

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## FIFTY YEAR OLD WARNER BROS. HAS RETROSPECTIVE OF 207 FILMS

Fifty years ago the Warner Brothers, who had started in a storefront exhibiting "flicks" and then began distributing and producing them, became a corporate entity. It was 1923 when four sons of a Polish immigrant, having discovered Edison's Kinetoscope while working on a fair ground, first undertook to become a major film company that was eventually to supply pictures not only to theatre emporiums over the face of America but in all parts of the world.

Now, five decades later, The Museum of Modern Art, in observance of this fiftieth anniversary, will trace the history of Warners from 1923 to 1973, with a four-and-a-half month retrospective of its films, from July 4 to November 18. The Warner show, programmed by Associate Curator Adrienne Mancina and Assistant Curator Larry Kardish, includes 207 feature length films chosen from a selection of 3000 pictures, and, in addition, a number of period cartoons, trailers and other shorts and featurettes. Film historians around the country recommended several of the pictures in what constitutes the longest and most extensive cycle of its kind ever undertaken by the Department of Film. The retrospective, besides following Warners' rise, demonstrates the accomplishments of a fledgling film industry and its growth, with its internationally-known stars and directors, its myths and myth-makers, and its technical competence and innovations, most notably the wondrous invention of sound.

As early as 1925 the Warners had "invested heavily" in what they called Vitaphone, described by The New York Times as "a marvelous device." The company had reached a nadir in its fortunes and, according to film critic and historian Arthur Knight, the Warner Brothers -- Harry, Albert, Sam and Jack -- "latched on to this unpromising and unprofitable novelty in an attempt to stave off bankruptcy." They succeeded admirably.

"The Jazz Singer" (1927) was originally conceived of as a silent film. It was, however, released as a film with musical interludes of song and some ad-libbing by its star, Al Jolson. Jolson, incidentally, only got the part by chance. It was performed on the Broad-

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way stage by George Jessel. But Jessel turned down an offer to appear in the screen version of the Samson Raphaelson play because he was not satisfied with the financial arrangements, and Eddie Cantor then suggested Jolson to the Warners. The rest is film history.

The Warners continued to experiment with sound, though Harry Warner, who died (from sheer exhaustion, it is said) the night before the premiere of "The Jazz Singer," had thought of it largely as the mechanical reproduction of musical scores that could be more closely synchronized to the action on the screen; at the same time he hoped to effect an economy measure, for the usual house orchestra or Wurlitzer organ or even piano player would no longer be necessary. So, the pictures that followed like "Lilac Time," with Colleen Moore and Gary Cooper, featured a musical accompaniment; "Old San Francisco" has the sound effects of an earthquake; but the first 100% all talking "Lights of New York" was called by Variety 100% crude. Still, the Warners, like other companies, dedicated themselves to the new miracle-- and, indeed, the 1927 audience of 57,000,000 weekly grew to 90,000,000 weekly by 1930.

In earlier years the Warners managed to survive according to trade wits, by depending on two great profiles: John Barrymore and Rin-Tin-Tin. Barrymore, who had appeared as "Beau Brummel," now starred opposite Mary Astor in "Don Juan," orchestrated even to the clanking of swords. The latter was eminently successful, and Barrymore went on to make "The Sea Beast," with Dolores Costello, "Moby Dick," with Joan Bennett, and "Svengali," with Marian Marsh. Rin-Tin-Tin performed irreproachably in a series of adventure films, written by the then youthful Darryl F. Zanuck.

In all, 32 films from the 1920s are included in the Museum program, but the selection of the silent films was unfortunately severely limited to those films known to be extant. However, one of the most important silents is part of the program: "The Patent Leather Kid," starring Richard Barthelmess, about whose performance The New York Times said in 1927: "...he makes the most of the cocksure young pugilist...there is not a single flaw in his acting." Other rarely shown "photoplays," as they were then called, are "Daddies" (1924) with Mae Marsh; "Tiger Rose" (1923), starring the famous stage actress Lenore Ulric; "Lucretia Lombard" (1923) featuring Irene Rich, Monte Blue and Norma Shearer.

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Too, the Museum will present "Red Hot Tires" (1925) with Monte Blue and Patsy Ruth Miller; "Broken Hearts of Hollywood" (1926) with Douglas Fairbanks and Louise Dresser; and three pictures by Ernst Lubitsch, "Three Women," played by May McAvoy, Pauline Frederick and Marie Prevost, "So This is Paris," co-starring Monte Blue and Patsy Ruth Miller and "The Marriage Circle," in which Monte Blue played opposite Florence Vidor. "The Marriage Circle" was Lubitsch's first American comedy and reportedly was a favorite of George Jean Nathan, Alfred Hitchcock and Lubitsch himself.

By the 1930s, entirely different themes were espoused. The Warners were deep into gangster pictures, musicals, topical films, and biographies with historical and cultural overtones. "Little Caesar" is an example of the gangster dramas. Based on the novel by W.R. Burnett, with Edward G. Robinson in the title role, "it had an earthiness of characterization and a flair for the idiom of the street that immediately set it apart from any 'talkie' produced up to that time." This picture, insists Arthur Knight, smacked of the real world when Robinson snarled "Let's bump him off" or "Take him for a ride." Every movie-goer knew exactly what he meant.

To cite Gilbert Seldes, "The gangster cycle provided one subject which was contemporary, urgent and real. By using it the movies made themselves as lively as the newspaper headlines; they gave the impression of being about to tackle real problems in American life." And the problems were numerous in these depression times of shrinking pockets; only the movies thrived.

Warners fared well with musicals such as "Forty-Second Street," "Gold Diggers of 1933 and 1935" and "Go Into your Dance," with Al Jolson and Ruby Keeler, all boasting lavish production numbers staged by Busby Berkeley. The musicals, which "provided an escape hatch" in those troubled times, also contributed to the more fluid use of the camera, and especially of the microphone, which previously had to be hidden in telephones, behind draperies, inside vases, under blankets or tables. Only the invention of the dolly really gave it mobility.

Besides the musicals, Warners was famous for biographies like "The Story of Louis

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Pasteur" and "The Life of Emile Zola," both starring Paul Muni. They also concentrated on contemporary subjects like labor racketeering, penal injustice, lynching and anti-labor activities of the Ku Klux Klan. "They Won't Forget" (1937) was an angry film "in the controlled style" of Mervyn LeRoy, based on Ward Greene's novel "Death in the Deep South," about the lynching of a Northern teacher, the well known Leon Frank case.

While injustice continued to be grist to the Warner mill, one picture proved to be more controversial than the others. It was "Confessions of a Nazi Spy," from the book by ex-F.B.I. agent Leon Turrou, dealing with Nazi activities in America. Though heralded by the critics, it was nonetheless condemned by some Americans as a war-mongering vehicle. It was immediately banned in Germany as were all other Warner films.

In 1943 Warners made "Mission to Moscow," based on the book by Ambassador Joseph E. Davies, just as in 1918 it had distributed "My Four Years in Germany," which told the story of Ambassador James W. Gerard. However "Mission to Moscow" encountered unexpected problems. Even though the Americans and Russians were allies when the picture was made, it was immediately attacked by a conservative press. Later on in the post-war years, the Un-American Activities Committee called upon Jack Warner to defend it against charges of communist influence. He replied that the film was made at the suggestion of President Roosevelt.

Less controversial pictures were also made in the 1940s, and one of the most distinguished was "The Maltese Falcon" (1941), directed by John Huston, starring Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor. While this picture is today considered a film classic it was actually the third screen version of the Dashiell Hammett story, and all three adaptations will be shown at the Museum the same day, August 9. The first version (1931), starring Bebe Daniels and Ricardo Cortez, was directed by one of the most active directors on the Warners lot, Roy Del Ruth, known to handle "abrasive low life comedies and melodramas with aplomb." The second version (1936) was far more sentimental and, starring Bette Davis, was retitled "Satan Met a Lady." Huston's version, for which he wrote the screenplay, marked his directorial debut at age 35.

That Warners was able to fulfill the needs of the public is evident. As Bosley Crowther,

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erstwhile critic of The New York Times, wrote in the mid-forties: "No studio in Hollywood seems to have a more consistent regard for the American middle class with its myriad little sorrows and triumphs, its domestic delights and dissension than Warner Bros." This opinion was also advanced by Ted Sennett, who states in the conclusion of his book "Warner Brothers Presents": "If the gold was sometimes brass, it the magic was sometimes earthbound, the Warner films of the thirties and forties displayed all of man's 'humanness': his cruelty and courage, his foolishness and romantic, unquenchable spirit."

And these qualities are manifest in the Museum series, in films such as: "Female" with Ruth Chatterton (1933); "Five Star Final" (1931) in which Edward G. Robinson appeared with the still unrecognized Boris Karloff; "The Green Pastures" (1936) from Marc Connelly's 1930 Pulitzer Prize-winning play; "Dust Be My Destiny" (1939) with John Garfield; "Casablanca" (1942); "The Constant Nymph" (1943) with Charles Boyer and Joan Fontaine; "White Heat" (1949) directed by Raoul Walsh and starring James Cagney; Alfred Hitchcock's "Rope" (1948); Howard Hawks' "To Have and Have Not" (1944) from the Hemingway story, as well as the same director's earlier "Ceiling Zero" (1936) and later "Rio Bravo" (1959).

Warners today continues to be aware of changing American tastes, as recent films indicate, beginning with "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" A further consciousness of new trends was displayed in "Bonnie and Clyde," "Klute," and "A Clockwork Orange." The company that produced "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "A Star is Born" has changed hands in recent years; in 1967 it became Warner Brothers-Seven Arts, Ltd.; and two years later it was acquired by Kinney National and is now Warner Bros. The last surviving brother, Jack Warner, is 81 and still active as an independent producer.

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