

MGM: The Lion Meows

by Hollis Alpert

It was just about twenty-five years ago that an important event took place at the MGM studios in Culver City, California. A luncheon was held to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the formation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, which had gone on to become the largest and most successful film company in the world. In attendance, according to Bosley Crowther, who chronicled the event, were hundreds of film salesmen, the entire Hollywood press corps, dozens of producers and executives of the company, and fifty-eight stellar contract players. In the latter roster were Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Judy Garland, Deborah Kerr, Ava Gardner, Katharine Hepburn, Gene Kelly, Jennifer Jones, Fred Astaire, and one dog, whose name, of course, was Lassie. All partook, with the possible exception of Lassie, "of a catered repast of stuffed squab, suitably garnished, and ice cream molded in the shape of the studio's trademark, the lion."

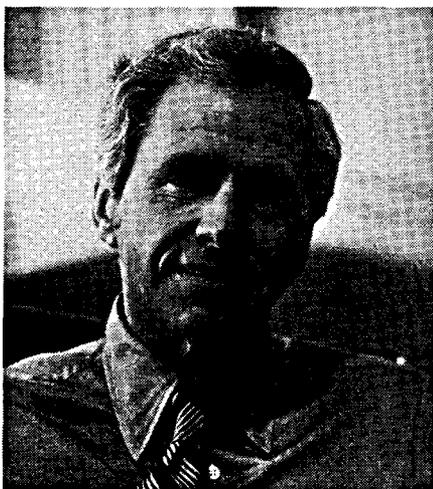
MGM's fiftieth anniversary is at hand, and it is reasonable to assume that the celebration will be a more sober and far less star-studded occasion. In fact, the studio's filmmaking operations have all but ground to a halt; its distribution arm has been taken over by United Artists; and a complex reshuffling of the company's structure has put it into the hotel business, with an active television subsidiary and plans for a small amount of virtually independent theatrical-film production. With the reshuffling came the resignation of James T. Aubrey, Jr., as president and chief executive officer of the company.

When the news of what many regarded as Aubrey's ouster came last November 1, shock waves of almost earthquake intensity were felt throughout Beverly Hills and Bel Air, through Trousdale Estates, North Hollywood, Malibu, and through the canyons and valleys where film people work and reside.

Rumors as to what had happened, what *really* had happened, abounded. Public statements were made, by Aubrey and others, but few people took them seriously. "I believe," said Aubrey, "the contribution I had to make, as far as the company is concerned, has been fulfilled."

The new president of MGM, Frank E. Rosenfelt, announced: "Contrary to recent public speculation, the roar of Leo the Lion will not be reduced to a weak meow. A revitalized, compact, commercially viable MGM is a continued assurance that the company will remain an important and significant force in the motion-picture industry."

But in talking with executives of other film companies and with a few individuals associated with the four-year Aubrey reign, I received a somewhat different impression, and also some fairly substantial accounts of the causes of MGM's corporate upheaval. The talks were off-the-record: There was understandable caution, not to say fearfulness, because today's discard may be tomorrow's mogul. Failure in Hollywood can be either downward or upward. So, to protect the talkative, no names.



James T. Aubrey—Out, at MGM.

Will MGM continue to remain an important force in the film industry? "Hardly," said one executive. "Financing for new motion pictures is not the problem. There's plenty of money around, if not from the major companies, then from dozens of outside industries willing to invest in feature-film-making. But the financing is meaningless without the necessary distribution deal and the all-important marketing of the product. As far as theatrical production is concerned, MGM is in the same position as a host of independent producers, all seeking distribution deals. The likelihood is that the new regime will get the leavings, so to speak."

Always in these talks the intriguing name of Aubrey kept popping up. The production head of another studio said: "You can't expect to make successful

features in an atmosphere of confrontation." It was his circumspect way of saying that Aubrey had had conflicts with "creative filmmakers," some of whom referred to him privately as "the smiling cobra" and publicly accused him of meddling with and carving up their films.

Closer investigation bears this out to a degree, but only to a degree. Aubrey comes out far less of a villain than gossip and rumor make him out to be. In one sense, at least, Aubrey did accomplish what he was brought in to do, and here I'd better quote a source who was present during much of MGM's recent turmoil:

"After a series of all but ruinous proxy battles, during which Kirk Kerkorian, an airline and Las Vegas hotels tycoon, became the major stockholder and gained control, Aubrey was brought in, first of all, to lighten the complicated and disastrous load of dead wood at the studio. He came from a successful career in television. It must be admitted that he is a brilliant corporate executive, without equal at streamlining operations and firing people. After getting rid of the previous production regime that gave us such unsuccessful youth-oriented films as *The Strawberry Statement* and *Brewster McCloud*, a regime that apparently thought the youth movement was in its infancy when actually it was in decline, Aubrey came up with a plan for making MGM's feature production profitable. An analysis of costs versus returns convinced him that in no case was a budget to go over two million dollars."

"Aubrey got there," said one of my sources, "because one of the great powers in this industry, the lawyers, had him installed. It is not an overstatement to say that almost every present-day head of a studio is the product of the efforts of some powerful attorneys. They are the real movers and shakers, and a genuine history of Hollywood could be done in terms of its lawsuits. The lawyers and their financial alliances are the real undergirding of this town. Note that Rosenfelt, the new head, is a lawyer."

This same source discounted the prevalent theory that Aubrey was brought in to supervise the dissolution of MGM's entertainment functions. "The absolute fact of the matter is that his job was to streamline the operation and put it on a paying basis. Perhaps unhappily for him and for MGM, he became a picture maker himself."

In this era of conglomerates absorb-

ing film companies, of outside industries moving into theatrical film production, there is a constant temptation for those in the corporate world to participate in the picture-making process. Why not? They control the financing, don't they? "These people," a former MGM executive said, "think motion pictures would be a good business if approached on a businesslike basis, which means a cost-accounting kind of procedure. There's nothing wrong with this in theory, except in practice the manufacture of dreams is hardly likely to be responsive to that kind of procedure.

"It can work for television, which operates on an entirely different basis. People generally don't understand the enormous economic disparity between features and television. In television, the profit consists of the margin between the money subscribed in front and the money spent. The cheaper you make it, the more your guaranteed profit. A feature, on the other hand, is a gambling game, in which the theoretical return is virtually unlimited. In television the premium is on what the old hands call 'doing it quick and dirty.' Aubrey was experienced in high-level corporate affairs and very well knew the difference between a convertible debenture and a convertible sofa. The difficulty with this damn business is that no matter how people get into it, the magnetism of making pictures and deciding what to make is so great that they can't keep their hands off it. A magnate hires someone to head up a program of pictures: The first week he assures you he will not in any way interfere with your decisions; the second week he calls up and says, 'Send me the pictures of the girls.' But that aspect is far from the worst. Generally people who care enough, even along those lines, can at least be counted on to have human responses."

I came across some verbal portraits of Aubrey in operation:

- "He felt he could deal with picture making and picture makers in a straightforward way. In conversation he is the most candid man I ever met. After conflicts with him, people went away screaming and raving. Aubrey would tell them exactly what he thought—not exactly common practice. This is an industry where a director who has just made an unutterable disaster, wasted millions of dollars, is generally greeted with a few kisses and told, 'Baby, it's terrific.' The kicker is that no one answers his phone calls any more."



Yul Brynner in "Westworld."

- "On one occasion, I was in the screening room, looking at a picture with Aubrey. The director and producer came in to hear his opinion, and he turned to them with a smile and said, 'This picture is so goddamn corny it's probably going to make some money.' The director all but sank to the floor."

- "To attend a postmortem with him on a script or a first cut was an experience, once you were aware of his style. He is a skillful, forensic counterpuncher. You sit there, waiting to discover which of the statements made is going to draw from him the terrible counterblast."

- "I liked the man and liked working with him. When he made decisions, he stuck by them. But he wounded the egos of some of the better filmmakers who did pictures for the studio. By being honest with them, he irritated them. They had never been talked to that way before."

But manner and personality aside, it must be said that Aubrey came a cropper at MGM for other reasons. The consensus is that he opted for "small-picture judgments. He couldn't imagine why a picture couldn't be made on a television-type schedule. Now, if you can't tell the difference between what *feels* like a major feature for theaters and one made for television, then it's fair to say you shouldn't be making features. The customers can apparently tell, since they have unanimously rejected every TV movie made when it was put in theaters."

In that same area of judgment, note that when *The Go-Between*, a Joseph Losey film made in England for less than a million dollars, turned out in Aubrey's opinion to be too arty for the market, he sold it at cost to Columbia. The picture then went on to win the Cannes Grand Prize and make money for Columbia. When he turned around and bought Visconti's arty and vastly boring *Ludwig*, it lost its entire cost.

"There were some Aubrey-sponsored films that made money," said an MGM executive with access to the figures. "The first of the three *Shafts*, *Travels With My Aunt*, *Skyjacked*, *Kansas City Bomber*. Others, though, went into the familiar void: *Every Little Crook and Nanny*, *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight*, *Savage Messiah*, *One is a Lonely Number*. Yes, there were complaints that we had not mounted adequate campaigns on their behalf, but the blunt fact is that they were rejected by the public.

"They were not always large losses, but it was a matter of a continuing, slow attrition, and don't forget that Kerkorian's Grand Hotel, being built in Las Vegas, was consuming cash in monstrous amounts. On the other hand, Aubrey increased the firm's television production, which was profitable. Toward the end, conflict developed between Kerkorian and Aubrey. Kerkorian didn't want to continue making movies. Aubrey did. Ironically enough, as Aubrey's tenure came to an end, MGM finally had a breakthrough movie: *Westworld*."

AUBREY IS SAID not to have been attracted to that project. "He didn't understand Michael Crichton, the writer and director." The movie, a macabre story about the ultimate vacation of the future, is expected to return close to twenty million dollars. And, again ironically, two upcoming Aubrey-sponsored projects have the look of winners. One is *The Super-Cops*, another in the current cop-picture craze, which sneak-preview audiences have accepted enthusiastically; the other is *That's Entertainment*, an astute amalgam of sixty musical numbers garnered from films of MGM's great period, calculated to hit the nostalgia bull's-eye. They will be United Artists releases, however.

"The bottom has fallen out of the feature-film market," Aubrey is quoted as having said. The wrong statement at the wrong time, apparently, for the productions made at the close of his MGM career seem to belie the words. Leo the Lion may have become a pussycat, but the industry will go on, for the lawyers and financiers are still behind it, and they know, they absolutely *know*, that with the right talismans—directors, producers, agents, and stars—and with proper cost-accounting procedures, and solid businesslike attitudes, and appropriate marketing procedures, the public will still buy—dreams. □

Chinese Windfall

by Katharine Kuh

Unexpected windfalls can produce waves in the art world. In recent months, Americans have been reading rave notices about a spectacular Chinese exhibition of archaeological finds unearthed in mainland China since the People's Republic took over in 1949. The show, which includes pottery, bronze vessels, sculpture, textiles, ceramics, and jade carvings chiefly excavated from ancient tombs, has now left China for the first time to travel in Europe. Reviews may seem unduly euphoric, but they are not; they are, if anything, understated, for the exhibition, far from an ordinary one, is an event that could only be duplicated in Communist China. In addition, these 385 works have been admirably restored, preserved, and documented by Chinese specialists. Nor should we overlook the news that all plundering of artifacts has ceased in China since the establishment of the present regime. In earlier times looting was rampant, which partly accounts for the profusion of Chinese masterpieces in Western collections.

But it is, of course, the recently excavated works themselves that are the true revelations—which is not to claim Chinese art is now bursting on us for the first time as a pivotal landmark in history. This we have long recognized. It is to say, however, that this cache of ineffable objects underlines an aesthetic continuity that is sometimes difficult to appreciate in the more fragmentary Chinese surveys we see in the West. As a matter of fact, many of the prehistoric and Shang works are too rare to have counterparts in either European or American museums. Starting with the earliest artifacts, the exhibition accents a sensibility scaled to human comprehension. Unlike Egypt and Mesopotamia or, later, pre-Columbian America and India, China developed an art that seldom lost touch with individual response, an art less humanistic than geared to human consumption. Objects, to be sure, were strongly ritualistic, but scarcely so awe inspiring or aggrandized as to become mainly reflections of authority. These

*Guardian figure from a T'ang tomb—
"Remarkable for its intricate modeling."*