

VIEW FROM THE 28th FLOOR

By HOLLIS ALPERT

FOR THE PAST three years the fortunes of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, one of seven major American motion picture companies, have been directed by a calm, quietly engaging, carefully spoken, Montana-born president who bears not the slightest resemblance to the caricatured conceptions of a movie mogul. Robert H. O'Brien, the president of MGM, is in his early sixties and bears them well. He works out of New York and not Culver City, California. He does not chomp on cigars, crack bad jokes at industry functions, or appear arm-in-arm at film premieres with the latest blonde, busty, wet-lipped version of a movie star. He is not even the son or son-in-law of a former movie mogul.

Instead, O'Brien has risen to his presidential position at the top of a huge entertainment complex by reason of a long, able career in engineering, law, finance, and executive capacities in the broadcasting and film businesses. As a type, he is relatively unique in the volatile American motion picture industry—which has changed radically from the pre-television era of the big studio bosses such as the late L. B. Mayer and Harry Cohn. Running a major film company these days means, least of all, overseeing a studio. More importantly, in the case of MGM, it means the careful allocation of some \$60,000,000 yearly for the production of motion pictures; developing and producing film series for television; the operation of a recording company; and the licensing, for formerly unheard-of fees to television, of what the firm calls its film libraries.

The present structure of MGM can be ascertained from those departments that operate directly under O'Brien's supervision: the Culver City studio head, the London studio head, the head of advertising, the foreign sales manager, the domestic sales manager, the president of the record company, and the president of a newly formed music company. According to O'Brien, all these individuals have "fairly wide latitudes and a certain amount of autonomy, because we've developed policies and attitudes that result in our all approaching a problem in basically the same way."

What this translates to is that O'Brien's policies are being followed. During his tenure of office, the firm's stockholders have been able to watch the annual statements change from a sobering loss

of \$35,000,000 in 1963 to increasing profits each year. This year's profit increase will beat last year's record by some 30 per cent. All this, to his adherents on the board of directors, signifies the wisdom of having a president who is able to bring wide managerial and financial experience to the present-day problems of a film company.

But motion picture presidents rise or fall not so much on their ability to handle profit and loss statements as on their decisions on which movie project to back. A crisis in the affairs of MGM occurred not long ago when the previous president backed the ill-fated remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty*—which, beset by every conceivable difficulty, required \$20,000,000 of the firm's money to finish. This debacle, as well as others not quite so horrendous, led to the elevation of O'Brien to the presidency. In turn, O'Brien appeared to be laying his head on the corporate chopping block when nearly \$12,000,000 was put into David Lean's film version of *Doctor Zhivago*. Word got around in industry circles that if *Dr. Zhivago* did not succeed at the box office O'Brien would go.

"The decision was pretty much all mine," O'Brien admitted in his large office on the 28th floor of a new midtown Manhattan office building. "Our thinking had to do with such factors as the quality and fame of the novel, the tremendous strength brought to the project by David Lean as the director and Robert Bolt as the screenwriter. We felt we were reasonably assured of a good picture and, usually, with a good picture you do good business. Not every time, but most of the time. We also went along with Lean's idea of using newer and fresher people than are usually starred in a production of such magnitude."

THE original budget for *Dr. Zhivago* was some \$2,000,000 less than the eventual cost, but movie companies are resigned to this kind of thing, especially when it is known that the director has the reputation of being a perfectionist. One of the smaller companies, which puts a million-dollar limit on its per picture expenditures, has a way of stopping a production cold when the limit has been reached, finished picture or not. The president simply rips the last several pages out of the script. But to do such a thing with someone like David Lean would be both unspeakable and unthinkable. It can be guessed that O'Brien



MGM's Robert H. O'Brien—Sometimes a risk can be a bargain.

cannily employed his own effective brake against time-consuming perfectionism by scheduling the premiere of *Dr. Zhivago* only a few months after the finish of shooting. Lean was known to have worked night and day in the cutting rooms assembling the final print of the bulky film in time for its New York opening.

The reviews in the New York papers the next day were hardly calculated to reinforce a president's confidence in his judgment. Word went around the industry grapevine: "Too bad for O'Brien." Later, when the public showed a continual willingness to line up at the box office and buy tickets for reserved-seat showings at increased prices, the

Julie Christie and Omar Sharif in *Dr. Zhivago*—Costly but profitable.



same wisecracks nodded and said: "Sure, Julie Christie got a hot reputation in the nick of time." Later, as the picture ran on and on, the tune changed again, this time over a tune called "Lara's Theme." Taken from the sound-track score, the lush melody blared from radios and jukeboxes in a hundred and one different arrangements. It became a pop hit. The record album containing the entire score became a top seller, too. "Lara's Theme did it," the insiders now announced.

Whatever did it, *Dr. Zhivago* is now heading toward at least \$40,000,000 in distributors' receipts, making it one of the half dozen or so most profitable films in history. The licensing of television rights will up the take considerably more. "The reviews surprised us," O'Brien said, "and naturally disappointed us. But we didn't agree with those first reviewers — particularly Crowther and Crist—and, happily, neither did the majority of the other reviewers. Nobody can shake me in my opinion that this is one of the finest pictures of all times. I've looked at it six times, and every time I think more of it."

O'Brien to the contrary, *Dr. Zhivago* is not critically regarded as one of cinema's peak achievements, nor as one of Lean's own peaks. But O'Brien had also made sure that the film, during its production, was given an all-out publicity campaign that would acquaint the public with the wonders awaiting them when they eventually entered a theater to see it. Under the direction of Dan Terrell, who works hand-in-glove with O'Brien, the campaign focused on the picture's leading players, Julie Christie, Omar Sharif, and Geraldine Chaplin. Canny advertising and the exploitation of the music were added to the drum-beating. Because of the reputation of the

material and the makers, the drum-beating was kept, of course, appropriately dignified.

But it is also the job of a company president to keep on taking calculated risks, and O'Brien has recently taken them with two more pictures of large budget: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, being made by Stanley Kubrick, and *Grand Prix*, a pet project of John Frankenheimer. Both films are being made in Cinema. The negative cost of Kubrick's film (the total before the costs of prints and advertising) is expected to go beyond \$7,000,000; *Grand Prix* has already gone to more than eight. But O'Brien is not alarmed. He has an almost infinite faith in Kubrick's ability, and he is vastly impressed with what he has seen of the rushes so far. "If we were to be told today," he said, "that this picture as we visualize it would have to be made for much more money than we're going to have in it, we would do it." In other words, O'Brien thinks MGM is getting a \$7,000,000 bargain and a great picture as well. As for *Grand Prix*, the public is going to get a lot of rip-roaring, thrill-packed entertainment for the price of admission, O'Brien thinks.

BUT behind these investments lies the assurance of a bonanza greater than any that has occurred in the film industry—the large sums being paid by networks for television licensing rights (see "Can TV Save the Films?" page 11). "The industry," he said, "has an anchor here, a security, another market, which makes the companies very different things from what they were in the past. Up until some time back, television was an erosive force in our business in that it took away a good part of our theater audience."

There are insiders who murmur that MGM, in selling rights to CBS for an

average of \$800,000 per picture, undersold its library, the reasoning being that the market is still rising and that by waiting MGM could have gotten more. O'Brien is quick to answer that criticism when it is raised. "Suppose," he said, "that all the companies had withheld their libraries and had not gotten into licensing and syndication, and thus were not consuming the merchandise on their shelves. If that had happened since, say, 1953, the market today would be glutted with films. Films carried that way would have meant that films held longer would have been worth less. And, most importantly, the market, not having been fed, would not have come into existence. Here at MGM we feel that we're in practically ideal conditions because we have our reserve supply and we still have *all* our pictures. We have never sold any, we have simply licensed them. And we've brought the market up to a very high level. In addition, we can produce pictures each year to replenish the library. This can go on indefinitely."

In fact, O'Brien regards as the most significant factor of his deal with CBS an arrangement that requires it to run a minimum of six pictures a year that have already run on a network, and at a price of \$400,000 per picture. The average fee paid for those same pictures when first run was less than \$300,000. This kind of arithmetic has not gone unnoticed on the stock exchange, with the result that motion picture stocks are selling at an all-time high during a distinctly bearish period.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—these indications of prosperity, there has been dissension of late among MGM's board members. The dissension has largely come from one board member, Philip J. Levin, who is leading a proxy fight at MGM expected to come to a head in February. His experience in motion pictures seems based on attendance at several board of director meetings, plus the fact that he has accumulated approximately 15 per cent of MGM's 5,000,000 shares of stock. No one is certain what Levin wants, other than a larger voice in the firm's decisions—or perhaps the presidency itself. What Levin does know a lot about is real estate, a field in which he accumulated his millions. Most of his MGM stock was purchased for about half of what it is now selling for.

But this kind of development, too, is a characteristic of the new shape of the industry. With profits mounting—theater business alone is 20 per cent better than last year—the desire of so-called outsiders to take over the motion picture business has been increasing. Columbia Pictures barely managed to resist a powerful raid from financial quarters; Warner Brothers will soon yield control



Runaway—John Frankenheimer's *Grand Prix* already has cost more than \$8,000,000, but MGM's president expects it to become a hit.

to a firm called Seven Arts; and Paramount has been absorbed by a holding company, Gulf and Western, the chairman of which, Charles Bluhdorn, overrode all advice to the contrary and insisted on dubbing into English the multilingual *Is Paris Burning?*, with a predictably unhappy result. Why do such men as Bluhdorn and Levin desert more familiar financial fields for the lure of motion pictures? "Well, it's a fun way to make money," said a film executive, "and these fellows get a thrill out of hobnobbing with famous stars and interesting people like directors and producers."

But the moviegoer may well want to know what all this incessant financial finagling has to do with his movie entertainment. Paradoxically, it doesn't mean, necessarily, that movies will grow worse or more vulgar. O'Brien, for one, is oriented toward as much quality in filmmaking as is consistent with commercialism. A literate man, who prefers to read at night at home in his New York apartment—a fact that alone is regarded as astonishing in the business—he has an unstinting admiration for professional and creative talent. Due to emerge soon from MGM cutting rooms are Kubrick's space odyssey, Frankenheimer's racing epic, Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Blow-Up*, Roman Polanski's *The Vampire Killers*, Francesco Rosi's *Happily Ever After*, and John Schlesinger's *Far From the Madding Crowd*. These directors are all well known and highly regarded by the discerning. Soon to be put in the works are such projects as *The Comedians*, based on Graham Greene's latest novel; *The Last Battle*, based on Cornelius Ryan's account of the fall of Berlin; and large-scale films made from Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and James Michener's *Caravans*.

To balance this kind of output, MGM is also making sure to provide the public with plenty of comedic entertainment with no pretensions to artistry in cinema other than the craftsmanship that sometimes can lift such commercial and inconsequential undertakings to unexpected excellence. (Last year's *The Ipcress File*, made for Universal, seemingly just another thriller, is now a favorite of many buffs.) Something similar might happen, O'Brien hopes, with a comedy called *Don't Make Waves*, directed by Alexander McKendrick, which strikes him as "MGM's best comedy ever and an exceedingly good picture."

But those who hope that O'Brien or someone like him is going to star Sally Klotz instead of Claudia Cardinale in a picture, or choose an off-Broadway neophyte over James Garner, for instance, are going to be disappointed. "On balance," he said, "I'm sure that a box-office name, in a good picture, adds con-



Venture in quality—Vanessa Redgrave and David Hemmings meet in Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Blow-Up*, one of MGM's new films done by "prestige" directors.

siderably to its revenue. I'll admit you can't measure this with a computer. But the difference between putting in someone who is not box office for \$100,000 or less and paying \$500,000 for a known box-office quantity becomes a matter of economics that favors the expensive performer. The drawing value of the 'name' can make a two or three million increase

in revenue, and thus far outweighs the saving you'd make the other way around. It's the audience that is making the choice, actually, and it's the performer who attracts the audience we're more inclined to bet on."

There are exceptions to the rule, and one such was *Patch of Blue*, which
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New Faces—II



Jack Smight: "Television filming is probably the best place for young people today to get started on a career," says Jack Smight, who at age forty has directed more TV films than he cares to remember. "The pressures are tremendous, but so are the opportunities to learn. Certainly it's the best place to prove that you *have* learned." Smight, who sprang into the front rank of the new directors with last year's *Harper*, was tapped for features by producer Ross Hunter on the basis of his vast experience with television in all its forms—live, taped, and filmed. "Es-

entially, they are all the same—the same principles of performance, camera angles, and technique in general. It's just that in films—theatrical films—you have a lot more room to move around in. In *Harper*, I was able to take special advantage of this. We were on the move all the time, searching out new and unusual locations. After all, our basic story has been done hundreds of times since *The Maltese Falcon*. Our job was to make it *look* different."

Because Smight did make it look different enough to turn it into one of the most successful films of 1965, he has been in constant demand since. Currently, he is completing a comedy for Universal, *Meanwhile, Back at the Front*, again starring Paul Newman; has a three-picture deal with the Mirisch Brothers, who seem to make contracts with the more promising young directors almost as a reflex action; and is planning a sequel to *Harper*, also with Newman. Although its title is *The Chill*, perhaps inevitably they refer to it as *Harper II*. —A.K.

WHERE IS THE NEW TALENT?

By ARTHUR KNIGHT

LATE IN NOVEMBER New York's Lincoln Center played host to the prize-winning films of the National Student Film Awards competition for 1966. Students in colleges and universities throughout the United States—not merely those with film schools—were invited to send in their submissions. Almost 150 entries were received; and anyone who was in the near-capacity audience at Philharmonic Hall or who attended the four screenings of the finalists earlier at Hunter College could only be aware that new film talent exists in abundance all over the country. Unfortunately, although the event was co-sponsored by the Motion Picture Association of America, its sponsorship consisted of little more than providing \$2,000 in prize money. The gulf that separates the would-be film-makers from access to the major studios has not been bridged.

As one of the judges who participated in this event, I was enormously impressed, first, by the vivid awareness of the contemporary scene that so many of these films displayed; second, by their anticipated variety; and third, by the sheer professionalism of many, particularly those that came from the half dozen or so universities with full-time film schools. The youthful makers of the prize-winning *Farforward Voyager*, from the University of California at Los Angeles, are obviously prepared to han-

dle dramatic assignments in any TV studio or major lot. Hal Barwood of the University of Southern California, whose sophisticated *Child's Introduction to the Cosmos* won the only prize for animation, displays almost too much taste and imagination for the lucrative world of TV commercials. *Hey, Little One*, a documentary from New York University, tells more about the life attitudes of the Greenwich Village "teeny boppers" in ten minutes than most TV "specials" encompass in a full hour.

BUT more exciting—and in the long run, more important—than professional competence is the impulse to speak meaningfully, personally, about a world that, one realizes with a start, is seldom talked about on the big screen. Here were student sit-ins and anti-war demonstrations, a dramatic strike of the fruit pickers in California, an expression of how it feels to be a Negro girl growing up in Watts (made, significantly, *before* the Watts riots broke out). All of these are themes that might have been handled by the studios if they were somewhat less timorous or had some infusion of new blood that was considerably more in tune with the times. No less important, looking at these films one realizes, too, that a number of them deal with subjects that are far too special ever to be commercial—film poems about a man who weaves beautiful tapestries in San Francisco or who builds marvelously primitive towers in Watts, a sly dig at

the blatant commercialization of Christmas, an *Our Gang* comedy in which the children at play wear the masks of Johnson, Khrushchev, and Mao Tse-tung while a Negro boy looks impassively on. Surely, for the enrichment of our movie-going experience, these deserve a place along with *The Liquidators*, *The Bible*, and the latest Doris Day escapade.

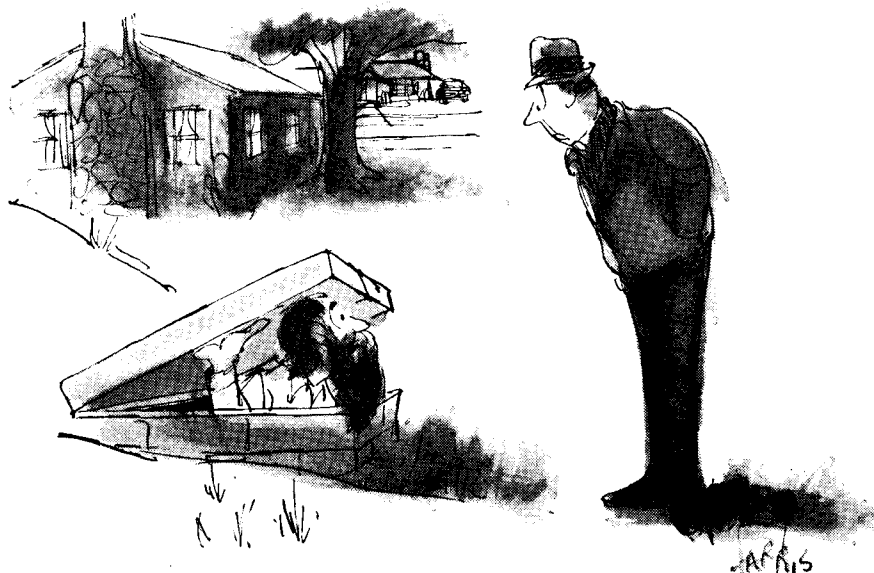
Happily, the National Student Association proposes to package the prize-winners and make them available for showings in universities. Happily, too, a number of film-producing universities such as USC and UCLA have undertaken to distribute the best of their student-produced works in the 16 mm. market. But while it is certainly satisfying to a student film-maker to know that his picture is being seen, this scarcely solves his central problem—how to break into the field for which he has assiduously prepared himself. In law, in medicine, in public accounting the course is clear. There are schools one attends, degrees one earns, apprenticeships one endures, and then—*voilà!*—one puts out his own shingle. Not so in films. The graduate of a film school, no matter how well qualified, has not the slightest guarantee of a job in his chosen field. Indeed, there are certain fields, such as those of the cameraman and editor, so tightly controlled by the unions that virtually the only method of entry is to be the son of either a cameraman or an editor.

This past summer in England I encountered a vivid example of the Hollywood system at work. I had gone out to the Pinewood Studio to watch Bryan Forbes shoot a sequence for his new picture, *The Whisperers*. As I stepped on the set, a young man came forward. "Mr. Knight," he said, "you don't remember me, but I was in your Thursday night class at USC."

"Yes, your face is familiar," I admitted. "But what are you doing here?"

"I'm the producer," he replied. Ronald Sheddloe, age twenty-seven, I learned, had acquired the rights to a novel that he thought would make a fine motion picture. He tried, in vain, to sell it in Los Angeles. "See my agent," was the standard brush-off when he sought to interest an American producer or director. Without introductions of any sort, he sent the book to Forbes in London—writing, with the bravado of youth, that if Forbes didn't like it he was going to send it straight to Ingmar Bergman. As it happened, Forbes *did* like it, sent for Sheddloe, and agreed to write and direct the film. With this commitment, Sheddloe was able to go to United Artists and obtain the \$500,000 or so needed to complete the film—with Dame Edith Evans as star. "The sad thing is," Sheddloe added, "I'd really like to have made it in Hollywood."

Actually, the situation is not as utterly



"Is the Cuban missile crisis over?"