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Chapter 5

'Look, Ma, I'm A Corporation!': United Artists and Kirk Douglas's Bryna Productions 1955-1959

James Fenwick

On 28 September 1949, Kirk Douglas incorporated his own production company, Bryna Productions. The company remained dormant for six years, only entering active production with *The Indian Fighter* (De Toth, 1955), the first in a six-picture contract with United Artists (UA), which Bryna had signed in January 1955. Douglas was not unique in becoming an independent producer and signing non-exclusive contracts with the likes of UA. In fact, UA had been instrumental in this rush towards independent production throughout the 1950s. As the industrial conditions of the studio system rapidly changed, actors, writers, and directors were quick to take advantage, realising that they could negotiate profit participation deals with the studios and, potentially, have extensive creative and business control of their films. *Variety* reported in March 1955: 'rarely has any new movement taken on such dimensions in such limited time as the swing toward the formation of independent companies by name players' (Arneel 1955: 1).

UA had taken the lead in signing up these new independent companies, financing and releasing the pictures they produced. In 1955 alone, alongside signing a contract with Douglas' Bryna Productions, UA also signed contracts with the independent companies of Frank Sinatra, Henry Fonda, Rita Hayworth, Robert Mitchum and Joseph Mankiewicz (Arneel 1955: 1). Arthur B. Krim, chairman of UA, stated in an article in *Variety* that the company was committed to ensuring that independent producers had the creative autonomy in which

to thrive, allowing them to feel like the ‘owners of their negatives’ (Hift 1959: 13). Of course, there were still limits to the levels of autonomy and control granted to these independent producers, especially with regards to publicity and exploitation. While UA was happy to allow producers to have creative autonomy to develop their films, the company felt that it was best placed to market and sell them to audiences.

This chapter uses archival documents from the Kirk Douglas Papers, housed at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, to examine the spaces of autonomy offered by UA to one of its signature independent producers, Kirk Douglas, and his company Bryna Productions, focusing specifically on the issue of publicity. Bryna Productions is a case study for understanding the intriguing relationship between UA and its independent producers in the 1950s, allowing us to comprehend the complex dynamics of autonomy at play in the evolving industrial conditions of the era.

Across four years Bryna produced six films for UA: *The Indian Fighter*, *Ride Out For Revenge* (Girard, 1957), *The Careless Years* (Girard, 1957), *Spring Reunion* (Pirosh, 1957), *The Vikings* (Fleischer, 1958) and *The Devil’s Disciple* (Hamilton, 1959). Bryna was allowed consultancy rights over the publicity of each of these films but there was a developing tension around the strategies being used by UA. Bryna wanted control over the way its films were promoted, keen to brand its films as experimental and socially challenging. UA – drawing on its expertise in publicity and distribution in both the US and the global market – was more concerned (initially, at least) with ensuring a profit. While UA has typically been seen as providing creative and business control to its producers, there were limits to this autonomy and a level of inflexibility that impacted on the creative processes of some producers and ultimately on the working relationship with the likes of Bryna. As a result, the initial

commercial and creative prospect of the partnership between Bryna and UA was never fully realised.

Bryna Productions

Douglas was one of the first actors to incorporate his own independent production company in the post-war era, anticipating the trend some five years before the landslide of companies incorporating in the mid-1950s. But determining Douglas' motivations in founding Bryna in 1949 is somewhat difficult. Trade journals like *Variety* seemed to emphasise the profit motive, quoting Douglas in 1955 as saying, 'we're doing it to make money' (Arneel 1955: 1). Yet, while this was undoubtedly a factor, Douglas was most likely motivated by a combination of a strong sense of independence and creativity, and a desire to take ownership of his business affairs and star-image. His contracts with producer Hal Wallis in the 1940s had placed him in strict creative bondage. Notwithstanding his energetic performances, many of his films – including *The Walls of Jericho* (Stahl, 1948) and *My Dear Secretary* (Martin, 1948) – were mediocre at best. Douglas described his early years in Hollywood as being 'like slavery' (Douglas 1989: 142). What Douglas wanted was control and Bryna enabled him to take it, as he reflected in his autobiography:

I had no ambitions to become a tycoon in the motion picture industry [...] My purpose was to participate more in the creative process of making films. I would have preferred to be handed a beautifully written script, with a role I wanted to play, and a director I liked to work with. But I couldn't just wait around for it to happen. I had to *make* it happen. (Douglas 1989: 257)

Despite Douglas's urgent desire for control over the films in which he appeared, Bryna remained dormant between 1949 and 1955. Even so, Douglas's box-office appeal continued

to grow, particularly following his Academy Award nominated performance in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Minnelli, 1952) and his starring role in the Walt Disney hit *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (Fleischer, 1954). Douglas's workload arguably distracted him from fully activating Bryna as a production company, appearing in nineteen pictures between 1949 and 1955. There were also repeated reports in the press about potential new projects, including *The Shadow*, which was to have been filmed in the United Kingdom and star Douglas alongside Jane Wyman, but the project, like many others, never materialised (Schallert 1952: 7).

By the end of 1954, Bryna's inactivity was becoming a serious problem, with its failure to develop a production noted in *Variety*. The trade paper reported that the company's latest failure had involved a dispute on a project titled *The Quality of Mercy*, for which John Wayne's Batjac Productions was claiming ownership ('Two Indies' 1954: 7). It had been five years since Douglas had incorporated the company and, despite having acquired various literary materials, not one project had entered pre-production. Archival documents in the Kirk Douglas Papers indicate that, while Douglas was creatively engaged, the lack of contractual obligations to deliver a project meant that there was no motivation. In contrast, Bryna entered a remarkably creative period between 1955 and 1960, producing twelve feature films, over half of which were released by UA, as well as a television series, *Tales of the Vikings* (1959).

So what were the conditions that moved Bryna from a period of extended dormancy to rapid activity? First, Bryna was advised, most likely by Douglas' lawyer Sam Norton, that it needed to make a successful film in order to take advantage of capital gains taxation (Arneel 1955: 1). Second, Bryna signed a six-picture, non-exclusive contract with UA in January 1955, which required Douglas to star in two 'A' pictures and obligated Bryna to produce four

smaller-budgeted 'B' pictures (Pryor 1955: 23). UA was keen to exploit Douglas' star appeal at the box office, with Max Youngstein, vice president of UA, in regular contact with Bryna to suggest potential 'A' pictures for Douglas. At the same time, Bryna was suggesting projects to UA. But Youngstein wanted to prioritise UA's preferred projects over Bryna's suggestions, as he noted in a letter to the company:

This really brings us to the heart of the problem, namely the setting up of some order of priority as to what pictures Kirk ought to get started on. If we buckshot all over the place, we will never nail the projects down. I think we ought to concentrate on 'The Viking' [...] and a good Western (Youngstein 1955a).

When Youngstein's correspondence from January 1955 is compared to the announcements in the newspapers and trade journals about Bryna's contract with UA, it is interesting to see that *The Vikings* was being promoted as a key project going forward, most likely at the insistence of Youngstein. Therefore, it does seem that there was a level of creative autonomy that UA did not grant Bryna, with the distributor eager to initiate projects it felt would be commercially viable. Indeed, the relationship between UA and Bryna became focused on the issue of commercial viability versus films made with an intellectual or moral message. While Bryna wanted to assert control over the promotional strategies of their films to emphasise the latter, UA was much more interested in selling Douglas. What follows is a case study of the six pictures Bryna distributed through UA and an examination of the levels of autonomy permitted over their publicity and exploitation.

***The Indian Fighter* (1955)**

The Western had proven a successful genre for UA between 1954 and 1955. *Vera Cruz* (Aldrich, 1955) and *The Kentuckian* (Lancaster, 1955) had been two of the company's most

profitable films, earning a combined \$7.5 million in domestic rentals ('1955's Top Film Grossers' 1956: 15), with Balio labelling the former one of the few blockbusters UA had released before it went public in 1957 (1987: 129). Both films had been produced by Hecht-Lancaster Productions, an independent production company incorporated by actor Burt Lancaster and his agent, Harold Hecht; the company had an ongoing and successful working relationship with UA. As for Kirk Douglas, his recent leading role in Universal's *Man Without a Star* (K. Vidor, 1955) had also proven successful at the box office ('1955's Top Film Grossers' 1956: 15). Max Youngstein urged Bryna to produce a Western for its first UA feature, with Douglas in a leading role. Youngstein had been eager for a producer to take on a project titled *The Indian Fighter* since being given the script in 1953, commenting that 'we can do big business with it' (Youngstein 1953). Bryna had sent Youngstein two Western novels with a view to adapt them for the screen: William Donohue Ellis' *Bounty Lands* (1952) and *Jonathan Blair: Bounty Lands Lawyer* (1954). Neither interested Youngstein, who dismissed them as 'character Westerns' (Youngstein 1955b). He insisted that Bryna's Western needed to 'put in the kind of action that Westerns must have to be successful' (ibid.). In other words, Bryna was effectively forced to produce *The Indian Fighter* as its first picture for UA. Announcements were placed in newspapers and trade journals at the beginning of February 1955, declaring that the film would feature Douglas as a 'reckless heel of an adventurer who stirs up the Indians against the white settlers' (Hopper 1955: B8).

These early interactions between UA and Bryna are an indication of the contrasting motivations between the two companies: whereas UA seemed more concerned with commercial viability, Bryna was interested in developing challenging, character driven films that would enable Douglas to stretch his acting skills and even experiment with his masculine star persona. If Youngstein had envisaged *The Indian Fighter* as a 'straight action' cowboy film, Bryna conceived of the film as a romance, one in which Douglas would seduce

the daughter of an Indian chief. Moreover, Bryna wanted to emphasise the film's racial and sexual politics; Kirk Douglas had argued that the interracial romance between the lead character, Johnny Hawks, and the Indian girl, Onahti, played by Elsa Martinelli, needed foregrounding in posters for the film (Margulies 1955b). Bryna had its own promotional unit, Public Relations, overseen by Stan Margulies, who worked with UA to ensure that Bryna's films were promoted and branded to its wishes. However, this soon brought Bryna into conflict with UA. Bryna wanted to promote Martinelli, who they had just contracted to appear in two films annually (Margulies 1955c). Promoting Martinelli made sense; on the one hand, she was an Italian born actress and the European market was increasingly important to Hollywood, with international sales overtaking national sales by the early 1960s (Lev 2003: 147). On the other hand, given her contract with Bryna, Martinelli represented an investment that the company wanted to capitalise on.

While UA executives did not interfere with the production of *The Indian Fighter*, they were heavily involved in the film's promotional strategy. Bryna could contribute ideas for the domestic publicity campaign, but UA had final approval. These limitations were imposed by UA as they underpinned its own distribution and marketing expertise; after all, UA was principally a distribution company. Tino Balio has pointed out in his study of the company that 'UA did not tell a producer how to shoot his picture and in return did not want to be told how to handle the marketing' (1987: 100). But these limitations arguably led to a sense of resentment among some independent producers who felt they better understood how to sell their films. They also had to eventually repay the costs of advertising, money that was initially fronted by UA (ibid.). This tension was underlined in an interview given by UA's Roger Lewis in 1961, telling *Variety* that he believed independent producers regarded themselves as experts on publicity, exploitation and merchandising: 'a "producer" can be anybody – a star, a director, a writer, or a businessman – but the moment he receives the

title of producer he automatically becomes an authority on publicity and advertising' (Hollinger 1961: 7).

Margulies wrote a memo to Kirk Douglas to outline UA's attitude to the promotion of the film in July 1955, saying that 'it was felt that the ads should powerfully illustrate the title; that is, visually project Kirk Douglas as the Indian Fighter, with secondary art to feature his relationship with Martinelli' (Margulies 1955e). Still, this did not prevent Bryna from attempting to assert a level of control over the branding of what the company saw as its own film. Margulies attempted to push Bryna's desired promotional angle at a meeting with UA executives in June 1955. The notes that Margulies made show that he was proposing that the film have the copy line 'Indian Fighter – or Indian Lover?', which he saw as a compromise between UA's view of the film as an action picture and Bryna's view of the film as a romance. Bryna went further with its requests, suggesting that artwork for the film should feature an image of Douglas's character superimposed on a headshot of Elsa Martinelli, or that her face be placed in the background of a 'major portion of the ad' (Margulies 1955d). Margulies was pushing hard to have Martinelli at the centre of the promotion for the film, outlining his thoughts to Roger Lewis: 'While I realise that the ad will stress and dramatise the action implicit in the title, I think we must be certain not to overlook the very beautiful and photogenic face and figure of Elsa' (ibid.).

In August 1955, Margulies contacted the National Screen Service (NSS), which was cutting the trailer for the film. His aim was to stop *The Indian Fighter* from being promoted as a 'cowboy' picture, arguing that 'there should be no comparison to *High Noon*, *Shane*, *Stage Coach* [sic]' (Margulies 1955f). Bryna felt that comparisons to films like *Shane* in particular were too conventional and that *The Indian Fighter* was a much more unusual film with provocative themes:

Here we have the unusual story of a white man, famed as an Indian fighter, who discovers through his love of the girl that he has more in common with the redskins he is supposed to battle than with the whites he should protect (Margulies 1955f).

The racial politics that Bryna wanted to emphasise, probably being pushed by Douglas himself, potentially alluded to a wide variety of social contexts in the United States in the 1950s, including the emerging civil rights movement and the pervasive paranoia about a communist threat from within. But Bryna's efforts to place the transgressive relationship at the heart of the film's promotion were rejected by UA; the company reminded Bryna that it was trying to sell a 'major Western action-type picture' (Winikus 1955). Francis Winikus, UA's National Director of Advertising, Publicity and Exploitation, argued that the target audience wanted to see Indians, cowboys, shooting and spectacle: 'I think it important that we analyse our normal audience for this picture' (ibid.).

By the end of September 1955, a sense of mistrust appears to have developed in the relationship between UA and Bryna. UA had not informed Bryna that they had intervened in the editing of the trailer and directed the NSS to ignore Bryna's requests. The trailer now promoted *The Indian Fighter* as an all-out cowboy versus 'Indian' action-adventure and, at the same time, compared it to the quality of critically-esteemed Westerns such as *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952), *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), and *Red River* (Hawks, 1948). Martinelli had also been marginalised in the promotion of the film. Similarly, poster artwork now foregrounded the film as a Western action-adventure without any reference to a love story, instead emphasising the spectacle of the film: 'The Vastness of *Shane*. The Sweep of *Red River*. The Drama of *High Noon*. And NOW the Might of Kirk Douglas as *The Indian Fighter*'. Bryna was dismayed by UA's approach and felt that the distributor imposed its own promotional

strategy, going so far as to call the UA practices 'disquieting' and 'upsetting' (Margulies 1955a). In a letter to UA, Margulies said that comparisons to *Shane* and *Red River* had a negative effect: 'I think this kind of comparison downgrades our picture because the approach has been used by so many cheap Westerns' (Margulies 1955a). Bryna felt that promotion for *The Indian Fighter*, given its status as the company's first feature, should represent its innovative approach to storytelling and the quality of its productions without unnecessary references to other critically esteemed films.

UA's approach to selling the film did not help its critical appeal. The film received mediocre reviews, being described as 'a routine Western' ('Film Review: *The Indian Fighter*' 1956: 43), with 'a regulation script', and 'monotonous' (Brog 1955: 6). Still, its box office performance was solid, ranking 33rd on *Variety's* 'Top Film Grossers of 1956', with a domestic gross of \$2.5 million ('Top Film Grossers of 1956' 1957: 4). UA may have viewed this as a vindication of its own promotional expertise and strategy that won out over Bryna's.

Bryna's 'B' Pictures

Between 1955 and 1957, Bryna quickly produced three 'B' pictures as part of its contract with UA: *The Careless Years*, *Spring Reunion*, and *Ride Out For Revenge*. In his autobiography, Douglas remarks that he was not keen on developing smaller-budgeted films for Bryna and that he had agreed to do so 'reluctantly' following tax advice from his lawyer (Douglas 1989: 262). Still, the pictures were to be products of Bryna Productions and therefore needed to possess a quality that was worthy of being associated with the company and Kirk Douglas.

The Careless Years and *Spring Reunion* were mediocre romances with poor characterisation and weak plots, while *Ride Out For Revenge* was an inferior version of *The Indian Fighter*

that explored issues of race relations in an otherwise generic cowboy versus Indians story. All three were commercial and critical failures and, despite the box office success of *The Indian Fighter*, the nature of Bryna's contract with UA meant that the B-pictures were cross-collateralized with the A-pictures, leading to an overall corporate loss for Bryna by the end of 1957 (Douglas 1989: 293-294). Cross collateralization was a means of risk protection for UA; if a picture made a loss, the company could recoup those losses from pictures that made a profit.

Development on *Spring Reunion* began in January 1956. The film, a romantic comedy, was based on a 1954 story and television play by Alan Arthur for the *Goodyear Television Playhouse* (1951-1957, NBC) anthology series, which were adapted into a screenplay by director Robert Pirosh. The story focuses on Maggie Brewster (Betty Hutton), a single thirty-something who fears her life is passing her by and, after attending a school reunion, realises she wants to marry and settle down. She meets a former lover, Fred Davis (Dana Andrews), at the reunion and the two rekindle their relationship. But Brewster eventually ends the relationship sensing Davis's unwillingness to commit and her desire to remain in her hometown. The weak story line was a key feature of reviews at the time. *Picturegoer* said that 'the film really isn't good enough' (*Spring Reunion* 1957: 18), an opinion shared by A.H. Weiler in the *New York Times*, who described the film as an 'unimaginative comedy-drama' that was nothing more than a 'standard and obvious romance' (1957: 16).

Another area where tensions between Bryna and UA emerged was in opportunities for product placement and other commercial tie-ups. Even though Bryna could negotiate and arrange such deals, it could not finalise them or enter into commercial agreements without UA's approval. During development of *Spring Reunion* Stan Margulies was being encouraged by Kirk Douglas and Jerry Bresler (who was producing the film) to commence a

merchandising campaign that would ultimately influence the writing of the script, and that would reflect the film's setting in a 'typical American town and with fairly representative middle class types as the principal characters' (Margulies 1956a). The campaign included tie-ups with homeware companies, as well as the likes of the Ford Motor Company to feature a car in the opening sequence, and with Bartley's clothing company for shirts to be worn by Dana Andrews. Margulies was particularly keen to secure an exploitation opportunity with Smirnoff and to feature their vodka in the school reunion scenes. The problem that Bryna faced, however, was that it needed the approval of UA for all merchandising opportunities. The major studios had an agreement in place that they would not make merchandising deals with any liquor company, but UA did not consider itself bound by this self-imposed restriction (Margulies 1956b). Margulies had approached the company in February 1956 to obtain approval, but by the end of April was still waiting for an answer and was growing increasingly frustrated.

The bigger problem that Bryna faced was the difficulty in securing commercial tie-ups, with companies reluctant to cooperate on a low-budget romantic comedy. UA initiated potential tie-ups with more divisive businesses, such as the tobacco company Old Gold Cigarettes. But Douglas intervened and refused the deal on the basis that *Spring Reunion* was not 'a hundred thousand dollar exploitation picture' (Margulies 1956c). Bryna wanted to ensure that *Spring Reunion* was promoted as a 'classy picture' (ibid). As Douglas made clear, 'the emphasis on Bryna has been, to date, on a high level of importance. I think it would demean the picture and the company to be tied in so closely with a cigarette promotion' (ibid.). Instead, the approach that Bryna favoured was to stress the quality of Bryna's productions and, once again, its innovative, challenging and offbeat stories. A plan put forward by Margulies involved promoting *Spring Reunion* as the next *Marty* (D. Mann, 1955), a low-budget romantic comedy about bachelorhood that had proven a commercial and critical

success. Given the similarities to the themes of *Spring Reunion*, Margulies devised a potential advertising slogan: 'If you liked *Marty*, you'll love Maggie' (Margulies 1956d). But UA did not pursue the idea, telling Margulies that 'the reaction to the trade campaign idea based on a successor to *Marty* found a very cold reception here' (Tamarin 1956).

UA and Bryna eventually agreed to centre the publicity on Betty Hutton, the film's star. Hutton had been one of Hollywood's most profitable leading actors in the late 1940s and early 1950s, particularly for her roles in the box office hits *Annie Get Your Gun* (Sidney, 1950) and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (De Mille, 1952). But she had been absent from cinema screens for five years in what was described by Bryna as a 'self-imposed sabbatical', but which in truth had been the result of a contractual dispute with Paramount (*Spring Reunion* Press Book 1957d). The aim was to emphasize the return of Betty Hutton in *Spring Reunion* as her 'comeback'. But Hutton had established herself as someone difficult to work with and her relationship with the press had broken down after outbursts about the way they had represented her career in the early 1950s (Levy 1956). This made attempts to secure favourable articles in leading magazines and newspapers problematic. There was increasing confusion over how to promote *Spring Reunion*, but the strategy to sell the film as Betty Hutton's return from retirement had little effect on its box office potential. The film could only be distributed as a second-feature in New York; it played as part of a double bill as a support for stronger features, with theatre owners feeling that it was too weak to play either as a top-feature or to have split-billing with a similar-budgeted picture. Bryna conceded that 'Betty Hutton just means nothing and it might as well not have had her name on it at all' and that she was 'no draw' (Beck 1957b). The film was a commercial disaster for Bryna and proved to be Betty Hutton's final screen appearance.

The battle for control of publicity between Bryna and UA became ever more tense on *The Careless Years*. The film in many respects echoed the storyline of *Spring Reunion*, but with a focus on teenagers. The two main characters decide to elope to Mexico before realising that they are far too young to marry, and agreeing to wait until they have matured. Edward Lewis had written the story for his first feature as a producer for Bryna; he would become a key partner in the production company, particularly in his collaboration with Douglas on *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960). *The Careless Years* did not excite UA. Max Youngstein, who had insisted on several script revisions, said that the final draft still needed a more forceful ending: 'The kids (the young lovers) come of age a little too suddenly and, in my opinion, too undramatically. In short, it still needs a stronger pay-off at the end' (Youngstein 1956). But even with Youngstein's suggested revisions implemented, UA had in effect given up on the film. In a frank admission to Sam Norton, lawyer to Kirk Douglas and Bryna Productions, Myer Beck – Bryna's distribution and sales representative at UA – stated: 'The job, sales wise, is to try to get UA to handle it [*The Careless Years*] in a little better fashion than as a second feature. They are not very hot on it and, as a matter of fact, the ad-pub department seems even less warm' (Beck 1957a).

Without Kirk Douglas's presence in a Bryna feature, UA seemed to put up a bureaucratic wall in regards to publicity. Requests for increased expenditure to promote the two young stars of the film were rebuffed, with Bryna instead being asked to find ways to 'effect some savings' in terms of publicity (Roth 1957). Meanwhile, Douglas wanted to promote the film in trade ads, and to brand it with a Roman numeral as the company's third feature, something they had done with both *The Indian Fighter* and *Spring Reunion*. The cost came to \$750 and, given the increasingly tight advertising budget for *The Careless Years*, UA had to approve the expenditure. In doing so, UA also wanted to scrutinise the trade ad, 'so that we have a chance to react and possibly contribute to the thinking involved' (Lewis 1956).

The growing interference and, at times, lack of cooperation from UA was causing consternation within Bryna. Sam Norton had clearly been in conversation with Douglas about the situation and wrote to Beck to call it 'very disturbing', outlining the frustration at Bryna:

What does one have to do to generate a little enthusiasm or excitement at United Artists? [...] What incentive is there for producers to make good pictures at a low price if nothing is accomplished in the selling of the pictures? Anyone can sell the pictures with Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster. You can tell United Artists for me that if they intend to keep customers like Kirk Douglas happy they had better do something about pictures like *Careless Years* (Norton 1957).

The frustrations outlined in the letter indicated the extent of the tension between UA and Bryna over the issue of publicity. Five months after its release, *The Careless Years* had grossed just \$106,687, with a negative cost of \$184,522 (Beck 1958).

UA was clearly not interested in overinvesting in the publicity of Bryna's 'B' pictures. At best, it wanted to sell them as genre pictures: comedies or action films. In contrast, Bryna wanted to emphasize their social themes. As a result, UA and Bryna found themselves working at cross-purposes in selling the 'B' pictures, an issue that did not improve when Bryna outlined its plans to develop an 'unusual Western picture. One that will get talked about because it has something to say' (Retchin 1957). Eventually released as *Ride Out For Revenge*, Bryna had initially wanted to call the film 'Begin With A Crime', but this was immediately vetoed by Youngstein, who said it was 'completely wrong for the project' (Youngstein 1957). The film had a moralistic message at its heart: two Indian chiefs approach a local town unarmed

aiming to seek peace. The local Sheriff agrees, but secretly condones the murder of the two Indians. One of the Sheriff's marshals is disgusted by this act of barbarism and takes sides with the Indians to oust the Sheriff from office.

Ride Out for Revenge can be seen as part of a cycle of Westerns and Civil War-era low-budget pictures released by UA in 1956 and 1957 that had at their centre themes of reconciliation. *War Drums* (Le Borg, 1957), for example, focused on the friendship between an Apache chief and a white settler and the personal conflict they faced when their two sides declared war. The film had overtly 'pro-Indian' messages to convey, with a similar ideological approach as that of *Ride Out For Revenge*, but both films and others like them (*Trooper Hook* [Marquis Warren, 1957], *Tomahawk Trail* [Selander, 1957], *Drango* [Bartlett and Bricken [1957]]) were promoted as action films and revenge Westerns, with no hint of their deeper themes. In a press release drafted by Bryna, *Ride Out For Revenge* was described as being set during the 'tragic hatreds of injustices of the Indian Wars of the late 1860s' and that it explored the hatred that existed between white settlers and Indian tribes (press release for *Ride Out For Revenge* no date). In contrast, UA had devised artwork for the film that excluded the themes of social injustice and reconciliation, instead claiming: '*Rideout* is a standout! All the Indian war excitement your screen can hold! A star-powered cast in a slashing outdoor action hit'. UA's and Bryna's approach to marketing these 'B' pictures could not have been further apart, with the latter potentially having unrealistic expectations of ad campaigns that stressed the moral dimensions of their B-films. In any case, UA was much more interested in developing Douglas's second 'A' picture, the historical epic *The Vikings*.

Selling Bryna's 'A' Pictures

In November 1957, UA announced that its focus moving forward would strictly be on 'A' productions, with an 'emphasis on importance in story material, stars, production values and other factors' and indicating that it intended to 'sidestep financing and distributing any project which falls below an unquestioned "A" category' ('United Artists No Hive...' 1957: 20). Bryna's *The Vikings* was indisputably an 'A' film, a fact that UA had repeatedly raised with journalists after signing a contract with Bryna in 1955. But UA's policy shift also indicates one reason why Bryna had struggled in promoting their 'B' pictures: UA was just not inclined towards the company's low-budget, experimental and challenging films. This was a point that Arthur Krim had stressed to Kirk Douglas in 1956 (Balio 1987: 157). But if the relationship between UA and Bryna over the publicity of their 'B' pictures had become strained, there was solid support for the promotion and exploitation of *The Vikings*, with UA approving a \$100,000 pre-production and production publicity budget (Margulies 1957).

Adapted from Edison Marshall's novel *The Viking* (1951), the film features Douglas in the starring role as a Viking prince who kidnaps a Saxon princess, played by Janet Leigh. He intends to marry the princess until a slave, played by Tony Curtis, rescues her. What follows is an all-out action story, as Douglas pursues Curtis and wages war in an attempt to recapture the princess. The film's budget, originally set at \$3.5 million, soon increased, with Douglas pledging various assets to UA, which funded the entire picture; in the process it became, at the time, the most expensive film financed by UA ('Kirk Douglas: Actor-Tycoon' 1958: 3). Therefore, there was an urgent need to ensure the film's success at the box office for both UA and Bryna, and for Douglas personally; he was not receiving a fee to appear in the film, but instead a 60 percent producer's share of the film's profit (ibid.).

In contrast to how Bryna's previous UA features had been promoted, *The Vikings* had a long-range and extensive publicity and exploitation campaign. As Bryna reflected, following a

meeting with UA marketing executives and Norwegian government officials (who were present as part of the plan to exploit the film's location shooting in Bergen, Norway), the aim was to develop a campaign 'on a size commensurate with *The Ten Commandments*' (Beck 1957c); the 1956 Cecil B. DeMille biblical epic had been one of the most expensive films in Hollywood history up to that point. Stan Margulies, in a campaign strategy document, argued that the company should 'do a Disney' on commercial tie-ups (Margulies n.d.). Bryna envisaged Revell model Viking ships, a Dell comic book, Viking costumes, colouring books and much more. Not all of these tie-ups were realised, but the collaboration between UA and Bryna demonstrated that they were both eager to exploit the historical spectacle of the film.

The setting – both geographically and historically – was perceived as the film's unique selling point, presenting to audiences what was considered a 'fresh pictorial subject. No one has ever made a film about the Vikings, not even the Scandinavian studios' (ibid.). While this was not strictly true – films about or featuring Vikings included the early sound feature *The Viking* (Neill, 1928), the B-movie *The Viking Women and the Sea Serpent* (Corman, 1958), and the swashbuckling adventure *Prince Valiant* (Hathaway, 1954) – Bryna's *The Vikings* was fresh in how it presented its subject, including being shot on location and going to extreme lengths of historical authenticity. Indeed, this was at the heart of the publicity for the film, as reflected in one press release:

A thousand years ago Europe cowered in fear of the Vikings, the ruthless warriors from Scandinavia. Sailing from the fjords of Norway [...] these Norse warriors attacked and enslaved foes all along the coast of the continent and in the British Isles. A dramatic slice of this historic violence inspired Kirk Douglas' \$4,000,000 Technirama-Technicolor spectacle, 'The Vikings' ('Viking Raid' 1958).

UA and Bryna were attempting to attract an audience through claims about an authentic representation of the past. This strategy was central to the way both producers and audiences engaged with historical subjects, with all involved, from production personnel through to cinemagoers, contributing to what Kathleen Coyne Kelly describes as ‘the pleasurable fiction that *The Vikings* is about medieval Norway and its inhabitants, and to the equally-pleasurable fiction that the cinema permits us to recover the past’ (Coyne Kelly 2011: 10). UA and Bryna agreed that one way to ‘recover the past’ was by sailing one of the three Viking ships which had been built for the film, to the New York premiere. Press releases for this publicity stunt emphasized the supposed historical authenticity of the prop, describing it as an ‘exact replica of one of 1,100 year old vessels discovered in recent years’ (‘Viking Vessel’ 1958).

The final element in the publicity for *The Vikings* relied on a degree of autonomy that was in stark contrast to Bryna’s ‘B’ pictures. Douglas and Bryna had been empowered on *The Vikings* in a way that they had previously not been and this allowed Douglas to position himself at the centre of the film’s production. This approach reflected UA’s change of focus to ‘A’ status pictures with big stars. While Douglas did not produce the film – that was a role undertaken by Jerry Bresler – press releases, newspaper articles, and trade journal articles portrayed Douglas as the film’s executive supervisor, placing him at the centre of the film’s authorial agency. Along with selling the spectacle of the film and its historical setting, Douglas was the third key ingredient of the film’s publicity strategy, both as a star *and* as an independent producer. The film was repeatedly referred to as Kirk Douglas’s *The Vikings*, while his contribution to the film’s financing was emphasized in profile pieces on Douglas, such as the one written by Donovan Pedelty: ‘When I was in Brittany with *The Vikings* unit, I watched a man lose 45,000 dollars a day. It was costing Kirk Douglas that much to keep his

unit standing about idle in the rain' (1957: 26). Meanwhile, *Variety* proclaimed Douglas as an 'actor-tycoon' in a bold headline in its 1 October 1958 issue, stating that *The Vikings* was a case study of how to produce a successful independent film and referring to Douglas as the 'filmmaker' responsible for it ('Kirk Douglas: Actor-Tycoon' 1958: 3). The article barely mentioned the film's director Richard Fleischer or its producer Jerry Bresler; they were demoted to the bottom of the column and placed inside brackets as part of the film's production information.

In UA's and Bryna's press releases, Douglas was given priority as the film's authorial agent, with one such release directly stating that Douglas had produced the film, with no mention of Jerry Bresler (press release, untitled 1958). This approach caused resentment within Bryna, due to the belief that Douglas was using the company to promote his own image; this was an accusation levelled by other producers Douglas had worked with, including James B. Harris, producer on the Stanley Kubrick directed *Paths of Glory* (1957) (Harris 1957). Disapproving of the publicity approach, Bresler resigned from Bryna and publicly decried the strategy adopted by UA, telling *Variety*: 'all the publicity and promotion issued in connection with "The Vikings" made it seem that Douglas had personally produced the picture' (Hollinger 1958: 3).

Despite Bresler's disquiet, publicity for *The Vikings* can be seen as serving the interests of both Douglas and UA. Even if Douglas had not directly produced the films in which he starred, he was marketed as having had a decisive creative role. Take Douglas's appearance in *The Devil's Disciple*, a co-production between Bryna and Burt Lancaster's company Hecht-Hill-Lancaster; Douglas was referred to in articles as the 'producing head' ('HHL-Bryna Production' 1958: 11) of Bryna, while both Douglas and Lancaster were described as 'the most successful actors-turned-producers in the business' (Bayne 1958: 10). The approach to

brand the stars as the producing heads of their respective production companies and films made sense in order to differentiate and sell their product. While a film solely marketed as a Bryna Production may not have meant much to a cinema audience (as in the case of the company's B-pictures), Kirk Douglas's *The Vikings* would almost undoubtedly have caught their attention. *Variety* ranked *The Vikings* as the fifth top grossing film of 1958, with domestic rentals of \$7 million, behind the likes of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (Lean, 1957) and *Peyton Place* (Robson, 1957) ('Top Grossers of 1958' 1959: 48). Perhaps so as to emphasise Douglas's own box-office appeal, and to build on the success of *The Vikings*, Bryna took out a one-page advert in the January 1959 issue of *Variety*. The design was stark. At the top it read, '1958. The Vikings'; the bottom of the page read, '1959. Spartacus'; and in the centre, Douglas had scrawled his signature. The advert made no mention of Bryna Productions, United Artists, or any other production company.

Conclusion

Whatever tensions there might have been between UA and Bryna over control of publicity, the contract between the two companies was a catalyst for Kirk Douglas to activate his dormant company. In the process, the late 1950s and early 1960s became the most fertile period of creativity in his career. And despite his claims that he was motivated purely by profit, a desire to produce films with a social message surely also encouraged him. This case study of Bryna's working relationship with UA in the late 1950s explores the spaces of autonomy that the latter was prepared to leave open to its independent producers in regards to publicity and exploitation.

While publicly UA may have declared that its independent producers had an unprecedented level of control over all aspects of business and creative decisions of the films they produced, this depended very much on UA's own attitude to the films in question. UA was

largely unwilling to allow Bryna to sell its low-budget 'B' pictures in the way that the production company wanted, resisting attempts to publicise them as challenging, innovative or liberal in their ideology. UA – which was fronting the costs of advertising – utilised its knowledge of both domestic and foreign markets, and its expertise of audience tastes, to promote the films as genre pictures. When it came to 'A' pictures, Bryna felt that UA was much more willing to cooperate and to incorporate its suggested publicity plans, above all else promoting Kirk Douglas as both the star *and* the man responsible for their production.

But if the company was not overly enthused by Bryna's 'B' pictures, why did UA agree to finance them in the first place? The risk for the distributor was minimal, as the contract with Bryna saw the 'B' pictures cross-collateralized with the 'A' pictures, incorporating any losses from the former into the latter. This meant that UA, with regards to the projects Bryna selected for its 'B' pictures, allowed them to experiment and explore social issues, even providing them with a sense of creative autonomy, but retaining control over publicity. At the same time, the B pictures – for which there was still a high demand in the late 1950s – ensured that UA had a supply of films ready to distribute, a key arrangement of its high volume business model that ensured it operated efficiently and covered distribution overheads (Balio 1987: 117-119).

When it came to the 'A' pictures there was a move to push Bryna towards particular projects that UA felt could perform well at the box office and which it could promote as spectacle films with a leading star in Douglas. Indeed, the early negotiations between Bryna and UA's Max Youngstein involved him vetoing a number of projects suggested for the 'A' pictures until they could settle on one with the greatest commercial potential.

Following the completion of the contract with UA, Douglas did approach the company about financing *Spartacus*, but UA turned him down on the basis of prior commitments (Balio 1987: 158). Bryna produced only two more films with UA in the following years: *Cast a Giant Shadow* (Shavelson, 1966), a co-production with John Wayne's Batjac Productions, and *The Final Countdown* (D. Taylor, 1980). What had begun as a promising creative partnership in 1955, ended with Douglas producing some of his most personal and best known films for other studios.

What this case study demonstrates is that there was a level of inflexibility at UA, one predicated on its own purpose as a distributor with the knowledge, personnel, and networks to develop appropriate publicity and distribution campaigns to maximise profits for both itself and its independent producers. These were the principles that underpinned the company and ultimately shaped its relationships with independent producers. However, the tensions between UA and Bryna indicate that some independent producers increasingly felt that creativity did not end with the production itself and that control over publicity and distribution could impact the course of the overall production process, even if they were making their films with UA's money. UA was arguably aware of this dynamic but still urged its producers to trust its knowledge of the market. As Arthur Krim reflected in a letter to Kirk Douglas, UA preferred to ensure that it had several profitable pictures behind it before they would gamble on more experimental features (Balio 1987: 157). The working relationship between Bryna and UA involved an ongoing tension over the limits of autonomy and creativity. By giving independent producers elements of control, UA had arguably opened up a Pandora's Box in Hollywood, one that would see producers and directors looking to stretch the boundaries of their own influence over the course of the next decade.

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