

**Streamlining the roadshow : the distribution and exhibition of "Gone with the Wind"**

HALL, Sheldon <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0950-7310>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/10189/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**Published version**

HALL, Sheldon (2010). Streamlining the roadshow : the distribution and exhibition of "Gone with the Wind". In: Film History Seminars, Institute of Historical Research, 28 January 2010. (Unpublished)

---

**Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Streamlining the Roadshow: The Distribution and Exhibition of *Gone with the Wind*

“Is my face Scarlett?” said the MGM salesman, as he started to discuss terms on *Gone With The Wind*.

“We showed him the road,” said the exhibitor, describing the incident later. “So they road-showed.”

(Demands for apologies from outraged film travellers will be dealt with in strict rotation.)<sup>1</sup>

David O. Selznick’s production of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is often taken to be the culmination of “classical” Hollywood in the 1930s, though in most respects it is an exception to all of its norms and standards. With a running time of 222 minutes (not including intermission) and a negative cost of over \$4 million, it was the longest and most expensive American film yet made.<sup>2</sup> It was adapted from the hottest literary property of the decade, Margaret Mitchell’s best-selling novel of the Old South. It had the largest amount of pre-release (and indeed pre-production) publicity accorded any film to date, and was therefore quite reasonably described as the picture most eagerly awaited by the public. And once exhibited, it quickly broke all records for box-office performance, setting new benchmarks for possible admissions and grosses. *Gone with the Wind* had certainly been expected to be a success; but the scale of that success took everyone, including its producer, by surprise.

Nevertheless, both Selznick and MGM (which had invested \$1,250,000 of the film’s budget and loaned its contract star Clark Gable in exchange for the distribution rights and 50 per cent of the profits) had made every attempt to

guarantee the film's profitability in advance and to make it an "event" (Selznick's term). The story of the production of *Gone with the Wind* has been told many times, perhaps more often than that of any other film.<sup>3</sup> What have less often been discussed are the distribution and exhibition methods used to bring it to audiences. They were not only significantly different from any preceding roadshow attraction; they effectively changed both the practice and the very definition of roadshowing, setting the pattern for big-picture releases from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s.

As a practice, *roadshowing* -- the touring of plays and shows -- was rooted in the legitimate theater and other forms of live entertainment. The itinerant exhibition of films in the 1890s and 1900s was an extension of this practice, one that continued on a small scale for many decades. But roadshowing on a large scale, in a manner reminiscent of the major repertory companies in the legitimate commercial theater, came to be used in the 1910s as a means of distributing and exhibiting early feature-length films and major attractions designated as "specials" or "superspecials". At a time when the film industry in the US was dominated by the production, distribution, and exhibition of programs of shorter films, when the seating capacity of most of the venues used for exhibiting films was limited, and when most programs lasted little more than an hour and were changed at least two or three times a week, the roadshowing of longer features in large theatrical venues for weeks and months rather than days was a means not only of showcasing expensive prestige productions, but also of building individualized publicity campaigns and attracting audiences willing and able to pay higher-than-average seat prices in numbers large enough to cover costs and generate profits. Many of the earliest films shown in this way in the United States were imported from Europe. Among the earliest were *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and

*Cabiria* (1914), Italian productions that broke new ground in terms of length, lavishness, prestige, and box-office earnings. In the United States, D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille sought to emulate films like these. Griffith produced and directed *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), DeMille, *Joan the Woman* (1916). All three were roadshown nationwide. As well as being the longest and most expensive American film to date, *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge box-office success. Exhibited in a legitimate theater on Broadway for a top ticket price of \$2 (when the standard cinema admission price was a nickel or two), it helped pave for the way for subsequent large-scale domestic productions shown on a similar basis.

At a time when most films were presented in continuous performances, without breaks between showings, and when tickets were rarely sold or reserved in advance, seats for roadshows were bookable, the films themselves were shown at specified times (usually twice a day) with at least one intermission, and if “silent,” as was of course nearly always the case until the late 1920s, accompanied by a specially composed score played by an orchestra. Roadshow runs of this kind continued for weeks, months, or sometimes years before versions of the films (often re-edited to shorten their running times) were released to regular movie theaters and shown in the usual manner at regular prices. Some of the films exhibited in this way, such as *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The Big Parade* (1925), and *Ben-Hur* (1925), earned record sums of money.

With the introduction of pre-recorded, synchronized sound at the end of the 1920s, the meaning of roadshowing began to change. It was no longer necessary for a live company comprising managers, a stage crew, and an orchestra to

accompany each print of a film “on the road” as it traveled from one city to the next. But the term, though separated from its literal origins, remained in use to describe those elements of legitimate theater presentation retained in the exhibition of certain pictures even in dedicated cinemas, such as reserved seats, separate performances, in some instances an orchestral overture played before the start of the film, an intermission, and the availability of lavishly illustrated souvenir program booklets. Raised prices, higher than for regular first-run exhibition, were still charged for such films and to encourage mass attendance party bookings were sought for the block sale of tickets. Extended engagements ran for as long as the box-office would stand, or even longer in the case of bookings which had been made for a fixed period of time for publicity purposes. Roadshowing a film in a large “pre-release” cinema, especially one on Broadway or in Los Angeles and other key cities, served to advertise it both to the general public and to other exhibitors prior to its general release at regular prices. Because of the greater investment in publicity and additional theater staff, roadshowing was inherently more risky than conventional presentation. The films exhibited on such a basis therefore had to be chosen carefully both for their prestige value and their audience appeal in order to justify their special status. In the 1930s these were rather more sporadic than in the silent era, but they included *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1935), *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and *Lost Horizon* (1937).

Although it had been widely expected that *Gone with the Wind* would be roadshown in the traditional manner, MGM -- stung by the poor domestic showing of its most recent roadshow pictures, *The Great Waltz* (1938) and *Marie Antoinette* (1938) -- instead wanted to put it into immediate general release in order to get a

quicker return on its investment. In a memo addressed (though not sent) to MGM Vice President Al Lichtman, Selznick strongly objected to the company's distribution plans, arguing that it would be "as wrong not to road show *Gone with the Wind* as it would have been not to road show *The Birth of Nation*:"

It is inconceivable that the American public, which was willing to pay road-show prices at that time, is not willing to pay them now. The failure, or the mild success, of dozens of other road shows is no criterion. There were dozens of road-show failures at the time of *Ben-Hur* and *The Big Parade*. Clearly the pictures did not warrant road showing.<sup>4</sup>

Selznick pointed out that, even if it were shown in continuous performances, the length of *Gone with the Wind* precluded more than three shows a day "unless the first performance is held for night watchmen," and that the probable "speed of revenue" of three daily performances rather than two "might be a few months' difference at the most." He even had to argue for the necessity of an intermission in what would be a four-hour show, as well as for separate performances and reserved seats (as seats could be stolen by latecomers if patrons were forced to make unscheduled visits to the lavatory).

To arrive at the most appropriate release strategy for the film, MGM instituted a public survey by distributing questionnaires at previews, asking patrons what performance times, ticket price scales and other arrangements they would find most suitable and acceptable.<sup>5</sup> Questions included the following:

- (1) Did you think the picture should be played?
  - with no intermission?
  - with two intermissions?

- with one intermission?

(2) What, for you, would be the most convenient time of day to start the picture, both for matinee and evening performances? In answering this question, please bear in mind that the picture with no intermission will be four hours long.

(3) Do you think the picture should be played with continuous performances all day, or only at specified times as is the case with a play?

(4) Would you prefer to buy reserved seats?

(5) What scale of admission prices do you think should be charged? And would you be prepared to pay a higher price if the producers went to the expense of having only two or three shows a day, with reserved seats?

(6) Will you come to see the picture again?

Rather than commit to a definite, uniform nationwide exhibition policy from the outset, MGM chose instead to treat the film's opening engagements as test runs, with several different policies operating simultaneously across the country. Ten theaters in seven cities were selected for this experiment following the world premiere in Atlanta, Georgia, on 15 December 1939. The policies at these venues, all of which charged increased admission prices, were as follows: two separate shows daily, all seats reserved (Astor, New York; Carthay Circle, Los Angeles; Colonial, Reading, Pa.); two separate shows daily, matinee seats unreserved, evening seats reserved (State, Boston); three continuous shows daily, no seats reserved (Loew's Grand, Atlanta; United Artists, Los Angeles; Orpheum, Boston;

Capitol, Cincinnati; Loew's, Harrisburg, Pa.); and three continuous shows daily, some loge seats reserved (Capitol, New York).<sup>6</sup>

From these early engagements a standard policy was evolved of two continuous matinee performances, without reserved seats, and a separate evening performance with a limited number of seats reserved. Ticket prices were set at a minimum of 75 cents for matinees and \$1.10 for evenings, with up to \$1.65 for "preferred" seats or up to \$2.20 for reserved seats (these were the top prices charged on Broadway at the Capitol and the Astor, respectively). According to Rudy Behlmer, "Reserved seating was optional, but MGM demanded that a thirty-minute lapse of time be provided between each showing."<sup>7</sup> Traditional roadshow engagements (twice-daily separate performances with all seats reserved) were usually offered only when the picture opened on concurrent runs at two or more theaters in a community, as with those in New York, Los Angeles, and Boston (and later in Detroit and Chicago). In such situations, one theater would play on "grind," the other as a roadshow, thus offering prospective patrons a choice. The price differential, by which theaters operating on a roadshow basis charged more than those on grind, was justified by the additional convenience to patrons of guaranteed seating and advance booking (up to eight weeks ahead in the case of the Astor).

Such an experimental approach was regarded by *Variety's* John C. Flinn as "more than a violation of precedent: it is a theatre-man's nightmare. It is also the riskiest piece of showmanship in memory, with little to win and much to lose." He pointed out that the film's length alone (the duration of an airplane flight from New York to Chicago) set a challenge for both exhibitors and audiences: "It will require more sitting through than the longest double bill program, with news, cartoon,



travelog and screeno combined. From the posterior angle it is a six-day bike race.”<sup>8</sup> Selznick himself felt that too many concessions had been made and that the standard admission prices, higher than the norm for regular engagements but lower than those usually charged for roadshows, undersold the picture and reduced its prestige value. As he wrote in his undelivered memo to Lichtman:

You will recall that you laughed at the incident I reported to you of the woman who said she had been saving her money to pay \$1.65 to see *Gone with the Wind*, and to pay \$1.10 per seat for the members of her family for “second-best seats,” but who, upon hearing that she would be able to buy the best seats, unreserved, for \$1.10, said that she certainly would not do this, and if that was to be the price of the best tickets, obviously the picture wasn’t what it was cracked up to be, and would soon be playing at lesser prices, and she would wait until it got to the neighborhood houses at the regular price. Since then, I have had occasion to cross-examine a number of other people in the middle-class and lower-middle-class brackets. The reaction has in each case been identical, and has, in addition, been one of great disappointment that an event which they had looked forward to for so long was evaporating ... I believe there are countless thousands of people who will be enraged at being gouged for advanced prices to stand in line, to take their chances at seeing the picture partially, to see the picture in discomfort -- but who would storm the box-offices to pay \$1.65 to be sure of a seat, and to see it under the proper circumstances.

Nevertheless, the “streamlined” roadshow policy used for *Gone with the Wind* proved enormously successful and established a new set of norms for subsequent films to follow.

If Selznick was unable to dictate distribution and exhibition policy, he was nonetheless determined to exercise some quality control over the standards of presentation in theaters. His company prepared a nine-page booklet for circulation to house managers (“the link between the producers and the public”), containing detailed instructions on how to present the picture “in the perfect form in which the public demands to see it.”<sup>9</sup> A personally signed memo from the producer began:

No time, effort, or money has been spared to make *Gone with the Wind* as perfect as possible. We have fully realized our obligation to the countless millions of readers of Miss Mitchell’s beloved work, and have gone to elaborate pains with every detail of production.

This picture represents the very finest obtainable in technical equipment, including a new, greatly improved Technicolor, and the use of many new devices designed to improve photography and sound effects.

But all of the time, money and effort, and all of the new devices, will have been in vain if we do not have the complete cooperation of the exhibitor, without whose showmanship and presentation abilities a perfect show is impossible.

Among the recommendations contained in the booklet was that “*no light, especially colored light, is projected onto the screen, screen masking or stage proscenium* during the showing of the picture” (italics in original), and ensuring that all house lights were fully extinguished so as not to “throw the color values of the

picture off balance.” Projectionists were instructed to check that projector sound and light levels were constant, to avoid shifts in volume or color temperature following reel changes, and to ensure that the machines themselves were kept spotlessly clean to avoid print damage. Ushers were to be “cautioned not to draw the aisle curtains, or open the aisle doors, any more often than absolutely necessary during the showing of the film,” to ensure that curtains and doors were properly closed before the picture start and not opened again until after the intermission and end titles had appeared, and to avoid unnecessary movements in the aisles or anything which might distract the audience’s attention from the screen. Souvenir programs were to be handed to patrons as they entered the auditorium, but not when they were seated. A staff rehearsal of the full show, to ensure smooth running of the performance, was suggested prior to opening the film to the public.

Perhaps most important were the instructions regarding the two-and-a-half-minute overture at the beginning of the first reel, the four-minute intermission music following the conclusion of the first part of the picture, the ninety-second overture prior to the second part, and the four-minute exit music following the end title. All these pieces of atmospheric music -- recorded on the film soundtrack over black leader and “designed to establish a mood for the enjoyment of the film,” as well as to obviate any choice of inappropriate music by theater management -- were to be played over closed curtains, with no light or other images projected on the screen.<sup>10</sup> The house lights were to be gradually dimmed during the overtures before the curtains parted for the picture start (following a seven-second drum roll), and lights were to be raised during the entr’acte and exit music only after the

curtains had fully closed. Exact timings for each piece allowed the operation of the screen curtains and house lights to be precisely synchronized:

Care should be exercised that a slow drawing of the curtains should not commence until "The End" is fully on the screen, as this title comes over a dramatically important pictorial effect. There is a cue mark 12 feet ahead of the Fade Out of the End title. The curtains should not start to close until 5 seconds after this mark has appeared on the screen.

*Gone with the Wind* was far from the first film to incorporate additional music in this way, but the care and attention it required of theaters to ensure excellence and uniformity of presentation set the standard for future roadshow pictures.

Exhibitors themselves often resented having admission prices dictated to them (a practice later declared illegal) and balked at MGM's 70 per cent rental demands, leading a number of non-affiliated theater chains in cities such as Chicago and Minneapolis to refuse to book the picture on first run.<sup>11</sup> This opened the way for independent exhibitors to step in and book it instead. For its first wave of release, the picture was exhibited "only in cities of 100,000 persons and up [of which there were 92 in the US], and in theaters seating at least 850."<sup>12</sup>

Advertisements announced that it would "never be played anywhere except at advanced prices -- at least until 1941." MGM charged exhibitors a rental of 70 per cent from the first dollar (i.e., *before* deduction of operating costs), but guaranteed them a profit of at least 10 per cent of the gross on the whole run: in the event of admissions falling short of expectations, the distributor would make up the difference.<sup>13</sup>

To speed up distribution, MGM again broke with precedent by permitting "nabes" (neighborhood theatres) to play the film concurrently with downtown

situations. For example, *Gone with the Wind* opened in Brooklyn, Newark, and Jersey City in early 1940, while the twin Broadway engagements were still in progress; normally they would have had to wait out at least one week's clearance following the termination of the Astor and Capitol runs. However, the distributor was keen to maintain the picture's momentum with as many simultaneous bookings as the market would stand. It was estimated that this policy would allow it to gross around \$500,000 a week. After only five weeks and 209 playdates, box-office estimates were revised upwards to \$1 million a week and an ultimate world rental of \$20 million was anticipated. First predictions had been for a mere \$13 million -- a sum which had almost been reached domestically by July 1940, when Selznick reported a rental to date of \$12,402,463, already a industry record.<sup>14</sup>

350 Technicolor prints had been struck at a cost of \$1,250 each for a total of \$437,500; MGM expected that wear and tear from long runs would require the entire inventory to be replaced.<sup>15</sup> *Variety* also reported wear and tear on theaters themselves: "Nervous breakdowns, enforced vacations for managers and other members of house staffs, broken ribs among ushers, heavy toll upon rest-rooms, complaints from cleaners and no end of relief for cops who have had to handle unprecedented crowds, lie in the wake of sustained engagements of 'Gone With the Wind.'"<sup>16</sup> Extended bookings led to other film releases being delayed or having to be diverted elsewhere. On Broadway, where the Capitol was Loew's regular pre-release house and the Astor was kept on long-term lease by MGM as a "run" house for special engagements, the studio's new pictures now went instead to other showcases such as Radio City Music Hall or the normally second-run Loew's State. But rather than cutting into the business for rival pictures, *Gone with the Wind* was claimed to have the opposite effect, boosting them by stimulating public

interest in movie-going generally.<sup>17</sup> The Capitol engagement was eventually cut short after twelve weeks (still a record long run for the theater) to free it up for new product, while the Astor run continued for a total of forty-four weeks, concurrent with neighborhood engagements around Greater New York. According to *Variety*, “Never in the history of the business has a picture continued on a roadshow basis after the same film has played first, second and third runs in the immediate territory.”<sup>18</sup>

Following the advanced-price playoff in 1940, the popular-price general release was announced for January 1941, and was preceded by a further set of eight test engagements to determine policy. MGM’s plan to book the film into many of the same theaters which had already played it first time around -- another break with tradition, according to which pictures usually played different venues on roadshow and general release -- was heralded by a duplicate premiere in Atlanta on the anniversary of its first public performance and a four-week return engagement at the New York Capitol, with the top ticket price now \$1.25. Nationally, admission prices were estimated to be around half those charged for the first release (i.e., an average 55 cents top) and MGM now booked *Gone with the Wind* on 50 per cent rental terms: still a hefty percentage, larger than normal even for a premium release. Unusually for the general distribution of a very lengthy attraction, the film was not shortened but remained intact at its full original running time.<sup>19</sup> Earnings from the pop-price engagements were expected to top \$4,000,000; Ronald Haver claimed that they reached \$9,700,000, with the total combined gross for both domestic releases coming in at around \$20 million, twice the previous highest *world* rental (for *Ben-Hur*) to date. The rest of the world -- or what was accessible of it -- contributed an additional \$5 million to \$10 million.<sup>20</sup>

Overseas, MGM had pursued an identical distribution policy but met with stiffer resistance in territories blighted by wartime restrictions. In Britain and the Dominions (Australia, Canada and South Africa), exhibitors' bodies and trade authorities strongly opposed the imposition of higher ticket prices and higher rental terms. The British Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA) called for a boycott, citing both its members' parlous financial position and the resentment advanced prices might cause among regular patrons. The technicians' union NATKE demanded a pay rise for its projectionist members if admission charges to the film were increased, and its general secretary, Tom O'Brien, advocated a government ban. The dispute caused such controversy that questions were raised in Parliament over the matter. The three large national circuits' refusal to book it at anything more than a 50 per cent rentals basis led to *Gone with the Wind* being offered to independent exhibitors and smaller chains, which were grateful for the opportunity. Even so, only thirteen engagements took place outside London in 1940 and wider release did not follow until 1942, when controversy continued to rage over steep percentage terms and ticket prices. Only on reissue in 1944 were admission prices reduced unilaterally, though they still remained higher than normal.<sup>21</sup>

*Gone with the Wind's* success can be gauged not just by its own epoch-making box-office figures but also by the extent to which later pictures took both the film and its marketing methods as their model. Having already sold the period costume drama *All This, and Heaven Too* (1940) as part of its 1939--40 program, Warner Bros. was not able to insist on special pricing arrangements, but it nonetheless encouraged exhibitors "to play the film ... in the manner that 'Gone' was exhibited." Evening tickets were recommended to be scaled from 75 cents to

\$1.10 and all showings restricted to single-feature bills; separate performances and reserved seats were not required except for the roadshow premiere engagement at Los Angeles' Carthay Circle.<sup>22</sup> Charles Chaplin's political satire *The Great Dictator* (1940) was distributed by United Artists in a pattern which exactly duplicated that of *Gone with the Wind*: 70 per cent rental terms with a 10 per cent profit guarantee, fixed minimum admission prices, and reserved seats only when two theaters played the film concurrently. Even the venues chosen for its Broadway launch were the same as those for *Gone with the Wind*, the Astor and the Capitol.<sup>23</sup> RKO's release of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) was planned for the same policy but, because of the press campaign launched against it by newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst (on whom the film's story was allegedly based) and the consequent reluctance of many theater chains to play it, the film received only a limited number of bookings. After several months' delay in opening the picture, a dual Broadway run was dropped in favor of a single roadshow engagement at the RKO Palace, usually a second-run house. But in Los Angeles *Kane* opened simultaneously on a reserved-seat basis at El Capitan, a legitimate theater opposite Grauman's Chinese on Hollywood Boulevard (this was its first film presentation), and on grind at the RKO Hillside (where it ran only a single week). Other roadshows were played in San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, and Philadelphia.<sup>24</sup>

None of these films was successful when played at advanced admissions. *The Great Dictator* opened strongly but drew criticism that Chaplin had turned against his regular fans by his insistence on high admission scales.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to its reputation as a flop, *Citizen Kane* performed extremely well at regular prices in many of those theaters that played it, but due to the Hearst campaign the film



received “only about 35 or 40% of normal bookings.”<sup>26</sup> As a roadshow, however, it was described as “one of the season’s worst.”<sup>27</sup> *Variety* reported the sage wisdom of the trade, that “Orson Welles is good, but he isn’t Rhett Butler.”<sup>28</sup>

Two particular aspects of what we might call the *Gone with the Wind* pattern continued to be incorporated into the industry on a longer-term basis. The practice of opening a major film in two theaters simultaneously, one on a reserved-seat basis, the other on grind (with the former always charging higher prices), was revived throughout the next decade with Paramount’s *For Whom The Bell Tolls* (1943), Fox’s *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947), RKO’s *Joan of Arc* (1948), MGM’s *Quo Vadis* (1951), Warners’ *The Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima* (1952), and United Artists’ *The North Star* (1943), *G.I. Joe* (1945), *Carnegie Hall* (1947), and *Limelight* (1952). Usually this occurred in only one or two key cities, normally New York and Los Angeles. In almost every case the grind run outlasted the roadshow engagement, though industry precedent suggested that the opposite should have been the case (round-the-clock performances using up patrons more rapidly than twice-daily shows). In several cases where the grind engagement closed first, the roadshow house subsequently switched policy to one of continuous shows at lower prices. All these suggested that the traditional roadshow as it had previously been known had outlived its usefulness; indeed its obsolescence was already apparent by the late 1930s. The above-named films were virtually the *only* traditional roadshows throughout this period (and limited, we repeat, to one or two key cities). The exceptions to this rule applied to a quite different type of picture than the big-budget, mass-market entertainments listed here and did not begin to appear until after the end of the war.<sup>29</sup>

A far more pervasive practice, for which *Gone with the Wind* was again largely responsible, was the selective raising of ticket prices for films exhibited on a grind basis. Though Selznick's picture was not the first to be presented in this way -- it was anticipated by, for example, *Les Miserables* (1935), *Anthony Adverse* (1936), *The Gorgeous Hussy* (1936), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), and *The Goldwyn Follies* (1938), albeit on a limited scale -- it was followed by such a large number of films adopting the advanced-price policy that its influence can scarcely be in doubt. In 1940 alone, they included *Arizona*, *Bitter Sweet*, *Boom Town*, *Brigham Young*, *Escape*, *Foreign Correspondent*, *New Moon*, *North West Mounted Police*, *Northwest Passage*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Pinocchio*, and *Strike Up the Band*.<sup>30</sup> There was considerable debate in the industry over the wisdom or otherwise of raising ticket prices for particular pictures without full-scale roadshowing. On the one hand, it was believed that the public might accept it if the films themselves were seen to merit the additional expense. Several of the aforementioned cases were "justified" by their high production costs, or by the high demand for the pictures concerned, or their prestige status. On the other hand, if advanced prices were seen as arbitrary and undeserved, audiences might very well turn away at the box-office, or express their resentment with fewer subsequent theater visits. They might even become sceptical about "ordinary" pictures whose prices were *not* raised, and which might therefore be bypassed as inferior attractions.<sup>31</sup> The Women's Institute of Audience Reactions conducted a survey of female attitudes towards advanced prices, whose findings were published early in 1941. Although 92.9 per cent of those polled preferred a fixed regular price for "the average program," 63.2 per cent said they would be willing to

pay a higher price “to see pictures similar to ‘Gone With the Wind.’” However, only 14.1 per cent were willing to pay extra for reserved seats.<sup>32</sup>

All of this failed to disguise the fact that the major distributors successfully asked exhibitors to increase prices because, in what was rapidly becoming a booming seller’s market, they could get away with it. From this point on, “roadshowing” came to mean little more than pre-release runs at advanced prices, usually with continuous performances and often in day-and-date bookings in multiple situations. With the exceptions noted above and those still to be discussed, from the late 1930s onwards the traditional roadshow policies of a single exclusive engagement per city or territory, advance booking of reserved seats, and twice-daily separate performances were increasingly marginalized or eliminated altogether.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> *Kine. Weekly*, 13 June 1940, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> The final negative cost of *Gone With The Wind* was variously reported as being between \$3,900,000 and \$4,250,000. According to Haver, p. 299, the actual total was \$4,085,790; according to Selznick, it was \$4,073,000 (*Variety*, 24 July 1940, p. 4). At either figure, it was an industry record to date.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the relevant chapters of Haver and Thomson, see for example Gavin Lambert, *GWTW: The Making of 'Gone With The Wind'* (Little, Brown: Boston and Toronto, 1973); Roland Flamini, *Scarlett, Rhett and a Cast of Thousands: The filming of 'Gone With The Wind'* (London: André Deutsch, 1976); Richard Harwell (ed.), *'Gone With The Wind' as Book and Film* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1983); Aljean Harmetz, *On the Road to Tara: The Making of 'Gone With The Wind'* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996); Alan David Vertrees, *Selznick's Vision: 'Gone With The Wind' and Hollywood Filmmaking* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Memo, 20 October 1939; in Behlmer (1989), pp. 223--6. The studio's decision not to roadshow *GWTW* had been reported in the trade press only two days before Selznick drafted this memo (*Variety*, 18 October 1939, p. 4).

<sup>5</sup> Sample questionnaires and responses were located in the Vertical Files Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles (hereinafter AMPAS).

<sup>6</sup> *Variety*, 29 November 1939, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Behlmer (1989), p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> *Variety*, 29 November 1939, p. 8. See also Thomas M. Pryor, 'Listen, *The Wind!*,' *New York Times*, 26 November 1939.

---

<sup>9</sup> A copy of the booklet is contained in the AMPAS files previously cited.

<sup>10</sup> Viewers who have only seen roadshow films in home video formats, which often include in-vision “Overture,” “Entr’acte” and “Exit Music” captions to explain their additional music, tend erroneously to assume that these captions were also part of the films’ theatrical presentation.

<sup>11</sup> *Variety*, 13 December 1939, p. 3; 6 March 1940, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 292.

<sup>13</sup> *Variety*, 27 December 1939, p. 4. The only reported instances of MGM having to reduce its share to make good on the 10% profit guarantee were in Canada.

These occurred mainly in the early weeks of runs when theater overheads were increased, or in the final weeks when business was beginning to fall off. Selznick estimated that the distributor’s share of the total domestic box-office gross to May 1940 was 66% (*Variety*, 10 April 1940, pp. 4, 16; 15 May 1940, p. 6).

<sup>14</sup> *Variety*, 10 January 1940, p. 4; 7 February 1940, p. 2; 24 July 1940, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Variety*, 28 February 1940, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Variety*, 3 April 1940, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Variety*, 10 January 1940, pp. 8, 20; 31 January 1940, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Variety*, 24 April 1940, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Variety*, 23 October 1940, p. 7; 13 November 1940, p. 8; 8 February 1941, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Haver, pp. 307, 329; *Variety*, 31 December 1941, p. 20; 18 August 1943, p. 5; 31 January 1945, p. 1. By 1956, after several further reissues, worldwide rentals totalled \$48,979,000 (Eddie Mannix Ledger, Howard Strickling Collection, AMPAS). By 1991, domestic rentals alone had reached \$79,375,077 (*Variety*, 6 May 1991, p. 100).

---

<sup>21</sup> The controversy over the film's British release is discussed in Allen Eyles, 'When Exhibitors Saw *Scarlett*: The War Over *Gone With The Wind*,' *Picture House*, no. 27, 2002, pp. 23--32. See also *Variety*, 22 May 1940, p. 13; 5 June 1940, p. 12; 26 June 1940, p. 13; 17 July 1940, p. 7; 19 February 1941, p. 4; 29 April 1942, p. 15. In the event, many cinemas accepted MGM's terms and enjoyed capacity business, but the battle over *Gone With The Wind* and a similar dispute over Paramount's *For Whom The Bell Tolls* set precedents which other distributors were reluctant to follow. Hence, British roadshows planned for such films as *North West Mounted Police*, *The Great Dictator*, *Fantasia*, and *The Song of Bernadette* were, except for their premiere runs in London's West End, dropped in favor of conventional general releases.

<sup>22</sup> *Variety*, 5 June 1940, pp. 6, 20. *All This, and Heaven Too*, adapted from another lengthy historical best-seller, was considered for release in two parts because its running time initially came close to that of *Gone With The Wind*. It was instead, with the help of the book's author, Rachel Field, cut to 140 minutes and released as a single feature (*Variety*, 22 May 1940, p. 8).

<sup>23</sup> *Variety*, 14 August 1940, pp. 1, 47; 2 October 1940, p. 6; 9 October 1940, p. 7; 16 October 1940, pp. 4, 29; 30 October 1940, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Variety*, 15 January 1941, pp. 1, 55; 22 January 1941, pp. 3, 63; 5 February 1941, pp. 4, 18; 19 February 1941, pp. 2, 18; 26 February 1941, p. 5; 5 March 1941, pp. 3, 63; 12 March 1941, p. 6; 19 March 1941, p. 7; 2 April 1941, pp. 2, 20; 9 April 1941, p. 6; 16 April 1941, pp. 3, 52; 23 April 1941, p. 7; 7 May 1941, pp. 6, 8; 3 September 1941, p. 3. Several theater chains, including Fox-West Coast, bought *Citizen Kane* only to shelve it rather than invite Hearst's wrath. When

---

Warner Bros. refused to show the film in Philadelphia, RKO leased a Warner theatre, the Aldine, to roadshow it (*Variety*, 14 February 1945, p. 7).

<sup>25</sup> *Variety*, 13 November 1940, p. 4; 20 November 1940, p. 15; 4 December 1940, pp. 5, 63; 5 February 1941, p. 6; 21 May 1941, p. 1; 3 September 1941, p. 11; 17 September 1941, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Variety*, 21 October 1942, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Variety*, 28 May 1941, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Variety*, 14 May 1941, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to those discussed in the main text, the following films each played at least one true roadshow engagement: *The Blue Bird* (1940), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *The Yearling* (1946), *The Barber of Seville* (1947), and *The Time of Your Life* (1948).

<sup>30</sup> *Variety*, 21 August 1940, pp. 5, 27. It is no coincidence that most of the films listed were released by MGM, whose sales chief William F. Rodgers commented: "Special handling of high-budget pictures ... is the only way to overcome the shortage of foreign returns" (*Variety*, 25 September 1940, pp. 5, 12). In fact, MGM's foreign revenues were consistently the strongest of all the majors'.

<sup>31</sup> *Variety*, 8 May 1940, pp. 5, 18; 28 August 1940, pp. 5, 20; 4 December 1940, p. 7; 29 July 1942, p. 5; 16 September 1942, p. 7; 21 October 1942, pp. 5, 22; 26 April 1944, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Variety*, 15 January 1941, p. 5.