The tramp, the dictator and the knight: United Artists and the roadshowing of prestige pictures in the 1930s and 1940s

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Chapter 4

The Tramp, the Dictator and the Knight:

United Artists and the Roadshowing of Prestige Pictures in the 1930s and 1940s

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Roadshowing was the premier mode of distribution and exhibition for major motion pictures in America from the early 1910s to the early 1970s. The precise definition of this practice varied over time, and these variations are partly the subject of this chapter; but its essential purpose was the presentation of a film in the manner of a live stage production in the legitimate theatre, in order to convey the exceptional nature of that film as a special attraction, as distinct from more routine or run-of-the-mill features. The venue, ticket pricing, booking policy, and the presentational and promotional strategies associated with roadshowing, as well as the qualities of the film itself, were all crucial to the experience offered to the public, with the emphasis on class and exclusivity. From the industry's point of view, successful roadshowing offered the possibility of increased revenues; but because it involved additional expense beyond standard methods of distribution and exhibition, it was also riskier and hence involved the possibility of heavy financial losses. Despite this, under certain circumstances the risk and even actual losses could be considered worthwhile in the long term as roadshowing enhanced a film's prestige and raised its status in the eyes of both the industry and the public. The chapter examines the release history of three films as case studies: two directed by Charles Chaplin, a co-founder and owner-partner of United Artists, whose work sat awkwardly in relation to roadshowing; and a British import whose American roadshows redefined the practice.

For a company such as United Artists, distributing the films of independent producers rather than being a combined production-distribution entity, roadshowing was problematic. Roadshow

engagements preceded regular runs in cinemas; they were traditionally arranged directly by producers, who bore the financial risk but also stood to enjoy the bulk of profits. But these 'pre-release' bookings – which during the silent era most often involved the hire of a 'legitimate' (spoken-word) theatre rather than a dedicated cinema – denied both distribution companies and regular exhibitors participation in the revenues from a significant part of the film's commercial life. They would only participate once the roadshows were completed and the films were turned over to them for general release. In UA's case, it was in the interests of producers to retain the roadshow rights to their films even when they were partners in the company, so that they could exploit them to their own benefit, which was as much reputational as commercial. Thus it was not surprising that the UA co-founder initially responsible for insisting on a roadshow clause in his contract was the director D.W. Griffith; or that, once he had proven the potential of roadshowing with his enormously successful *Way Down East* (1920), his fellow partners Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, and later Samuel Goldwyn, would also seek to take advantage of it, even to the detriment of the jointly-owned corporation. In order to protect its own financial interests, in 1925 UA introduced revised contracts which entitled the company to a 10 percent participation in any roadshow revenues earned by producers whose films were subsequently generally released through UA, even when it had not directly arranged the roadshows (see Balio 1976: 46-47).

City Lights

The question of what actually constituted a roadshow came under particular scrutiny in 1931, when Charles Chaplin's *City Lights* had its premiere engagements in Los Angeles and New York. Unlike the films of Fairbanks and Pickford, no film starring Chaplin had ever before been released on a roadshow basis. Indeed, the comedian's two- and three-reelers of the 1910s had often been distributed using precisely the opposite method, releasing direct to cinemas and saturating the market as quickly as possible in order to satisfy his waiting fans. The films that Chaplin made for Mutual and First National, as both star and director, had been issued in record numbers of prints

(between 200 and 300 each for national distribution) and played an unusually large number of cinemas simultaneously. Chaplin's first full-length feature, *The Kid* (1921), released by First National, had been booked into seventy theatres for its New York first run alone (Hall and Neale 2010: 45).

For his first feature made for United Artists, *A Woman of Paris* (1923) – a romantic melodrama written and directed by Chaplin but starring Adolphe Menjou and Edna Purviance – Chaplin rented the off-Broadway Lyric Theatre, a legitimate house that had often been used for roadshowing films such as Fairbanks' *Robin Hood* (Dwan, 1922), and presented the film on a roadshow basis, with two performances daily, reserved seats and top tickets priced at $1.50 (unless otherwise noted, ticket prices mentioned in this chapter have been sourced from the weekly box-office reports in *Variety*). But *A Woman of Paris* proved a commercial disappointment and Chaplin subsequently returned to comedy with *The Gold Rush* (1925). There was speculation in the trade press that this large-scale production would be roadshown nationally (as there had also been press speculation with *The Kid*); but aside from Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, a roadshow house where the film played with an intermission and tickets priced at up to $1.65, it went out as a regular general release. In New York *The Gold Rush* was exhibited on 'grind' (continuous performances) at the Strand, with normal Broadway first-run prices (85 cents top). In a generally lukewarm notice, *Variety*'s editor Sime Silverman commented that 'as a picture house attraction at the regular scale for the usual run, *The Gold Rush* in any kind of show weather will draw a heavy gross' (Sime 1925: 36).

Its successor, *The Circus* (1928), was handled similarly. But *City Lights*, Chaplin's first synchronised-sound film, was booked at his own insistence into a new cinema, the Los Angeles Theatre, for its West Coast premiere run, and into the George M. Cohan, formerly a legitimate theatre, for its first New York engagement. These theatre bookings were handled by UA rather than by Chaplin's own organisation and the company also retained control over advertising. Nevertheless, towards the end of the exclusive twelve-week run at the Cohan, Chaplin indicated to UA that he regarded the

engagement as a roadshow. There was a financial interest in his doing so: UA's contracts with producers (including its owner-partners) stipulated that UA was entitled to a cut of only 10 percent of the net receipts from a roadshow run instead of the 25 percent fee it demanded from regular distribution. *City Lights* sold more than half a million tickets and grossed some $400,000 at the Cohan box office; the difference between 25 and 10 percent in UA's participation amounted to $47,218 (Reeves 1932).

A detailed study of correspondence between UA executives and lawyers, discussing whether or not the engagement should in fact be regarded as a roadshow, is useful in clarifying the status of roadshowing in the industry at this time. No strict definition of a roadshow existed in law, but Chaplin's representative Nathan Burkan argued that the

> Cohan Theatre is a legitimate theatre. The contract [with UA] contains no specifications of the number of performances to be given per day for the purposes of roadshowing, nor the admission fees; nor do I think they have any relevancy to the question. The term 'roadshowing' is commonly understood in the trade to mean the presentation of a picture in a legitimate theatre, prior to its general release (Burkan 1931).

Responding to these claims, UA vice presidents Dennis F. O'Brien and Arthur W. Kelly, along with Edward C. Raftery and Paul D. O'Brien of law firm Raftery, Driscoll and O'Brien, cited precedent and custom as the basis for a working definition of roadshowing, based partly on the wording of past contracts UA had entered into with producers (including its owner-partners) and with exhibitors.

Ed Raftery and Paul O'Brien argued that a 'road show, as distinguished from the ordinary exhibition of a motion picture in a motion picture theatre has a very fixed meaning. In the city of New York a custom, established over a period of years, makes a road show a very definite thing.' They enumerated the component parts of that 'definite thing': (1) the use of a legitimate theatre rather than a dedicated cinema; (2) the film's presentation as a 'De Luxe Production'; (3) a scale of ticket

prices up to $2.00 for orchestra seats; (4) a limited number of performances weekly, with two shows on weekdays (normally beginning at 2.45 and 8.45 pm) and three at weekends and holidays; (5) reserved seats with tickets bookable in advance. According to Raftery and O'Brien, the engagement of *City Lights* at the Cohan met none of these criteria: (1) the Cohan had been operating as a motion-picture theatre for the whole of the 1930-31 theatrical season, having been under licence to British International Pictures; (2) the presentation was not in a 'De Luxe' manner; (3) its scale of prices ranged from 50 cents to $1.00, comparable to other dedicated cinemas in the Broadway area; (4) the Cohan's opening hours were also comparable with other cinemas, and *City Lights* had been shown up to nine times daily, starting at 9.00 am and finishing at 2.00 am; (5) there were no reserved seats or advance bookings, so patrons took their chances by lining up for the best available seats on the day of the performance and a sidewalk barker was employed to announce when seats were available. The lawyers observed of the latter: 'This custom prevails only in motion picture theatres and is radically different from the system used for road shown pictures' (Raftery and O'Brien 1931).

With regard to the distinction between roadshow pre-releases and regular first runs, Raftery and O'Brien cited 'franchise agreements' with exhibition circuits which stipulated that the scale of ticket prices for a roadshow presentation should be at least 50 percent higher than those charged for regular first runs in the same territory 'and in no event less than a minimum admission fee of one dollar and fifty cents ($1.50) for orchestra seats at evening performances' (contract between United Artists Corp. and Loew's Inc., 23 February 1928, quoted in Raftery and O'Brien 1931). They pointed out that Douglas Fairbanks' *Reaching for the Moon* (Goulding, 1930), which had played ten weeks at the Criterion Theatre in New York at $2.00 top, was 'a perfect example of a road shown picture', whereas *City Lights* was 'a perfect example of a first run exhibition'. The lawyers argued that the purpose of roadshowing was 'to exploit the photoplay as an outstanding attraction' and 'to establish a special value' for the picture in future distribution even if this meant making a loss on the

roadshow engagement itself. Roadshowing placed a film in direct competition with legitimate stage productions by offering to patrons the same services of fixed performance times, reserved seating and advance purchase as legitimate theatres (Raftery and O'Brien 1931). Paul O'Brien further stated that the film had been booked into the Cohan rather than a regular first-run house because Chaplin and UA wanted it to have a long run (P.D. O'Brien 1931). Most cinemas would have cut short the engagement for a change of programme, but hiring the Cohan allowed *City Lights* to run twelve weeks, probably longer than business would have warranted in a more in-demand venue. In fact, *Variety*'s weekly box-office reports show that the house went dark following the end of the Chaplin engagement, with no other films playing there for the rest of the year.

Arthur Kelly pointed out that

> there is nothing in Mr. Chaplin's contract that defines a road-show, but it is more or less being established by precedent that a road-show is a reserved-seat two-a-day policy, and any picture that plays a continuous showing policy, whether it is at a legitimate theatre or a regular motion picture house, is constituted as the first-run of the picture in that situation under their general release (Kelly 1931).

He argued that because of the length of run at the Cohan, it was now 'impossible [for the film] to go into a first-run [house] such as the Rivoli or Rialto' and that *City Lights* would instead 'immediately go into its second run on the Loew circuit' (ibid). The Cohan had been hired outright, on more favourable terms than would have been the case at other first-run cinemas, where receipts were divided in the proportion of 70 percent for the distributor and 30 percent for the theatre, following deduction of operating expenses; instead, 100 percent of the receipts after house expenses and rent for the theatre went to Chaplin and UA. (The term is not used in the *City Lights* papers, but such hire arrangements became known as 'four-walling.') UA was entirely responsible for the 'management and direction' of the Cohan engagement (as it also was the Los Angeles Theatre booking) and had always regarded it 'as a first run exhibition of the photoplay on Broadway.' Other territories besides

New York had presented the film in regular first runs at about the same time, so the Cohan run could not be regarded as a pre-release (Raftery and P.D. O'Brien 1931).

In summarising the legal advice and making his case to UA's General Sales Manager, Al Lichtman, Dennis O'Brien noted that there were two principal reasons for roadshowing a film: (1) 'to attract to the theatre patrons who do not usually attend motion pictures and are willing to pay a larger sum for admission', in order to avoid waiting in line and to be sure of having a seat and to see the picture from the beginning; and (2) 'to give the motion picture a box-office value among the motion picture patrons who would later be permitted to see such pictures at regular prices of admission'. He called this 'good-will value', a product of the extensive advertising and word-of-mouth recommendations afforded the film as a roadshow and thereby 'causing the patrons of the motion picture theatres to believe that they will see such motion pictures in the motion picture theatres at a bargain price, that is, a price of admission considerably lower than that paid by the patrons of the so-termed legitimate theatre' (D.F. O'Brien 1931). O'Brien cited clauses in the various agreements and contracts signed by UA's owner-producers from the company's inception on 5 February 1919 and the provisions by which they agreed to be bound. Participants were entitled to produce 'one so-termed unusual or special motion picture per year of at least ten thousand (10,000) lineal feet in length' (ibid.) which would fall outside the commitment to release their pictures through UA, provided that they delivered at least three regular pictures per annum. O'Brien noted that *City Lights* ran only about 8,000 feet in length; that Chaplin had not delivered to UA the number of films he had undertaken to produce or secured the permission of the company to roadshow his picture; that its exhibition at the Cohan did not meet the criteria for a roadshow established by contract or custom; that the terms under which the film was exhibited placed it in competition with other first-run films at regular cinemas rather than with legitimate theatres; and that the only significant difference between *City Lights* at the Cohan and the operation of these other cinemas was the four-wall hire arrangement

rather than a share of the gross. All these conditions also applied to the film's West Coast engagement at the Los Angeles Theatre (ibid.).

It seems that the distributor proved its point, as Chaplin's claim for a refund of 15 percent of the rental accruing to UA from the Cohan engagement was refused (Kelly 1932). But in the course of their own correspondence, Paul O'Brien privately admitted to Dennis O'Brien that expediency would have put the shoe on the other foot if UA had been negotiating a profits split with a theatre: 'What bothers me in this problem is that if an exhibitor had claimed this to be a general release and demanded service as per his contract, United Artists would probably take the other stand and contend that this was a road show' (P.D. O'Brien 1931).

The Great Dictator

In his summing up of the *City Lights* dispute, Dennis O'Brien had provided a brief historical summary of roadshowing in the United States. He identified the Italian import *Quo Vadis?* (Guazzoni, 1913) as the beginning of the practice, followed by D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). O'Brien commented of *Quo Vadis?*: 'The advertising, booking and routing … were similar to that then established in dealing with theatrical attractions performed in the legitimate theatres' (D.F. O'Brien 1931). There had in fact been many other roadshows in addition to and even earlier than these two, though they were clearly significant in terms of their impact (see Hall and Neale 2010: 21-40). O'Brien also included a list of twenty-five pictures in UA's history that had been presented on a roadshow basis in New York at the expense of their producers, five of which he said had also been roadshown in other territories: Griffith's *Way Down East*, Douglas Fairbanks' *Robin Hood* and *The Thief of Bagdad* (Walsh, 1924), Samuel Goldwyn's *Stella Dallas* (King, 1926) and Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* (1930). The present author's own research has established that several of the other twenty had also been roadshown outside New York, and that there were in addition at least seven other UA films that had been exhibited as roadshows in the period 1920-1930.

UA producers were not exceptional in this regard: pre-release roadshowing was extremely common in the silent era, especially on Broadway, though UA's limited output by comparison with other major distributors (it released only 125 features in total during this eleven-year period, an average of eleven per year) meant that the proportion of its films that were roadshown was relatively high. But in the sound era the number of roadshows from all companies dropped markedly: from 1931-1940, only seven UA releases were roadshown, and then on only a limited basis, despite an increased volume of output (178 films, an average of twenty releases per year). There were a number of reasons for this, including the advent of the Great Depression and changes to both the distribution and exhibition sectors and to film marketing practices caused partly by the conversion of cinemas to pre-recorded, synchronised sound (see Hall and Neale 2010: 88-98). But the industry definition of roadshowing also changed during this decade as distribution and exhibition practices became more varied and flexible. For example, the hire of a legitimate theatre was no longer a central component, as many such venues had become permanent cinemas or were supplanted in prestige by purpose-built picture palaces; nor was it expected that a producer take the responsibility of booking and managing the roadshow engagement. By 1940, the strict criteria for roadshowing that UA's lawyers had enforced in the *City Lights* dispute had given way to a much looser understanding – had it been made a decade later, Chaplin's film would probably have been granted the designation he had sought for it.

One of the key factors in changing the practice of roadshowing in the 1940s was a single film. Under normal circumstances *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939) would have been released by UA: its producer, David O. Selznick, had signed with UA to distribute twelve productions made by his company Selznick International Pictures between 1936 and 1940. But in order to secure the services of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer contract star Clark Gable, Selznick was obliged to licence *Gone with the Wind*'s distribution rights to MGM, thus depriving UA of the most popular and lucrative picture of

the era (see Balio 1976: 177-81). The distribution and exhibition policy that MGM devised for the film influenced the release patterns of other big pictures for the next decade and beyond. Instead of holding to a strict policy of area-exclusive engagements, reserved seats, advance booking, twice-daily performances and ticket prices comparable with the legitimate stage, the distributor opted for a two-pronged approach. In the bigger cities, *Gone with the Wind* was booked into two theatres simultaneously, each with a different policy: whereas one operated on a traditional roadshow basis, the other offered continuous performances with limited reserved seating only in evening performances. Because of its length (nearly four hours including intermission) the film was precluded from more than three showings daily; but ticket prices for the grind houses, while higher than those for standard first-run cinemas, were lower than those for the reserved-seat engagements. Patrons thus were faced with a choice: they could pay extra to be sure of getting in, knowing where they were going to sit and seeing the film from the beginning; or they could pay a slightly lesser rate and take their chances on the day of showing. Under this mixed policy, the clear distinction between roadshow pre-release and first run was broken down: instead of one preceding the other with a clearance period in between, they existed side by side. Because even the cheaper engagements were more expensive than regular first runs, *Gone with the Wind* would go on to play a conventional general release later, often returning to the same cinemas to play at a lower price. And because the continuous-performance runs played concurrently with the reserved-seat, twice-daily engagements, *both* could be referred to as roadshows. Thus, throughout the 1940s raised ticket prices alone could be sufficient to merit the description of a film as a roadshow; all the other components were optional (see Hall and Neale 2010: 113-9).

Confirming the way that *Gone with the Wind* had redefined roadshowing was the first film to adopt a similar distribution-exhibition pattern: UA's release of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). *Variety*'s review compared the two films in terms of advance publicity and audience curiosity (Char. 1940: 18). According to the trade paper, the decision to roadshow Chaplin's film was due to the increased

reliance on domestic theatre revenues because of the shrinkage of war-affected foreign markets ('Chaplin's $2,200,000 *Dictator*…' 1940: 47). The release policy was set by UA sales managers Jack Schlaifer and Harry Gold rather than by Chaplin himself, though the filmmaker retained the right of approval on all booking arrangements and was consulted on the scale of prices to be charged (these were stipulated in contracts). The rental terms were identical with those for *Gone with the Wind*: the distributor took 70 percent of the box office 'straight from the first dollar' but in some situations guaranteed exhibitors a 10 percent profit above the house 'nut' (break-even point) up to a limit of 30 percent of the gross; theatre operating costs were established on a case-by-case basis ('Same 10% Guarantee…' 1940: 6). Also similar to *Gone with the Wind*, in selected key cities *The Great Dictator* was booked into two theatres with contrasting operating policies: one with reserved seats and twice-daily performances, the other on grind with limited or no reserved seating. In New York these were the same two theatres that *Gone with the Wind* had played in its premiere engagements: the Astor, a long-established roadshow house, which charged $2.20 for top tickets; and the larger Capitol, a Loew's first-run theatre, which ran continuous performances for $1.10 top. In Chicago, the theatres chosen were the Apollo, a twice-daily engagement at $1.65 top, and the Roosevelt, also charging $1.10 top on grind ('10% Net Profit…' 1940: 7). In Los Angeles, the roadshow and grind theatres were the Carthay Circle and the United Artists, respectively. The shorter running time of *The Great Dictator* by comparison with *Gone with the Wind* meant a higher turnover of screenings on grind and therefore greater audience capacity, so simultaneous twin bookings were considered unnecessary in most metropolitan centres. Harry Gold referred to the policy on *The Great Dictator* as a 'streamlined roadshow', aimed at holding the film in first runs as long as possible to maximise its potential ('Chaplin Talks…' 1940: 4).

However, *The Great Dictator* attained far less success with this policy than had *Gone with the Wind*. Both New York engagements performed well, especially the Astor roadshow, which lasted a highly profitable twenty-three weeks. But in Chicago the reserved-seat Apollo engagement lasted a mere

two weeks and the grind Roosevelt only three; by contrast, *Gone with the Wind* had recently completed a thirty-eight-week roadshow run at another theatre in the city. The two Los Angeles theatres managed four weeks apiece. Although the film did well in some other cities, such as San Francisco and Washington, *Variety* reported disappointing business in Baltimore, Buffalo, Louisville, Memphis and Pittsburgh, where poor word-of-mouth seemed to focus on the high prices charged: 'there wouldn't have been nearly so much disappointment at regular prices'. The paper cited local press comments 'that it was the two-bit people who "made" Chaplin and that he was turning his back on them with the increased admissions' ('Two-Bit Trade…' 1940: 4). After barely a month, with around 150 engagements still playing or completed, UA's Arthur Kelly – now the company's General Sales Manager – announced that no more deals would be made under the raised-price policy and no further bookings were to commence until six months after the film's premiere date. This corresponded to the length of the 'protection' (clearance) period specified in the initial exhibition contracts; the equivalent clause in *Gone with the Wind* contracts was for a full year. The company admitted that it had not been able to make a sufficient number of bookings based on the 70/30 split after it stopped offering 10 percent profit guarantees due to the number of rental adjustments that it had had to make under the arrangement ('UA Stops Selling…' 1940: 15). All these were signs that the film was performing far less well than anticipated.

When *The Great Dictator* commenced its general release on 1 March 1941, the first time it had played at regular prices, rental terms were reduced to 40 percent of the gross ('Chaplin Film…' 1941: 6). In practice, UA operated a 'sliding scale' rental policy, varying between 35 and 50 percent. On this basis, the film did much better than it had in its 'streamlined roadshow' engagements and ended up as one of the top grossers of 1941 with a domestic rental of about $2.5 million. It was also admitted in the trade press that the film had cost only $1.4 million to produce rather than the inflated $2.2 million claimed for publicity purposes ('Chaplin Now Figures…' 1941: 1). Meanwhile, exhibitors in Britain and Australia – the two largest overseas markets – had strongly objected to a proposed 70/30

split of the gross. As a result, UA backed down, lowering the terms to 50 percent. The London premiere engagement at the Prince of Wales Theatre was on a reserved-seat roadshow basis, but otherwise the film played in the UK at regular prices. The British trade paper *Kinematograph Weekly* commented:

> Mr. Chaplin expects that British exhibitors will cooperate with him by agreeing to run *The Great Dictator* for longer than they run other pictures and by permitting neighbouring theatres to run it at the same time so that the picture can be seen by the biggest possible number of people and so do the maximum amount of good for the British cause ('Normal Prices…' 1940).

Despite the film's erratic box-office performance under the alternate reserved-seat/raised-price-grind policy, this method of exhibition was used for at least ten other pictures throughout the 1940s, including UA's *Story of G.I. Joe* (Wellman, 1945) and *Carnegie Hall* (Ulmer, 1947). Chaplin did not make another new film for seven years, and when his black comedy *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) opened in New York it did so in yet another 'unique' variant of roadshowing. The premiere engagement at the Broadway Theatre – a 'legit' house hired by UA in a revival of the tradition of booking roadshows outside regular cinemas – initially had two performances daily, with most tickets priced at $1.80 top but with a block of 250 seats in the mezzanine section that could be reserved for $2.40. The theatre booking had been made at very short notice on Chaplin's insistence, so there was no time for UA to build a sustained publicity campaign ('Unique Combo…' 1947: 5, 20). But after less than one week the reserved-seat policy was dropped and prices were reduced to $1.50 top. According to *Variety*, the reserved seats were selling relatively well but the public was confused by the split policy and assumed all seats were at the roadshow scale. The price cut followed swiftly on a similar reduction in the cost of top tickets for Samuel Goldwyn's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Wyler, 1946), released by RKO Radio and the biggest hit of the year, so it was not immediately obvious that Chaplin's film was the problem ('Price-Minded Public...' 1947: 3). But Chaplin found himself assailed

by a hostile press over his political views (he was accused of being a Communist sympathiser) and the film was not helped by negative reviews (Golden 1947: 4, 20). *Monsieur Verdoux* continued to perform poorly and the Broadway run was cut short after only a month. Despite successful runs in five theatres in Washington, D.C., UA struggled even to get bookings for the film, with fewer than 1,000 playdates in the first year of release: a 'phenomenally low record' for such a prominent filmmaker ('Chaplin's *Verdoux* Gets…' 1947: 3). Chaplin suspected a conspiracy of the major circuits to keep the film off the screen, and after a further year he ordered *Monsieur Verdoux* to be withdrawn from circulation. *Variety* reported that it had played only 2,075 dates (around one-sixth of normal expectations) and earned only $325,000 in domestic rentals compared to $1.5 million abroad ('Chaplin's *Verdoux* Grossed…' 1947: 3; Balio 1976: 210-4).

Five years later, Chaplin's next picture *Limelight* (1952) had a twin New York premiere engagement at the Astor and Trans-Lux, both initially on grind; but after a few days the latter switched to a roadshow policy and ran for a total of twelve weeks. The film's subsequent general release in Greater New York was also successful, but like with *Monsieur Verdoux* UA experienced difficulty in booking the film nationally because of ongoing controversies over Chaplin's politics. *Limelight* performed better, grossing around $1 million domestically, but this was still far short of expectations, especially when compared to $7 million overseas. It was the last film Chaplin made in America, and when he went abroad to promote it he found his right to re-enter the country had been rescinded (see Arneel 1953: 1; Balio 1987: 55-61).

Henry V

Chaplin's star persona, reinforced by his political convictions, was as a man of the people; it could be argued that roadshowing, by aiming at the 'class' audience rather than the masses, was in contradiction with the image of the Little Tramp. *The Great Dictator* achieved greater popular success in general release than as a roadshow, and while raised prices did not harm the Broadway

performance of *City Lights* its exhibition had not been given the full 'trappings' of a roadshow, as UA had been keen to point out. But given the right kind of product, and indeed the right audience, roadshowing could bring far greater profit than a regular release strategy. UA's 'special handling' of Laurence Olivier's British production *Henry V* (1944) demonstrates this more vividly than perhaps any other film before the mid-1950s.

Henry V was one of a group of six pictures financed and released by the Rank Organisation in the UK to which UA had acquired North American distribution rights (a seventh was added later). As Sarah Street (2002) has discussed, very few previous British films had broken through to achieve substantial commercial success in the U.S. Some of those that did had been released by UA, most notably several Alexander Korda productions, beginning with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), and the war film *In Which We Serve* (Coward and Lean, 1942). The biggest attraction of the Rank package was Gabriel Pascal's Technicolor production of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945), the most expensive picture yet made in Britain at a cost of nearly $5 million. UA gave it a wide general release, earning a domestic rental of $2 million from around 10,000 theatre bookings – both records for a British film. But reports suggested that after opening big *Caesar and Cleopatra* had quickly tailed off, suffering poor word-of-mouth and failing to return anywhere near sufficient funds to help Rank pay off the huge negative cost (Griffith 1949: 34; Balio 1976: 220).

By contrast, according to the trade press, UA did not want to distribute *Henry V* at all, on the 'grounds that it is not suitable for the American market and would be difficult to sell first to the exhibitor and, subsequently, to the public.' It was claimed that J. Arthur Rank wanted to roadshow the film himself in the U.S. to prove UA executives wrong, but roadshowing was widely 'considered obsolete' because of current market conditions ('Showdown on Shakespeare…' 1945: 3). Recent experience had shown that big films generated more revenue from increasing prices slightly in regular first runs but otherwise avoiding the traditional roadshow appurtenances of reserved seats

and twice-daily performances, which slowed down daily turnover. *Gone with the Wind* had shown the way with its flexible booking policy, while *The Great Dictator* was among the films that apparently proved audience resentment of roadshow-scale admissions. It was another year later when *Variety* reported that *Henry V* was indeed to be roadshown, albeit through UA rather than by Rank directly, and that the film would 'be treated more like a legit show than any pic ever released in this country' ('UA Plans Roadshowing…' 1946: 3).

The release policy was devised and supervised by Paul N. Lazarus Jr., UA's Director of Advertising and Publicity, and Rank executive Captain Harold Auten (see Street 2002: 96-106; Hall 2012: 346-8). As Lazarus and Auten conceived it, the film's disadvantages for marketing purposes included its Britishness, its historical subject matter, its 'difficult dialogue' and its '"highbrow" connotations' ('*Henry V*', n.d.). Its advantages included the cultural capital of Shakespeare, the film's novelty appeal, its high production values (with a production cost around $2 million) and the fact that it was 'entirely non-controversial and can be shown anywhere, at any time, to any audience' – although it had been reported with some amusement in the British trade press that the Production Code Administration had required the re-recording of a line of dialogue in order to win the U.S. censors' Seal of Approval ('Long Shots' 1945: 4). *Variety*'s mainly favourable review set out the challenges UA faced:

> *Henry V* as a picture, however, requires that the spectator take more with him into the theatre in the way of mental preparedness than mere curiosity. And, certainly, it is no film to be dropped in on by a casual passerby. […] It has a way of going right over one's head and leaving him wondering what the devil's going on. Shakespeare's renowned verse, except in occasional instances, is just so much overrated abacadabra [sic] to the kid from Brooklyn or the average film-fan in Birmingham [Alabama] or Seattle. You must

> be thoroughly familiar with the plot and speeches before ever going near the theatre to derive much meaning from the picture. (Herb. 1946: 8.)

UA achieved an early coup by arranging a tie-in with the Theatre Guild, the subscription service that was able to mail promotional material directly to its members in twenty cities, to encourage block ticket sales and to lend the film an aura of prestige. Indeed, this was the first occasion on which the Guild had sponsored a film rather than a live show. With the Guild's name prominently displayed in advertising, *Henry V*'s premiere U.S. run was at the Esquire Theatre, Boston – a legit house – beginning on 3 April 1946. Ticket prices were set at $2.40 top and there were reserved seats, advance booking and two separate performances daily, in the traditional roadshow manner. The engagement surprised even UA by being a success from the beginning, aided by a cover story and four-page article in *Time* magazine published in the week of opening ('B.O. of British-made…' 1946: 6). The Esquire run eventually lasted thirty-six weeks. *Henry V* then opened on similar terms on 14 June at the 800-seat Laurel theatre in Los Angeles and three days later in New York at the 'municipally-operated', 2,600-seat N.Y. City Center – the first film to play there. The New York launch fortuitously coincided with a visit to the city by the Old Vic Theatre Company, of which Laurence Olivier was a member ('*Henry V* Debuts…' 1946: 15; '*Henry* OK…' 1946: 7). Paid advertising was kept to a minimum, UA spending only $3,000 on advance ads – around one-tenth the sum normally spent ahead of a New York opening – and relying for the most part on word-of-mouth recommendations and other free publicity ('3G Ad Budget…' 1946: 4). Again, the film took off and at the completion of the City Center's strictly-limited run of eleven weeks run it transferred to the John Golden Theatre for a 'move-over' engagement that lasted thirty-five weeks. In addition, the film subsequently played two shorter New York engagements, at the Broadway and Park Avenue theatres for five and seven weeks respectively, giving a combined first run in the city of fifty-eight weeks – a record for a British film. The association with the Theatre Guild reportedly caused some confusion: because ads for the film appeared in the theatre pages of newspapers rather than the cinema sections, and the Old Vic's

New York stint included Olivier starring in a production of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, many patrons assumed that *Henry V* was in fact a live performance ('Guild's *Henry* Tie…' 1946: 22).

By early 1947, *Henry V* was reported to have earned a net profit for UA of $700,000 – equivalent to about half of the box-office gross – from only twenty North American engagements. All these theatres had been booked on a four-wall basis, so after covering house operating costs and advertising expenses the entire gross was taken by UA, to be shared with Rank following deduction of its 27.5 percent distribution fee, which would rise to 30 percent after the net had reached $1.6 million ('British *Henry*…' 1947: 5; '*Cleo* Figures…' 1947: 20; 'Surprising Big Biz…' 1948: 5, 18). The film's success in sophisticated metropolitan situations might have been anticipated; however, the hinterlands were another matter. Invoking the classic industry question of 'Will it play in Peoria?', UA's distribution campaign was aimed at selling the film to ordinary 'Peorians' – the small towns of middle America – as much as to those upmarket urban patrons who were already well disposed to see a Shakespeare adaptation or a British-made picture: 'Once the British Film is accepted by the Peorians, the battle is won – for the time' ('*Henry V*', n.d.).

After more than a year of four-wall engagements, from the summer of 1947 UA sought to make bookings on a percentage-of-the-gross basis. It nevertheless kept control of theatres' presentation of the film by sending out field operatives to supervise advertising and promotional activities ('UA's *Henry*…' 1947: 5). In a letter to these 'advance agents', Harold Auten stressed that while playing on a percentage basis relieved UA of having to pay exhibitors rent to book their theatres outright, it was still necessary to liaise closely with theatre managers to get the maximum revenue from each situation:

> The percentage engagement gets the Manager of the theatre in your corner. He has got to work to get his share of each dollar at the box office. So make a friend of him – encourage him to get out and dig up the business […] give the local Exhibitor the credit of securing

> *Henry V* for his theatre and patrons. Let him put a carnation in his buttonhole and take the bows – all we want is those dollars in the box office and a successful engagement (Auten 1947b).

Agents were required to send Auten a telegram each night noting takings from the day's performances and to file a report at the close of the engagement, counter-signed by the theatre manager, with details of deductions for advertising and other expenses along with the total net (Auten 1947a).

In November 1947 Auten reported a net profit to date of $1,282,744 and stated UA's aim of achieving an ultimate profit on the film of $2 million, which would be a company record. A deal on 50/50 rental terms had been offered to the Fox West Coast and Warner Bros. theatre chains, based on *Henry V* playing bookings of one to four days depending on the size of the local population. UA was happy to take the middle days of the week – typically the weakest at the box office – but sought to avoid dates that conflicted 'with school examinations periods or extra-curricular activities' (Auten 1947c). In the summer of the following year the strict roadshow policy – maintained for more than two full years – was discontinued in favour of a dual policy of either roadshows or continuous performances, depending on theatre preference. Rental terms were set at a minimum 50/50 basis, and top prices for evening shows were reduced to $1.20, or $1.00 for smaller situations (Auten 1948a). By this time, according to Auten, sixty-six Technicolor prints had played over 800 roadshow engagements for a box-office gross of $3 million and a net profit to date for UA of $1.62 million**.** He confidently expected the film to gross another million by June 1949 (Auten 1948b).

Roadshowing after *Henry V*

Writing for *Sight and Sound* in 1950, Richard Griffith described the term 'prestige picture' as 'practically an affront to money-minded distributors and exhibitors. In Hollywood argot, a "prestige" picture is one whose merits may reflect glory on its producers, but which cannot possibly make

money' (Griffith 1950a: 39). *Henry V*, he argued, was one of those films that proved otherwise. Initially regarded as a commercial liability, by the end of its extended release it had become one of the most profitable films in UA's history to date. Moreover, the distribution policy for the film established a new pattern for the handling of specialised pictures aimed at offering audiences a different theatrical experience from standard cinema releases. Rival companies subsequently modelled their campaigns for other films on the example of *Henry V*, most successfully Universal-International with its roadshowng of Laurence Olivier's second Shakespeare production *Hamlet* (1948), also made for the Rank Organisation. UA itself adapted its tactics, with varying degrees of success, for the British films *The River* (Renoir, 1951), *The Tales of Hoffmann* (Powell and Pressburger, 1951) and *The Great Gilbert and Sullivan* (Gilliat, 1953), as did Stanley Kramer for early engagements of his American production *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Gordon, 1950), which was subsequently generally released by UA. Perhaps most significantly, *Henry V* established that a sizeable American audience existed for films of apparently rarefied appeal, if properly marketed and presented (Griffith 1950b; Knight 1953). 'If we had handled *Henry V* as if it were just another big picture', commented Paul Lazarus in retrospect, 'we'd be dead. We knew that there was nothing here for regular movie audiences. But we knew we did have something for the devotees of legitimate theatre and for all cultural-minded people throughout the country. That was the audience we had to reach' (quoted in Knight 1953: 191).

With UA under a new management regime in the 1950s and 1960s, roadshowing once again became the policy of choice for 'big' pictures as well as specialised ones. Beginning in UA's case with Michael Todd's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Anderson, 1956), films with roadshow engagements extending in some instances not just for weeks and months but for years at a time set a new industry bar for earning potential. Among the blockbusters UA subsequently released on a roadshow basis around the world were *Exodus* (Preminger, 1960), *West Side Story* (Wise and Robbins, 1961), *It's a*

Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World (Kramer, 1963) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (Jewison, 1971), the last of which set another new company record for profitability (Balio 1987: 193).

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