Warners. I also had access to the interviews Bob Thomas conducted for *Thalberg: Life and Legend*. His generosity made it possible for me to study documents that began with notations such as: "William Haines, 446 South Canon Drive, 10/31/67" or "Joan Crawford, 1/24/68, Cock and Bull [Restaurant, West Hollywood]." Unfortunately, Mr. Thomas was not granted an interview by Thalberg's most intimate colleague, Norma Shearer. After her retirement from films in 1942, Shearer granted almost no interviews. When she did, for Bosley Crowther's books on M-G-M in the mid-1950s, she asked not to be quoted. Inasmuch as I considered her thoughts on Thalberg essential to this project, I hoped and prayed for some archival record of them. My prayers were answered by the discovery of an unpublished document.

In 1955 Shearer felt that the time had come to tell the story of her work and her life with Thalberg. She was brought up short when the first draft of her dictated memoirs was rejected by Random House's Bennett Cerf. He called it "bland and romanticized." Between bouts of debilitating illness, Shearer spent the next twenty years reworking her manuscript. She never completed it. In its final form it portrayed M-G-M as a plantation populated by contented celebrities. Shearer wrote honestly about her childhood, her struggles to enter the movies in New York, and about the early days of M-G-M, but she refused to visit the painful memories of Thalberg's estrangement from Mayer, her husband's tragic death, or her own problems with Mayer during the making of her favorite film, *Marie Antoinette*. In 1976 MGM vice president Howard Strickling tried to tell her as gently as possible that her manuscript was unpublishable. Shearer was too ill to care. For the next thirty years, the manuscript was believed to have been destroyed. Fortunately, one copy survived—and made its way to me.

Shearer's memoirs are indeed romanticized. In the decades following Thalberg's death, she became obsessively protective of his memory and fought to keep him from being misrepresented. She took great pains, for instance, to see that Robert Evans was cast as Thalberg in the 1957 biography of Lon Chaney, *The Man of a Thousand Faces*. As much as she tried to sugarcoat history, her memoirs have immediacy. They relate episodes crucial to any Thalberg biography: her first meeting with Thalberg, her early problems with Mayer, the transition to the big company after the merger, her first encounter with Joan Crawford, and details of studio life that appear nowhere else and from no one else. Most important, Shearer's memoirs tell how she felt about her career, about M-G-M, and about Thalberg.

Interweaving Shearer's stories with those of other M-G-M veterans, with transcriptions of Thalberg's previously unpublished letters, speeches, and interviews, and with transcriptions of his conversations found in archival documents, I have learned how he made his films. I have gone beyond the legend of Thalberg to find the human being. To do this, I had to look at him from perspectives that even I found difficult. I had to know what pushed him to defy doctors, ignore bureaucrats, and overcome treachery as he worked to refine and uplift the product manufactured by America's sixth-largest industry. I have turned away from the image of the Boy Wonder and looked at his life as I looked at those of Hurrell, Karloff, and Garbo—week by week, film by film, and story by story. After “living with” Irving Thalberg for five years, I can tell the story of the self-educated boy who so vitally influenced our culture.

*This Page Left Intentionally Blank*