

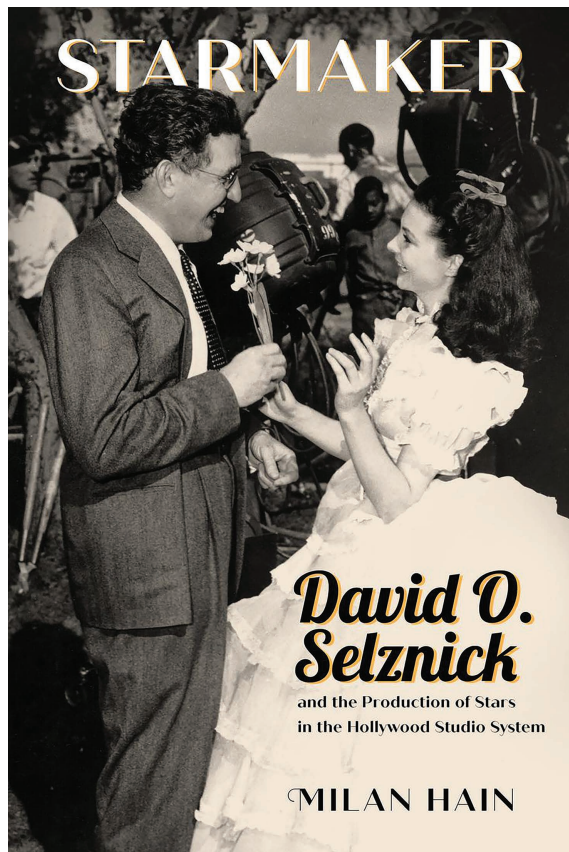
## Book Review:

# Hain, Milan. *Starmaker: David O. Selznick and the Production of Stars in the Hollywood Studio System* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2023)

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In the 1940s, acclaimed American independent film producer David O. Selznick not only created prestigious films but also enhanced his company's profits and reputation through a deliberate strategy of developing his performers' movie star identities and careers.

Milan Hain reconsiders Selznick's operations during his period of greatest success through an alternative lens, expanding the media industry's discussion of stardom as a key economic tool and product of structured business practices during the Hollywood studio system era. While his name looms large in film history, nevertheless, Selznick's cinematic output from the late 1930s through the 1940s was small (chiefly *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Intermezzo* (1940), *Rebecca* (1940), and at mid-decade *Since You Went Away* (1944), and *Duel in the Sun* (1946)). Hain argues that the producer was actually more active during the long periods of project development in discovering young and lesser-known actresses and actors. Bringing them to his studio from European film studios and the New York theater,

Selznick developed some into top stars and others into respected mid-level players. He signed them to long-term contracts, invested money and his staff's attention to grooming and training them, crafting publicity campaigns around them, launching them in one of his films, then making substantial sums by loaning out their services to perform in films produced by other studios (often the result of dealmaking to package performers and adaptation projects he had located). The producer paid his performers their contractual amounts while profiting from the higher fees that other studios paid him for the actors' services.

After recounting Selznick's production background with RKO and MGM in the 1930s in the introduction (when he worked with established stars borrowed for his films), across six chapters Hain focuses on case studies of the various ways Selznick subsequently managed the careers of the actors he gathered under his umbrella. Vivien Leigh and Joan Fontaine were his most successful stars; they receive only glancing mention here, as their careers have been documented elsewhere. Instead, Hain looks deeply into Selznick's business papers to examine his systematic star-making practices. Chapter one examines how he constructed the star persona of Swedish import, actress Ingrid Bergman, as natural and un-affected by the glamorous identity then prominent among Hollywood female stars. Chapter two charts how Selznick worked to establish an aura of prestige around his female stars (Bergman, Dorothy McGuire, and Jennifer Jones) when he loaned their services out to other studios. Chapter three looks at Selznick's efforts to promote his stable of male stars (Alan Marshal, Gene Kelly, Gregory Peck, and Joseph Cotton), a project made more challenging by the demands of World War II on participation in the military for both British and American actors. Chapter four traces the story of how Selznick attempted to refashion child star Shirley Temple as a teenage celebrity persona in the second half of the 1940s. Chapter five shows how Selznick looked to European film industries for new star-material finds to promote in the post-war era, with only moderate success amidst the decline of his production efforts by 1950. The sixth chapter focuses on how Selznick shaped the star persona of his most personally meaningful actor find, Jennifer Jones, during her rise to prominence.

The book studies stars as a phenomenon of production rather than consumption, as is more typical in star studies. Hain discusses industrial strategies, the company's careful attention to publicity, marketing, and advertising. In Selznick's voluminous memos, reports from his staff, and the details of contracts, Hain finds information about strategies that circulated behind the scenes of negotiation to place actors in other studios' films. Hain writes of the stars as capital investments whose contracts earned him not only cash profits from loan-outs but also indirect earnings from the intangible glamor quality, prestige, and publicity that the actors brought to his studio.

Hain examines not only Selznick's own personal efforts but also the work of numerous members of his company (many of them women) who played important roles in the star-making process—talent scouts, script readers, studio secretaries and assistants, makeup professionals, publicists, cinematographers, and lighting technicians.

Of particular note is the fascinating archival evidence Hain uses in the chapter on Bergman to demonstrate how Selznick and his cinematographers, scriptwriters, director, and publicists carefully labored to photograph and present Bergman as an inherently "natural" young star, untouched by artificial makeup or glamorizing photography and publicity buildup. Hain uncovers details in shooting scripts and Selznick memos to his production team, showing

exactly how the actress was lit, costumed, groomed, and presented. It was a carefully constructed “naturalness.”

The chapter on Selznick’s efforts to reconfigure child star Shirley Temple in the newly formed category of teenage movie star examines an understudied moment in Temple’s career as well as 1940s popular culture. Voted the number one most popular star in America (and much of the world) in the Depression years, Shirley Temple’s career had ended in 1940 as she aged out of child roles. She was curtly dismissed by the 20th Century Fox studio, for whom she had earned so much money. Selznick alone saw the opportunity to capitalize on Temple’s lasting fame by refashioning her as a teenage star like Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, and Deanna Durbin. Adolescents were increasingly newsworthy not only as bobbysoxers screaming for Frank Sinatra but also as an expanding consumer market for clothing, music, and movie tickets. Selznick changed Temple’s wardrobe and hairstyle and successfully showcased her in a supporting role as a 15-year-old in *Since You Went Away*. Finding other suitable roles that navigated the narrow channel between maturity and sexual innocence was made more challenging by Temple’s marriage at 16, motherhood at 18, and Mrs. Temple’s rigid beliefs in appropriate roles for the famous star. Nevertheless, Selznick was delighted by his actress’ pregnancy and strategized how to put the unborn child under a long-term contract. After some minor successes but more flops, and scandalous divorce publicity, Temple retired. Hain argues that while Selznick’s efforts were only somewhat successful, Temple’s contract had earned him a substantial amount of money on loan-outs, just when his company needed it the most in the late 1940s.

Like many other facets of the Hollywood film industry impacted by the decline of box office revenue after the end of World War II, Selznick’s operations declined in the latter half of the 1940s, after *Duel in the Sun*. His top stars of 1940 had left him, and their replacements did not replicate their success. With the Paramount Decree and studios cutting so many of their long-term contract stars loose, Selznick no longer had rare, valuable commodities to deal with.

Hain’s study tells Selznick’s side of the story. It will be useful to connect this to the point of view of the performers and to learn more about how they negotiated or agreed or pushed back against the company’s efforts to shape their bodies, reputation, publicity, and choose loan-out roles. Other accounts show how and why stars like Vivien Leigh, Joan Fontaine, and Ingrid Bergman ended their associations with him. It would also be interesting to explore how Selznick’s efforts at star management possibly interacted with or paralleled the efforts of his brother Myron O. Selznick, pioneering actors’ agent.

This excellent, detailed study encourages us to think about the actions of producers and studios to be creative star crafters in Hollywood history. Hain’s research reminds us that stardom did not come naturally or magically to an individual but was the product of a great deal of work, from makeup and photography to publicity to the choice of film roles, involving “the skills, expertise and labor of dozens of film professionals” (xii) who, like the studio itself, rarely get credited for their input in creating star images.

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