

Gone With the Wind



America is a culture that admires success like no other. Its history is littered with names of men who pulled themselves up from log cabins to the

White House or from Russian ghettos to glitzy Hollywood palaces. Needless to say, the latter outnumber the former and then some, as they used to say in Hollywood before the Sammy Glicks took over the studios.

The first Hollywood tycoon I met was Spyros Skouras, a Spartan immigrant who became head of 20th Century Fox sometime in the forties. Skouras was an illiterate Greek boy when he arrived on these shores, and although he climbed quickly up the greasy Hollywood pole, he never lost the moral compass his peasant parents instilled in him. He was a kind, avuncular family man who used the office couch for post-prandial rests, unlike the rest of the sharks.

I will never forget when on a visit to Greece, Queen Frederika asked him which side he would take in the unlikely event of a war between Greece and America. "I owe everything to America, your majesty, and although it would break my heart, I would fight for Uncle Sam..." Gone with the wind is the Hollywood tycoon that was Skouras.

Jack Warner, of Warner Bros. fame, was a fixture on the French Riviera during the fifties, and although not as sweet as Spyros, a prince when compared to today's overpaid slobs. Warner recruited me for tennis—he was mad about the game—but after a while I got bored playing pitty-patty, began hitting rather hard, and hit myself out of his game as well as his Riviera parties. It was a dumb move because Jack's house was full of actresses, and as he put it himself, "You're a schmuck, kid."

Swiftly Lazar, of course, was and remains to this day a Hollywood legend, a very short and bald man with a very long reach. Lazar had to be the original Sammy Glick, although when Budd Schulberg wrote the novel *What Makes Sammy Run*, Lazar had not as yet become infamous for hustling among the Hollywood Hills. Like Skouras and Warner, Lazar had made it on his own, and like them had refined tastes and could tell the difference between Rimbaud and Rambo. In fact, he had a wonderful art collection which—a first for Hollywood—he had chosen himself. Swiftly and I had a so-so relationship, mostly because he hated liking someone who could be of no professional use to him.

My only other Hollywood friend is that wonderful actor Louis Jourdan, of "Gigi" and "Letter to an Unknown Woman" fame. Louis was close to being the perfect matinee idol of the fifties, a terribly nice man who read Baudelaire nonstop while his wife Kik complained to him that no one was about to make a film of "Les Fleurs du Mal." (Louis and Kik now spend their summers in Greece, and Louis has discovered the game of tennis.)

I've been thinking of Spyros and Swiftly and Louis because of my old friend Edward Jay Epstein's new book, *The Big Picture*, which captures the new logic of Hollywood like no other: moral corruption, utter cynicism, and tastelessness. The studios have found a new way of printing money, according to Ed, and it has nothing to do with talent. It has to do with home videos, TV and cable rights, and merchandise

licensing. As a result, movies don't have to be any good to make an enormous amount of money. A mere six companies control all home and personal entertainment, with only 18 percent of total revenues coming from ticket sales. Today's mass audience, 90 percent of the population, is to be found at home watching the garbage put out by the television studios, which in fact now own what used to be the major studios. Ditto for the cable networks. Home entertainment is now king, and the lower the common denominator, the more profitable. The dream factories that once upon a time made Hollywood synonymous with the American dream have gone the Rupert Murdoch way, down and dirty.

According to screenwriter Joe Eszterhas, a modern Hollywood person is one with a complete self-absorption, a total inability to treat another human being as a human being, and an absolute fixation on success. That's putting it mildly. I once lunched with the egregious Hollywood superagent Michael Ovitz. Agents used to be known as bloodsuckers; Ovitz gave bloodsuckers a bad name. He was arrogant and aggressive, but I, too, can be the latter. He talked about his martial-arts training. I suggested that training at home with an instructor is like shadow boxing. Real martial artists enter tournaments or accept single-combat challenges inside a closed dojo. Lunch soon ended.

What worries me is the subconscious hold that movies exert over our imaginations, especially those of the youth. Nowadays the young prefer entertainment to exceed reality, ergo the endless car-crashes, explosions, and violence, so acting means being aggressive, foul-mouthed, and anti-social.

Spyros, Jack, Swiftly, where are you now that we really need you? ■

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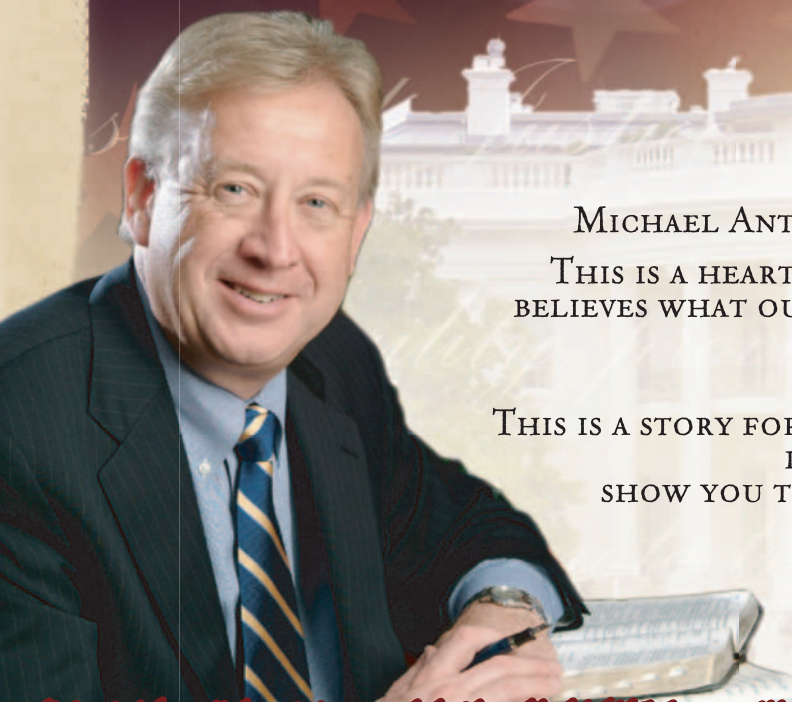


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