

Hollywood Dreams Made Real: Irving Thalberg and the Rise of M-G-M

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There are certainly reasons to approach this book cautiously. Despite producer Irving Thalberg's celebrated influence on American film, the trite phrase "Hollywood Dreams" gives one pause. In fact, it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect this account of "the rise of M-G-M" to be a collection of vacuous glamour portraits loosely united by the Thalberg association.

As it turns out, though, author Mark Vieira has told a true pictorial history, skimping neither on the pictures nor the history—and doing so with nary a cliché in sight. Beginning before the creation of M-G-M—the original "media merger" to have lasting impact—and moving through Thalberg's success grooming such stars as Joan Crawford and Clark Gable, *Hollywood Dreams Made Real* is remarkably evocative considering its light touch. Particularly fascinating is its inside look at filmmaking during the transition to talkies, a period many know from its comedic treatment in *Singin' in the Rain*.

Although later reversing himself dramatically, Thalberg was initially dismissive of sound pictures (and color, too). Yet while Vieira is upfront in revealing such short-sightedness, he can act as apologist, too. After discussing legal suits brought against M-G-M for libel and plagiarism in 1932, both of which apparently had merit, he comments, "Such missteps were inevitable in a year when Thalberg was defying the Depression." This sentence may represent a leap in logic many readers won't be willing to take.

Still, these are minor gripes about a book that's never less than stunning in scope, detail, and design. Vieira's grasp of history in its broader context is impressive, and his prose style is clear and restrained, highlighted by his knack for selecting the perfect quote. Similarly, his year-by-year organization is quite straightforward—don't look for grand, thematic approaches to movie history à la David Thomson. Vieira introduces each year with about five (illustrated) pages of text, then uses what might be called a "gallery" presentation, with photos cover-ing major productions accompanied by clean, concise captions.

In an interesting epilogue, Vieira speculates about what Thalberg's career might have been had he not died so young. It's probably safe to say that he would have been increasingly out of place in an industry so rife with self-promotion: incredibly, Thalberg never put his own name on these classic films, which explains why today's audiences may not be aware of his vital contributions to them...a situation that *Hollywood Dreams Made Real* corrects in breathtaking fashion.

PETER GUTIÉRREZ (December 15, 2008)

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