Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival

Moonlight and Magnolias
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Ron Hutchinson—A Celebration
By David G. Anderson

It is not difficult to discover personal characteristics of great playwrights scattered liberally among the characters they create within the scope of their works. So it is with Ron Hutchinson. This autobiographical aspect is not as easily recognized in the specifics of his plays, but in the underlying themes that are unmistakably his life. Early in his career, there was a high concentration of what Hutchinson himself calls the “Irish Experience” viewed from outside Ireland. Having lived in Southern California for the past eighteen years, his horizons have broadened and so have his Hollywood enlightenments.

Hutchinson was born in 1947 near Lisburn, Northern Ireland. He moved with his family to Coventry where he attended school. After leaving school, he had varied experiences ranging from gutting fish, working as a clerk in the Department of Defense, and investigating claims for the British Department of Health.

An examination of his Irish experience reveals, “The playwright, Ruari, in The Irish Play, declares that he is ‘trying to understand my country . . . my countrymen . . . myself.’ Hutchinson said . . . of his most successful play, Rat in the Skull, ‘I wanted to write this play to sort out my personal reactions to what was going on in Ireland. . . . You find out who you are in the process.’ This certainly feels like a work imperative. For the first time, Hutchinson’s abrasive comic dialogue and his preoccupation with performance are concentrated into a sustained scrutiny of the self-awareness and self-understanding catalyzed within an Irishman by his presence in England” (“Ron Hutchinson,” Contemporary Dramatists, 6th ed., St James Press.) In a 1992 interview, he further confessed, “I don’t write about Ireland because I have a political agenda. I don’t believe that I have . . . the solution . . . No . . . I feel I was expelled from paradise when I was a child . . . that’s why I write with passionate feelings and rage” (Dictionary of Literary Biography: Ron Hutchinson, p. 1).

Already an acclaimed British playwright, Hutchinson also has become a prolific screenwriter and “hired gun” script doctor. He has written literally dozens of stage plays which include The Irish Play, Flight, and his self proclaimed best drama, Rat in the Skull. Among his screen plays are Emmy Award-winning Murders Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story, The Burning Season, The Josephine Baker Story, Fatherland, The Tuskegee Airman, Traffic (nominated for three Emmys in 2004), The Ten Commandments, and Marco Polo.

In navigating the prickly Hollywood landscape, Hutchinson has gained precious knowledge through twenty-five years of collective experiences. When asked during an exclusive telephone interview with the Utah Shakespearean Festival, if there was a specific horror story that precipitated the writing of Moonlight and Magnolias, he laughed and remarked, “Not really, Hollywood has been good to me. Is there an abundance of crazy, driven, slightly off kilter people out here? Yes, and they all want to leave their indelible imprint on the precious celluloid.”

“The inspiration for ‘Moonlight’ came when I was visiting my father in England. I was reading Daily, Daily, the autobiography of Ben Hecht’s week rewriting Gone with the Wind, and literally from one footnote to another, it struck me, wow—this is classical farce. Can you imagine? All the elements are there. Three high-powered individuals lock themselves in a room existing on peanuts and bananas, and they are ever mindful that the clock is ticking, in a total pressure cooker situation.”
There was no stretch of the imagination for Hutchinson to identify with Hecht. “I’ve been all around the world in closed hotel rooms from Libya, to Morocco, to Mexico hammering out new scripts with ulcer ridden, catatonic producers ever present. The most memorable was a few years back when they flew me to the Kalahari Desert in Africa to assist with Flight of the Phoenix. The pressure is immense, there is craziness all around, but somehow you hammer it out. I enjoy the challenge and fun of it.”

“Moonlight and Magnolias,” he confesses, “was really more of a celebration to correct the image of film’s golden age writers, directors, and producers than an indictment of Hollywood. Though Hecht is the voice in the play, the hero is the producer David Selznick. Too often today, the producer’s image is that of the sleazy, behind the scene guy, who rakes in the money. Selznick had everything on the line: his fortune, reputation, and his marriage. The producers of yesteryear are the ones upon which the industry was built. I’ve had the great fortune to work with some outstanding producers who aren’t afraid to make the tough decisions.”

So much of the humor in the play is driven by the tension between Fleming and Hecht. When asked if there was a director he had worked with in the fashion of Fleming, Hutchinson laughed again, “Actually, I did have a person in mind in the casting. Fleming is a lost director of the golden age, a man’s man, a real tough guy. I had the great opportunity to work with John Frankenheimer on several occasions. John was six-feet-five-inches tall and full of aggressive energy. To John, directing was a full contact sport. Once again, it was my intent to shed today’s image of the director who has a scraggly beard, a backwards baseball cap, and a shaggy green belt.”

Frustrated by today’s film industry, Hutchinson lamented, “The people in the industry are way too worried about the costuming, scenery, casting, and staging. They will have all this in place and then realize, hey—we have to do something with the script. This mess is total garbage. Unfortunately, the script has become a complete after-thought, and there are millions of dollars at stake.”

Greatly affected by the recent screenwriter’s guild strike, Hutchinson managed to remain busy. “I teach a class every Friday at the American Institute of Film on screen writing. The problem is—does the world really need another 20,000 screen writers? Fortunately, I also have my theatre work, and, last but not least, my British passport! I spent all of January in Dublin. I’m currently working on a murder story in Ireland for the SciFi network, and on a play about an intriguing Iraqi soldier.”

“Comedy is much more difficult than drama,” Hutchinson confides. “You have to deliver. It’s like basketball; either you score or you don’t. It’s tough, especially if you have a drama-driven background.”

Fortunately for us, Ron Hutchinson has led a life full of drama and comedy. He’s been able to effectively translate that to stage and screen leaving us as he put it, “A celebration, it doesn’t matter how nuts things get. It’s a matter of surviving it, but you can’t take it too seriously.”
Synopsis

Legendary Hollywood producer David O. Selznick has a problem. He has just fired the director of *Gone with the Wind* and the script is on its umpteenth version. He desperately needs a new director and writer—immediately. However, the writer he wants, Ben Hecht, has never read the novel. Selznick gives him a brief synopsis of the story and offers him $15,000 to write a revised screenplay by the end of the week.

Selznick also calls in director Victor Fleming, pulling him from finishing *The Wizard of Oz* to be the new director of *Gone with the Wind*. Hecht is still not sold on the success of the storyline, but Selznick believes in this movie, so much so that he locks the three of them in his office for five days, with bananas and peanuts as their only food, to pull together a new script.

Work begins. Selznick and Fleming attempt to act out all the characters in the novel while Hecht types. Early in the week, Hecht and Fleming constantly clash. By day three, fatigue, hunger and sarcasm prevail. Tempers flare. There’s even an attempt to escape from the office—if only for just a shower and a meal.

By the end of the week, Selznick asks, “Is there anything wrong with getting the job done, no matter what it takes?” Completing this job may take everything these men have to give! Take a fun, farcical look at the behind-the-scene birth of one of the most beloved films of all time.
The Characters

**Ben Hecht:** As a Hollywood screenwriter and playwright, Hecht is offered $15,000 by producer David O. Selznick to, in five days time, rewrite the screenplay for *Gone with the Wind*, the filming of which has come to a complete halt. The problem is that Hecht hasn’t read the novel, and after hearing a quick synopsis, he thinks the film is doomed to failure. He is an ex-journalist from Chicago and is very committed to pro-Jewish causes. He also butts heads with the newly appointed director Victor Fleming more than once during the five-day re-write, as he isn’t shy to share his cynicism and sarcasm.

**Victor Fleming:** A Hollywood director who is pulled from directing *The Wizard of Oz*, Fleming is to take over *Gone with the Wind*. His other films have been mostly action films, but he says “if you can write it, I can shoot it.” He and Selznick frantically act out all the characters in *Gone with the Wind* for Hecht, who types as they role-play.

**David O. Selznick:** A renowned Hollywood producer, Selznick confines Hecht, Fleming, and himself in his office for five days, subsisting on only bananas and peanuts, until a new screenplay is complete. He is the son-in-law of legendary film producer Louis B. Mayer of MGM fame, and throughout the play suffers from occasional catatonic stupors.

**Miss Poppenghul:** The long-suffering assistant of Mr. Selznick, Miss Poppenghul is constantly on-call and dutifully fulfills each request made of her during the men’s five-day confinement.
There is no business like show business, and nothing proves it quite like Moonlight and Magnolias. The play, an “if-these-walls-could-talk” comedy by Ron Hutchison, takes its audience behind the scenes of Gone with the Wind to show how three entertainment titans jerry-built one of the biggest movies in history. The three principle contributors bring different attitudes and ambitions to the process, using the movie’s production as a vehicle for exploring the entertainment industry, the politics of race, and the demands of artistic creativity. In the end, whether the film’s subsequent success is deserved or not is left for the audience to decide.

There is no question that Gone with the Wind was huge. Adapted from Margaret Mitchell’s novel, the movie opened in 1939 and was an immediate box office success. Its initial run lasted more than two years, during which an estimated 25 million people saw it; since then, the audience has grown through subsequent releases, television broadcasts and worldwide video distribution. At the time, it was nominated for fifteen Academy Awards and won ten, including best picture, best actress, and best director; today, it is widely considered one of the most popular American movies, and was named number four on the American Film Institute’s list of the top 100 films of all time.

But the road to success came with big problems and tremendous controversy. Producer David O. Selznick purchased the film rights in 1936 and then spent three years trying to get the movie made. No one thought the movie was a good idea. Selznick famously spent two years trying to cast the film’s iconic heroine, and is said to have auditioned every major movie star of the day before choosing Vivien Leigh to play Scarlett O’Hara. Principle photography began in January 1939 without a completed screenplay, and just three weeks into the production, Selznick suddenly fired the director, George Cukor, without explanation.

It’s at this point that Moonlight and Magnolias takes up the story. The production is at a standstill; desperate to save it, Selznick enlists the aid of his go-to men: Ben Hecht, a Chicago newspaperman turned screenwriter who has made a name for himself as a “script doctor,” fixing or finishing screenplays started by others; and Victor Fleming, the legendary Hollywood director who, at the time, was busy trying to complete The Wizard of Oz. Selznick hires Fleming to take over as director, and he offers Hecht $15,000 to take the latest version of the script and turn it into something he can use.

Unfortunately, Hecht has never read more than the first page of the book, and all he knows about the story is that it’s set in the South, has slaves, and involves the Civil War. Hecht thinks the movie is a terrible idea, and repeatedly reminds Selznick what a failure it’s going to be. “No Civil War movie has ever made a dime,” he says early on, and later, “I don’t know whether this is a very good bad book or a very bad good book, . . . but I do know you’ll never get a movie out of it.”

To prove him wrong, and to give him an idea of what to write, Selznick locks the three of them in his office for five days and proceeds, with the help of Fleming, to act out the entire story for Hecht while he types. That is the conceit of Moonlight and Magnolias, and it is from this that the play draws most of its comedy. As the days pass, the three men become tired and begin taking their frustrations out on each other; to keep the animals in his circus going, Selznick orders large quantities of bananas and peanuts. “They’re brain food,” he explains.

As a person, Selznick was obsessive and meddlesome. As a character, Selznick embodies...
the entertainment business and sees himself as the engine that drives Hollywood. “In the beginning was The Deal,” he says. “I pay you to write it the way I want it written and somebody like Fleming to direct it the way I see it. That’s called collaboration.”

Selznick makes movies to make money, and he knows this movie must be a success. “I need this, guys. I need it. . . . Give me a hit, fellas,” he pleads. At first glance, Selznick’s view of his profession seems rather unglamorous, but then he suddenly admits a reverence for the magic of movie-making. “What’s a movie?” he asks. “Specks of light stuck to a strip of celluloid—[an] authentic miracle. A series of moments frozen in time by the only time machine ever invented.”

Hecht, on the other hand, represents the industry as a vehicle for social change. At the time *Gone with the Wind* was being produced, Hitler had risen to power; as a Jew, Hecht was actively involved with groups like Jewish Relief, which raised money to help Jewish people flee Europe. In *Moonlight and Magnolias*, Hecht sees the tale of slavery and racial discrimination as an opportunity to tell his own story. He reminds Selznick that, as a Jew, he isn’t allowed to join certain clubs or live in certain neighborhoods; when Selznick asks him to leave his politics out of his movie, Hecht says, “Why don’t you take a real gamble and make a movie that could make America look its ugly face in the mirror?”

Selznick, of course, just wants to make a movie, and vows to remain faithful to the original story because that’s what he believes the audience wants. When Selznick asks him to write a scene in which Scarlett slaps a slave girl, Hecht refuses on principle. “If there’s anybody who can understand the legacy of prejudice it’s us Jews,” he says.

Meanwhile, Fleming embodies the industry as art, and, interestingly, contributes the least to the creative process, as if Hutchinson is saying that artistic creativity is the least important element in filmmaking. As the play progresses, we see flashes of the director envisioning shots and angles, but most of the character’s time on stage is spent defending his contribution. Fleming clearly sees actors, writers and producers as obstacles to his creativity; when Hecht claims movies start with the writing, Fleming says nothing gets said until he shouts action. “Are you going to sit up . . . because your actors refuse to come to work because they don’t like the color of their shower curtains? . . . even before the shooting starts somebody’s nagging at me—drop this scene, drop that scene, do you really need so many extras?”

In the end, Selznick’s viewpoint seems to win as he successfully makes the movie he wants. As commentary, Hutchinson seems to say that no matter the social impact or artistic value of a film, it’s really the money that counts. And yet, there is a moment when Selznick realizes there’s only so much he can do. “You know who has the power . . . the real power?” he asks the others. “All those Joe Blows and Jane Does . . . all those little people who have nothing in common except they go to the movies . . . every ticket is a vote for my movie or a vote against it. . . . We don’t amount to anything if they give us the thumb down.” As the play closes, Selznick is obviously pleased with the outcome, but he knows that despite his efforts, the movie’s success is in the audience’s hands.