

The English Theatre of Hamburg
Established 1976

presents

MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS

a Comedy

by Ron Hutchinson

Premiere on 25 April, 2019

Preview Performances on 22, 23 and 24 April

Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours;
Matinee Performances at 11.30 Hours on Tuesdays
and Fridays Beginning 30 April 2019

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Dear English Teachers, Students and Friends,

The English Theatre of Hamburg will premiere **MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS** by Ron Hutchinson on 25 April, 2019, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 22, 23 and 24 April. Bookings for this delightful comedy have already started. See the cover of this study guide for ticket information. The text of the play may be obtained at theatre@samuelfrench-london.co.uk or www.amazon.com. Teachers who are interested in being invited to a dress rehearsal of the play on 21 April, 2019 should write to marketing@englishtheatre.de.
THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

About the Playwright

Ron Hutchinson was born in Ireland in 1947, but he was raised and educated in Coventry, England. He began his career in the UK, but by the late 1980s he was working in American television. A prolific writer, he is known for many of his screenplays as well as radio dramas. He has also produced some twenty stage plays, among them **MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS** which was first performed at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. It was nominated for the 2004 Joseph Jefferson Award for New Work. In an interview with David G. Anderson of The Utah Shakespeare Festival, Hutchinson said, “The inspiration for **MOONLIGHT** came when...I was reading...the autobiography of Ben Hecht’s exhausting week of rewriting **GONE WITH THE WIND**, and...it struck me, wow—this is classical farce. 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.” Hutchinson added that he drew from his own experience as a screen writer: “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 pressure is immense, there is craziness all around, but somehow you hammer it out. I enjoy the challenge and fun of it.” He sees **MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS** as “a celebration...of film’s golden age of writers, directors, and producers.” Some of Ron Hutchinson’s other plays include **THE IRISH PLAY** (1980), **RAT IN THE SKULL** (1984), **PYGMIES IN THE RUINS** (1991), **BEAU BRUMMELL** (2001), **TOPLESS MUM IN DEAD HERO SHOCKER!!** (2007) and **DEAD ON HER FEET** (2012). The many television and movie screenplays he has written add to this impressive body of work. He now lives in Los Angeles, California with his second wife and adopted daughter.

About the Play

Hollywood, 1939. The iconic movie **GONE WITH THE WIND** (based on Margaret Mitchell’s best-selling novel by the same name) is in full production. But producer David O. Selznick hates the script despite the fact that fourteen different writers, including literary giants like F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Van Druten, have been called in to revise it. Selznick also hates the direction. After three weeks of filming he fires the screenwriter and director, and production stops at a cost to Selznick of many thousands of dollars a day. He calls top screenwriter Ben Hecht and the famous director Victor Fleming into his office and locks the door, thereby imprisoning the talented men. He intends to prevail upon them to come up with a great screenplay that will make the movie one of the best the world has ever seen. He asks his secretary, Miss Poppenghul, to not put any phone calls through to his office, and he tells her to provide them with lots of peanuts and bananas which he calls brain food. They eat nothing else for five days and drink only water. The door to the toilet is the only other door in the room. Selznick promises to pay them exorbitant amounts of money if they do what he wants. With conflicting opinions at every turn, and under enormous pressure, the men resort to acting out scenes from the novel themselves in order to create the dialogue for the new script. They bicker and shout, hurl peanuts, banana peels and insults at each other. At one point Selznick becomes catatonic but he snaps out of it. The three men practically come to fisticuffs over what became some of the most memorable moments in the film. The screenplay is finished after five days, but the men are thoroughly exhausted and the office is a mess. This hilarious comedy, though based on real circumstances, is an imaginative account of the creation of one of the most popular movies of all time.

*Summary of Ron Hutchinson's***MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS***Setting: An office on a Hollywood studio lot***Act I, Scene 1**

It is 1939 and David O. Selznick, the legendary producer of films like **REBECCA**, **DAVID COPPERFIELD** and **THE PRISONER OF ZENDA**, is in his Hollywood office with the famous screenwriter Ben Hecht. Selznick informs Hecht that he has stopped production of **GONE WITH THE WIND**, his film version of Margaret Mitchell's widely popular book by the same name. As the producer of the film he has fired the screenwriter and the director after three weeks of work because neither of them was giving him what he envisions to be a true representation of Mitchell's book. He is determined to make an epic film that will go down in history as the greatest film ever made, and the shutdown is now costing him \$50,000 a day. Selznick is already deeply in debt and his reputation is at stake. He will lose everything if this film is not a success. The pressure could not be greater to get the film back into production, this time with a first rate screenplay and the best director Selznick can get.

Selznick has called Ben Hecht into his office because he knows he is capable of rewriting the screenplay to his satisfaction. He is astonished to learn that Hecht has not even read the book! Everyone in the world has read the book except him, he tells Hecht. So Hecht takes the book and starts to read it. Selznick grabs it back and tells him he does not have time to read the 1,037 page book because the screenplay has to be ready in five days. He goes on to say that it will be a monumental film about the American Civil War. "It's about a nation torn in two, an entire civilization having to decide between the modern world and its past." Hecht replies that he read the first page of the book and in his opinion it is just "moonlight and magnolias". (According to the urban-dictionary.com the expression "moonlight and magnolias" refers to the romanticization of the pre-civil war South. The term alludes to soft lighting and flower scents.)

Selznick insists that the movie will be reminiscent of how just recently the country had to find a way to come through the depression of the 1930s. For that reason, he believes Americans will identify with the heroine of the film, Scarlett O'Hara, who is determined to survive the devastation of the Civil War. Unconvinced by Selznick's passion for the film, Ben Hecht starts to leave, but Selznick stops him by promising to give him fifteen thousand dollars if he will help him for just five days. Hecht still has his doubts about the

potential success of the movie, but the pay sounds good so he decides to stay.

Next to arrive in Selznick's office is Victor Fleming, Selznick's choice to direct the movie. He believes that Fleming is the only director who can make the film reach the epic proportions that lie in the pages of the famous book. Fleming has been working on **THE WIZARD OF OZ**, starring Judy Garland. Selznick tells him he is taking him off **OZ** so he can direct **GONE WITH THE WIND**. Fleming is open to cooperating with Selznick because he is sick and tired of dealing with all of the problems the dwarfs in the Judy Garland film have been causing him.

Fleming, however, has not yet heard the bad news about how fast the new screenplay must be written. He asks for three weeks of preparation but Selznick puts his foot down, making it clear to Fleming that the movie must be ready to continue production the following week! Selznick locks Fleming, Hecht and himself in the office and puts the key in his pocket. Fleming is taken aback, but agrees to help Selznick give ideas to Hecht, the writer, only if he is freed from all other directing obligations. Selznick agrees and they get to work.

Selznick tells his secretary, Miss Poppenguhl, to provide them with lots of peanuts and bananas (brain food he calls it) because that is all they are going to eat until the screenplay is finished. He adds that she is to furnish them with a typewriter, paper, carbons, pencils, erasers, pens, ink, and notepads. At this point Hecht suggests sarcastically that cyanide capsules should be added to the list. As usual, the efficient Miss Poppenguhl responds immediately to her boss's demands and brings everything asked for to his office.

As Selznick describes the story to Hecht, he and Fleming act out portions of the book, playing the different characters so that Hecht can visualize what happens and can start typing a fresh new script. Selznick explains that the four main characters are Scarlett O'Hara (*played by Vivien Leigh*), Rhett Butler (*Clark Gable*), Ashley Wilkes (*Leslie Howard*) and Ashley's cousin Melanie Hamilton (*Olivia de Havilland*). Scarlett loves Ashley, but he turns her down and marries his cousin Melanie, a practice common in the South at that time. The spoiled Scarlett, who is used to getting her own way, is furious. She is further humiliated when she finds out that Rhett Butler

overheard Ashley's rejection of her. Stung by Rhett's laughter and Ashley's rejection, Scarlett quickly marries Melanie's brother, Charles Hamilton, just to save face. He, however, is soon killed in the war, leaving her a widow. Rhett Butler later falls in love with Scarlett despite her selfish and insolent nature, but Scarlett refuses to marry him. Near the end of the film, however, she has a change of heart.

Selznick describes from the book the burning of Atlanta and the surrounding area by the Union soldiers from the North. He acts out Scarlett's desperation to get from Atlanta to Tara, her plantation, to see how things are. When she arrives, her mother has died and her father is "out of his mind with grief". Most of the slaves have run off and there is no livestock and little food. She returns to Atlanta as fast as she can to find help to rebuild her home. There she looks for Rhett Butler who is in jail for smuggling. Forgetting all that has passed between them, she begs him for financial help from his smuggling money. He tells her he cannot give her money because the authorities would find out how much money he has and where it is. He has smuggled money from the North to the South for personal profit, but also to help the Confederate soldiers from the South. In desperation, Scarlett cries out that she "will never be hungry again". To insure this she marries Frank Kennedy, because he has a lot of money, not because she loves him.

As Selznick and Fleming continue to act out everything for Hecht, Selznick explains that they are coming closer to the end of the war. The Union soldiers from the North have won and it is time for the "Reconstruction of the South", he says. Since Scarlett's new husband is in the lumber business she is perfectly situated to rebuild what is left of Tara and to get rich by selling to other southerners the wood they need to rebuild and bring about the rebirth of the South.

At one point Scarlett and Melanie are attacked by black men when they are on the road between Atlanta and Tara. They survive, but when Scarlett's husband and Ashley hear of this they join the Ku Klux Klan (an anti-black, white supremacy organization) to avenge the women. Hecht cannot believe that Selznick is really going to have two of the main characters join the racist Klan. He tells Selznick that he will never make a successful movie out of this story. He finds the characters unsympathetic and their actions appalling. "I don't know whether this is a very good bad book or a very bad good book or more likely a

bad bad book, but I do know you'll never get a movie out of it." In response Selznick opens the door to the outer office and shows him the impressive brass plate on the door and what is written on it: "David O. Selznick, Producer". Despite his respect for Selznick's position and all that he has accomplished, Hecht asks him how he ever got suckered into making this movie. Selznick answers that the whole world cares about this book and this movie, and to prove it he reaches for international newspapers and reads the praiseworthy comments in the world press.

Hecht continues his protestations by trying to make Selznick aware that there is going to be a war in Europe soon, but Selznick says that that war (World War II) does not concern them. They have nothing to do with it. Hecht responds that it certainly does concern them because half the directors in Hollywood are Jews who had to flee from the Nazis. Then he reminds Selznick that he is the one Jew who would not give one lousy dollar to the Jewish Relief fund. Fleming stops their bickering by asking Hecht when they are going to hear some typing.

After a few telephone interruptions, Selznick tells Miss Poppenguhl not to put any calls through for the rest of the week and to keep the door closed to all who want to enter.

Hecht asks if the movie has to be set in the Civil War. Selznick emphatically answers yes. He adds, "We're stuck with the American Civil War and we're stuck with this storyline and these characters. We're also going to use only the dialog that's in the book." Hecht still does not feel good about the movie. He wants to know how they can make audiences sympathize with characters who are slave owners. Selznick replies, "they will if we do our jobs right." Hecht reminds Selznick that Scarlett shoots a Union soldier from the North. He wonders if that does not make her just a tiny bit unsympathetic. Selznick insists again that the audience's reaction just depends on how they film it. Fleming agrees.

Selznick begs them, "Give me a hit, fellas. A hit. You know what it's like when a million people go see your movie? When a million people say yes?" Hecht's response is, "And they forget you're a Jewboy?" Selznick is growing tired of Hecht's passion over social issues, such as his concern about how Jews are still treated in the movie business even though many are successful, and his concern about showing slavery in the movie and expecting people to be sympathetic with the slaveowners.

Instead of responding to Hecht's negative attitude, however, Selznick described what an epic movie **GONE WITH THE WIND** will be. Listening to the colorful and grandiose way that Selznick sees the movie, Fleming is fully convinced that the producer is on the right track. Hecht is still sceptical but decides to cooperate. Selznick proceeds to the next scene that needs to be written. Pretending to be Scarlett he says in a high pitched voice, "War, war, war—that's all anybody can talk about—war, war, war." And on and on it goes. Selznick and Fleming are in full swing and Hecht is typing as fast as he can to keep up with their amateurish, over-the-top acting.

Act I, Scene 2

It is the middle of the night two days later. Papers are scattered all over the floor along with banana skins and peanut shells. The men are exhausted, but they keep working. Hecht is typing away while Fleming is lying on the floor, playing Melanie trying to give birth. Selznick, playing Scarlett, leans over Fleming telling him to "Push. Push harder." Scarlett yells for the young slave girl, Prissy, to come and help them, but when Prissy arrives she admits that she lied about being able to "birth babies." Irate, at hearing this, Scarlett slaps the girl in the face.

Hecht stops typing. He is shocked at learning that in the book Scarlett slaps the slave girl, Prissy. He insists that you cannot have a slap like that in the movie. He adds that, as Jews, he and Selznick should identify with the downtrodden. Fed up with Hecht's constant concern about whom they might offend, Selznick vehemently refuses to cut the slap. He tells Hecht that he is producing a melodrama which is true to what happened in the old South as well as being true to Margaret Mitchell's book. Then the men start arguing about who is most important in the making of a movie: the writer, the director or the producer. Selznick protests the loudest, pointing out that if he were not responsible for choosing a story, raising thousands of dollars and getting the rights for production, the film would never be made. He shouts that he is "... going to make the best damn movie in the history of the world and I need this scene. I need it, Ben, I need it, for God's sake I need it —." Then Selznick freezes. He seems to have gone into a catatonic state. Hecht and Fleming do not know how to snap him out of it. When they see that he is still breathing they think about escaping from the madness of getting a film ready for production in five days on a diet of bananas and peanuts. They find the key to the door in one of Selznick's pockets, but just as they are about to leave they hesitate and decide they cannot

walk out on Selznick who might, after all, be right about the potential greatness of the film. They lock the door and put the key back in Selznick's pocket. Selznick suddenly revives and his first words are, "Have we got the slap?" Yes, they have the slap, the men reply. Selznick is elated. He exclaims, "The slap stays in the movie. The Civil War stays in the movie. And before anybody asks—Scarlett O'Hara stays in the movie." As Fleming looks for a place to collapse, Hecht resumes his frantic typing.

Act II

It is dawn, the beginning of the final two days. The room is in even more of a mess. Selznick is curled up on his desk in a fetal position. He is comatose. Fleming is too weak to peel a banana and Hecht is slowly typing just one letter at a time. Selznick revives and asks Hecht how the writing is going. Hecht proudly says they are nearing the end, but he has another objection. He asks Selznick, "Why don't you take a real gamble and make a movie that could make America look its ugly face in the mirror?" Selznick answers, "Because that's not what it wants to see. It wants to see the way it thinks it looks." He reminds Hecht that he has done pretty well for himself in Hollywood writing trash, and he has never turned down a pay check. Fleming, tired of the haggling, encourages them to get back to the scenario of the film.

Again they act out a scene. Fleming plays Melanie who is lying on a couch close to death. She tells Scarlett, "Be good to Rhett—he really loves you." Then Fleming twitches a few times and pretends to die. Selznick, playing Scarlett, says, "I've been a silly little fool. It's Rhett I really love." Scarlett rushes to Rhett, played by Fleming. He replies that he loved her at one time, "but you screwed it up because you couldn't get Ashley out of your mind. And now it's too late." Scarlett, concerned about how she will survive without him, pleads, "But what about me?" and Rhett answers, "My dear, I don't give a shit." Selznick tells Fleming to say, "I don't give a damn" instead of "shit," but Hecht objects because they will never get "damn" past the censors. Not bothered by this, Selznick goes on to say that the sentence is missing something, a "handle". He says that when he made the "gorilla movie" they wanted to call it "Kong," but he objected because it didn't have a "handle". He told them it should be called "King Kong" and he was right. That's the name that stuck and made the film a success, he claims.

They decide to look for a "handle", the thing that is missing in the sentence, later. The important job now is to

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finish the screenplay for the movie. Hecht cannot believe that after Melanie dies, Rhett turns down Scarlett's advances and leaves her. He wonders how Margaret Mitchell could end the book without uniting Rhett and Scarlett, but Selznick says it is that way in the book and that is the way it will be written and filmed. Both Fleming and Hecht try to come up with an alternative ending where Rhett returns on his horse, scoops up Scarlett and the two of them ride off into the sunset. Selznick, however, says no. They will film it the way Margaret Mitchell wrote it and that is final. Then Hecht looks at the very last line in the book and cannot accept it either. Scarlett says, "Tomorrow is another day." Hecht cannot bear to write what he considers a weak line at the end of the film, but, with his hands shaking, he does so just to bring an end to their efforts.

The men discuss the unlikely possibility that the film will be a success. Fleming says he will take a pay check up front rather than a percent of the gross because he knows it is going to be a flop. Hecht does the same and, surprisingly, Selznick even gives him a check for the Jewish Relief fund, something Hecht has asked him to do time and time again in the past.

Selznick says he will either "break the bank or go belly up" with the film. He adds that "For once I'm making a movie without any compromises. I'm going to show everybody how it should be done—and if it takes a crazy Jew to do it, what the hell, somebody else can figure out what that means—frankly, I don't give a damn." Then he pauses for a moment. He realizes now what is missing in Rhett Butler's response to Scarlett after she asks him how she will survive without him. It is the addition of the word "Frankly" at the beginning of the sentence. He says excitedly, "That's it, that's the 'handle': Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. Before he rides away, that is what Clark Gable (Rhett Butler) will say to Vivien Leigh (Scarlett O'Hara).

The screenplay is finished now except for a few minor things that can be altered later without destroying the integrity of the book. After Selznick asks the dutiful Miss Poppenguhl to clean up the appalling mess the three men have made, he takes a call from his father-in-law, Louis B. Mayer, the famed film producer and head of MGM studios. He says to him, "Poppa, I have some very good news for you—we're making a movie."

Curtain

Objective Questions

1. Why did David Selznick stop production on *GONE WITH THE WIND*?
2. The film *GONE WITH THE WIND* was based on a book. Who wrote it?
3. Who wrote the final screenplay for the film? How long did it take?
4. Why does Ben Hecht criticize David Selznick for including in the film the slapping of a slave girl and the Ku Klux Klan?
5. Name the four main characters in the film.
6. Which of the three men goes into a catatonic state? Why do you think this happens?
7. Where and when does the film take place?
8. Who is Miss Poppenguhl and what does she do for David Selznick?

Interpretative Exercise

1. Are the producers, screenwriters and directors of movies obligated to teach moral lessons? Why or why not?
2. Is Selznick's conviction correct that the producer of a movie is more important than the screenwriter or the director? Why or why not?