

# ***MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS***

**By Ron Hutchinson**

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## **A STUDY GUIDE**

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**THE AUTHOR.** Born in Country Antrim in Northern Ireland in 1947, Ron Hutchinson was raised and educated in Coventry, England. He began his career in Great Britain, writing for theater and television. By the late 1980s he was working in American television, most memorably as author of *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991). He has also written film scripts, notably *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), starring Marlon Brando and Val Kilmer.

Hutchinson has been continuously writing for the stage, having produced some twenty plays since 1977. *Moonlight and Magnolias* premiered at the Goodman Theater in Chicago in 2004.

In an interview with David G. Anderson of The Utah Shakespeare Festival, Hutchinson declared that, “The inspiration for ‘Moonlight’ came when . . . I was reading . . . the autobiography of Ben

Hecht's week rewriting *Gone with the Wind*, and . . . it struck me, wow—this is classical farce. Can you imagine? All the elements are there. 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." (Ben Hecht was an American journalist, novelist, screenwriter, and civil-rights activist, well-known for his skills as a script-doctor. Among his movie credits are *Front Page*, *Scarface*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Gunga Din*. As a Jew, he was particularly active in raising support for the victims of anti-Semitism in Germany. David O. Selznick, the producer of *Gone with the Wind*, hired him to re-write the screenplay for the film three weeks after shooting had started. Hecht is a character in *Moonlight and Magnolias*.)

For this play, Hutchinson drew liberally on his own experience writing for film and television. As he told Anderson, "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 most memorable was a few years back when they flew me to the Kalahari Desert in Africa to assist with *Flight of the Phoenix*. The pressure is immense, there is craziness all around, but somehow you hammer it out. I enjoy the challenge and fun of it."

He describes *Moonlight and Magnolias* as, "a celebration . . . of film's golden age writers, directors, and producers. . . . Though Hecht is the voice in the play, the hero is the producer David Selznick. Too often today, the producer's image is that of the sleazy, behind the scene guy, who rakes in the money. Selznick had everything on the line: his fortune, reputation, and his marriage. The producers of yesteryear are the ones upon which the industry was built. I've had the great fortune to work with some outstanding producers who aren't afraid to make the tough decisions."

**THE SETTING.** As the playwright notes above, the physical setting for *Moonlight and Magnolias* is essential to creating the atmosphere of claustrophobia and desperation that pervades the play. All the action takes place over the course of five days in the office of powerhouse producer, David O. Selznick. There, Selznick, Hecht, and director Victor Fleming toil away at writing a screenplay based on Margaret Mitchell's epic novel, *Gone with the Wind*.

There's nothing particularly noteworthy about three men working together in an office—unless they keep at it uninterrupted, day and night, for five days; going without sleep and food (except for bananas and peanuts); never leaving the room; never changing their clothes; never talking to anyone except each other—and, occasionally, Miss Poppenguhl, Selznick's secretary, who ducks in and out to deliver the bananas. Selznick literally imprisons his co-workers in this space, allowing them out of his sight solely to use the bathroom—accessible only through a door inside the office.

As the play begins, the office is tidy and the men in it well-dressed. But as scene succeeds scene, and the interminable hours of writing pile up, the physical environment begins to mirror the psychological and emotional dishevelment of the characters.

As Scene 2 opens, two days of non-stop writing have passed. It is the middle of the night, and we see the men hacking away at the script surrounded by a welter of “*devastation that’s been wrought in the office since we last saw it. Scores of papers are scattered on the floor, there are heaps of banana skins and piles of peanut shells on every surface . . . cardboard boxes have been overturned and the contents spilled out. It looks like a battle has taken place here. . .*” The men in the room have also been transformed. They are “*rumpled*” and “*wild-eyed*,” stripped down to “*shirtsleeves*,” with “*wild*” hair, and “*chins . . . dark with stubble.*”

As the curtain rises on Act Two, another forty-eight hours of ceaseless writing have elapsed, and the office is in an even worse state of disarray than it was two days earlier. The stage directions describe the room as “*apocalyptically*” messier than before: “*chairs lie upside down, pictures hang crookedly on the walls, the bookcase doors hang open and one of the drapes has been tied into a knot.*”

But as the office sinks into chaos, the script for *Gone with the Wind* takes shape, a counter-movement towards clarity and order that stands in ironic contrast with the bedlam among its creators—as if the devastation of the setting is the price that must be paid for the finished work of art.

The historical setting of the play is also relevant. The time is 1939, and the news from Europe is alarming. An atmosphere of dread hangs in the air: Hitler and Mussolini have been ratcheting up their belligerent behavior, and in Germany the persecution of the Jews has been going on in earnest since Kristallnacht, an outbreak of anti-Semitic pogroms that took place in 1938. Nazi racism is rampant, and the world is about to lurch into another cataclysmic war. Against this background, three men labor to write a script that glorifies the plantation South and views slavery with nostalgic warmth and the Ku Klux Klan with tacit approval. Selznick and Fleming’s obliviousness to the implications of the book and the movie at such a moment in history infuriate Hecht, and prompt him to the scathing criticism that energizes many scenes in the play.

**THE PLOT.** The play is based on events that actually occurred in the making of *Gone with the Wind*. As the action begins, Selznick, the movie’s producer, is meeting with Ben Hecht, whom he has hired to write a new screenplay for the film—which has already begun principal photography. Having discarded the original script, Selznick can’t continue filming, but keeping the production apparatus up and ready to run is costing the producer fifty-thousand dollars a day. So Selznick is desperate to get his hands on a script he can shoot. Selznick has also fired the film’s original director, George Cukor, and hired Victor Fleming—currently at work on *The Wizard of Oz*—as Cukor’s replacement. So we begin with a producer and a film studio in a state of extreme crisis, facing financial ruin and professional humiliation.

But the first thing Selznick learns from Hecht is that the would-be screenwriter has not read the novel he is supposed to turn into a movie. Or, rather, he has read only the first page, and doesn’t like the material. “Feh,” he says, “Moonlight and magnolias? Gimme a break.”

Meaning that he's unimpressed with the sentimental clichés about antebellum life that he finds in the opening pages. In addition, Hecht, an ardent champion of civil rights, dislikes the way the novel romanticizes the slave-owning culture of the old South. And, a more pragmatic objection, he insists that, "No Civil War movie ever made a dime." (A bizarre assertion, since one of the most profitable American films up to that time was *Birth of a Nation*—a "Civil War movie" if there ever was one.)

So Selznick has to woo Hecht into doing the job, persuading him with money—fifteen thousand dollars for a week's work—and emotional blackmail: "No movie?—no more Selznick Studios. No more Selznick Studios?—I'm back working for my father-in-law. Ruin. Humiliation. Failure. You want that for me?" (Selznick's father-in-law is Louis B. Mayer, head of MGM Studios, the umbrella under which Selznick makes his own films.)

Eventually Hecht agrees, grudgingly, to write the script, but given his artistic and moral objections to the material, getting a screenplay out of him will be like pulling teeth.

Then Victor Fleming joins the fun. Fleming, a successful director of films spanning a wide range of genres, from romantic comedies such as *Bombshell* (1933) and *Reckless* (1935), to muscular adventure movies such as *Captains Courageous* (1937) and *Test Pilot* (1938), has been called in by Selznick to add some dash and energy to what has thus far been a limp production. Says Selznick, "Cukor took five days to shoot the opening scene. His pacing's too slow."

So Hecht will punch up the writing, Fleming will add vigor to the directing, and Selznick will save his reputation and his bank account. That's the theory. What actually happens is that Hecht remains intractably unsympathetic to the whole project, while he and Fleming seriously rub each other the wrong way: the brainy writer versus the man-of-action director. And to Selznick falls the responsibility of keeping these adversaries working productively together, while also holding them virtual prisoners in his office.

Among the many obstacles to be overcome in this situation (and drama is fundamentally about overcoming obstacles), the foremost is Hecht's ignorance of the novel. Not having read it, he can neither follow the complicated plot as recounted by Selznick, nor grasp the fact that the second male lead is named Ashley, not Ashcroft. How do you write a screenplay in the absence of such crucial information? Selznick's answer: he and Fleming will act out scenes from the book, and Hecht will turn their performances into pages of filmable dialogue:

SELZNICK. We do a scene from the book, he watches it, he writes it up as a movie scene; we do the next scene, he says 'Why do we need this scene, we can tell the story without,' so we toss that scene—we look at the next scene and by the end of the week we have a movie.

HECHT. That nobody's going to watch.

That interplay of Selznick's enthusiasm and Hecht's skepticism drives the action for the remainder of the play. And through it all, Selznick remains optimistic: "Big book, yes. But big brain—(*He claps Hecht on the shoulder*—) Big guy—(*he claps Fleming on the shoulder*—) Big shot—(*He sticks his thumb in his own chest*—) Five days, one screenplay." And off they go, bound for Tara, even if it kills them. Which it nearly does.

The next scene occurs in the middle of the night two-and-a-half days later, with the office in disarray, showing the effects of the bickering and angry confrontations that punctuate the non-stop screenwriting. Almost immediately there is a face-off between Hecht and Selznick over the scene where Scarlett slaps her black maid, Prissy. In the book, Melanie, a white woman and daughter of a plantation-owner, is experiencing serious complications as she labors to give birth. On the basis of Prissy's claims to knowledge of midwifery, Scarlett expects her to save Melanie's life by delivering the baby safely. But, as it turns out, Prissy was lying about her skills, and confesses, "I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies." Hearing this, an outraged Scarlett slaps her. Hecht is appalled that Selznick would consider putting this on film: "What happened, David? *You?* Making a movie that doesn't just glorify the Confederacy but—*she slaps the little girl?* . . . Don't you have a responsibility to make America look its ugly mug in the face?"

Hecht, as we have seen, is an ardent supporter of civil rights and has always imagined that Selznick shared his views. Now his old friend seems to be betraying their beliefs to score a Hollywood success. (Oddly, Hecht doesn't seem to consider that showing the slap, rather than excising it, would be the more effective way of exposing racism's "ugly mug.") So Hecht tries to politicize the scene by radically revising the novel's dialogue. He gives Prissy a defiant speech: "*I know Miss Melly's hurting up there, hurting real bad—and I'm glad, do you hear, I'm glad, and if she dies what do I care, because what do any of you care, any of you white folk, you in particular Miss Scarlett O'Hara.*"

Fleming's contempt for this patch of message-peddling leads to a face-off between him and Hecht, who demands to know where the director stands on the race question. Fleming denigrates Hecht as a mere "newspaperman at heart," addicted to sloganeering and easy moralizing. Hecht mocks Fleming, one of whose first jobs in the movies was a stunt driver, as nothing but a jumped-up chauffeur. This soon develops into an argument over the importance of writers versus directors in the making of films, a quarrel joined by Selznick who claims preeminent status for the producer. Each waxes eloquent in defense of his trade, with their dispute ultimately focusing on how to handle the scene where Scarlett slaps Prissy. Selznick on Fleming: "he figures where the camera goes and how the actor says the line." Selznick on Hecht: "stop dreaming of making Hollywood what it can never be—Put your butt into that chair and give me Prissy's big scene."

As they quarrel over the most effective / least offensive way of filming the slap, Selznick experiences a panic attack, convinced they have reached a fatal impasse. "Mayer wants me to fail. All the people who said this was the biggest white elephant in Hollywood history want me

to fail. . . . I need this scene. I need it . . . I need it for God's sake, I need it—(*He suddenly freezes as if locked in position—*)

With Selznick suddenly catatonic, Hecht and Fleming consider abandoning this seemingly-hopeless project, fleeing the claustrophobic office, and escaping into a world of fresh air, showers, and meals not consisting of peanuts and bananas. But they are men of their word, and they have promised to deliver a useable script in five days. So they decide to stick it out. At that moment, Selznick recovers from his fit, and they again begin working on the slap, acting it out as they have been doing with all the other scenes of the novel. Which means experimenting with various blows to each other's faces. Fleming slaps Hecht two different ways. Selznick slaps Fleming, taking yet another approach. Fleming slaps Selznick. Hecht slaps Fleming. Selznick slaps Fleming again. And the smack-fest continues, developing into a "free-for-all" until finally this mad improvisation leads to the perfect slap. The crisis is over, the scene written, the obstacle overcome, and they are ready to move on, bringing Act One to a close with Selznick's determined cry, "Twenty-two chapters down—forty one to go."

As Act Two begins, the fifth day has arrived, and the trio is closing in on its goal: the completion of the screenplay. But before the final words come clacking out of the typewriter, the three weary workmen clash yet again about the value of this enormous project: was it worth it? Will the movie succeed? Given its representation of the old South, slavery, and the Ku Klux Klan, does it deserve to succeed? And more generally, Hecht raises the question of the fundamental value of the movies as a cultural phenomenon: "And when it's all over, what have the movies been? A flood of claptrap that's helped bitch up the world."

Once again Hecht attacks Selznick for his social and political gutlessness, accusing him of pulling his punches by making movies that ignore the realities of the contemporary world. And why? Because Selznick is a Jew, fearful that if he steps on the toes of the gentiles they will run him out of town. But Selznick protests that he doesn't have the power to do what Hecht expects of him. The producer only seems to be in charge; in reality it's the public that determines what kind of movies get made. So he has to make sure that this movie will fill the seats. Back to work.

As Selznick narrates the novel's ending scenes, Hecht becomes increasingly incredulous about the lack of a final resolution in the relationship between Scarlett and Rhett: "We don't know whether she gets him back, whether he changes his mind—? . . . . You can't end a movie like that." But Selznick insists on remaining faithful to the novel, despite Hecht's protests and Fleming's pleas. He even wants to keep the last line, "Tomorrow is another day," which Hecht finds unbearably trite and vapid. But Selznick insists. Hecht (promised a hefty check from Selznick for one of his political causes) capitulates, and after 120 hours of toil and tears, the job is done.

Fleming and Hecht having eagerly left the ruined office, Selznick telephones his father-in-law, the formidable Louis B. Mayer, Hollywood colossus: “Poppa, I have some very good news for you—We’re making a movie.”

**THE CHARACTERS.** Characters in a play are largely defined by their primary objectives: Macbeth wants to hold onto the throne of Scotland; Blanche DuBois wants to escape from the harshness of the real world; Walter Younger wants to start a business and get rich. These objectives shape the characters’ actions, driving Macbeth to murder, Blanche to alcohol, and Walter to financial folly.

In *Moonlight and Magnolias* Selznick wants to prove he has the right stuff by making a successful movie; Hecht wants to salve his conscience by turning the novel into a tract for social justice; and Fleming just wants to get the damn thing done.

The most powerful of these objectives is Selznick’s. The film will appear under his name, and be identified as his responsibility; his achievement will be measured by the yardsticks of Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg, Hollywood legends; failure will mean financial and professional ruin, humiliation in public, and shame in the eyes of his family:

I need this, guys. I need it. You have no idea how badly I need it. My father-in-law’s just waiting for me to fall on my ass. He told Irene [Selznick’s wife, Mayer’s daughter], ‘Keep away from that schnook. He’ll be a bum. . . . Give me a hit fellas. A *hit*.

These high stakes turn Selznick into the relentless, driving force that keeps the play moving; he is the engine of the plot. His absolute need to get the job done, and done right, account for his refusal to allow Hecht or Fleming to leave the office, his insistence that they eat nothing but bananas and peanuts—“brain food”—his determination to push Hecht forward to the end of the script without surrendering to his ideological demands, and his willingness to look foolish as he re-enacts the romantic scenes from the novel.

He does whatever it takes to get what he wants, and in the end he is in possession of the script for what will become the greatest box office success in the history of the movies.

Hecht also has a forceful purpose: to advance his political ideas by injecting them into the script. He wants to write a screenplay that subverts the novel’s celebration of the antebellum South and its whitewashing of slavery, and to create instead a film that forces “America to look its ugly mug in the face.” But that’s not what he does. At every critical juncture—from the slap scene to the corny last line—he capitulates to Selznick, and follows Margaret Mitchell’s lead rather than his own convictions.

Why is this? For one thing, as screenwriter, Hecht will occupy a relatively obscure place among the creative ensemble responsible for *Gone with the Wind*. It remains one of the enduring frustrations of Hollywood writers that they labor in virtual anonymity. Aside from film buffs,

who knows that major authors such as Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Bertolt Brecht wrote for the movies? “Schmucks with typewriters,” is how producer Jack Warner described screenwriters, expressing in three words their standing in the Hollywood pecking order.

So despite his ardent social views—expressed frequently and at great length in the play—Hecht has little personal stake in the outcome of Selznick’s project. If it succeeds, Selznick takes the credit; if it fails, Selznick shoulders the blame. Hecht just cashes his check and moves on to the next assignment. In fact, he was not even named in the original writing credits for *Gone with the Wind*.

Victor Fleming is the man in the middle. He shares neither Hecht’s political views, nor Selznick’s passionate devotion to the novel. Indeed, he refers to the book as “piffle.” But he’s not a literary man; he’s a director and he tells people what to do: “Put the camera here,” “Put the light there,” “Say the line this way, not that way.” In fact, as mentioned in the play, he slapped Judy Garland during the filming of *The Wizard of Oz* to cure her of a fit of the giggles. She was holding up the action; preventing him from getting the job done. And that’s his intention: to finish the damn thing and move on.

FLEMING. If you can write it, I can shoot it.

HECHT. The politics of it? At a time like this?

FLEMING. You’re confusing me with somebody who gives a s\*\*t.

As far as Fleming is concerned, Hecht’s continuous sounding-off about politics and race is nothing but sand in the gears, even if it is 1939 and a German racist is tooling up for war. Hecht’s moralizing is just an adult version of Judy Garland’s giggles, another obstacle on the road to the finish line. And in the play he winds up slapping Hecht, just as he did little Judy.

**THE THEMES.** The sixteenth-century English aristocrat and author, Sir Philip Sidney, wrote that poetry ought to be “a medicine of cherries.” By this he meant that works of art should be morally and spiritually good for you, while also delighting you with their beauty; they should teach edifying lessons and also be a pleasure to consume. But while Sidney advocated that art strike a balance between the useful and the sweet, the fact is that ever since Aristotle begged to disagree with Plato about the value of tragedy, there has been a sharp debate between the medicine-men and the cherry-pickers about the nature and purpose of art, with the medicine-men emphasizing art’s moral responsibilities, and the cherry-pickers its power to please.

This dispute became particularly strident in the twentieth century when, following the Bolshevik Revolution, critics in the Soviet Union demanded that all Communist artists follow the precepts of “socialist realism,” a doctrine imposing on art the duty to stoke revolutionary fervor in everybody who read a novel, saw a play, or looked at a painting. Art was to be a strong medicine, as red as cherries, though not perhaps as sweet. This dogma was also followed outside the Soviet Union by left-wing artists who wanted to nudge the revolution along in their own countries.

At the same time, artists such as Picasso, Joyce, Kafka, and Cocteau were experimenting with non-realistic ways of representing the world in words and images, the better to astonish and delight their audiences. Needless to say, Marxist critics deplored this work, dismissing it as decadent bourgeois formalism, overripe fruit totally lacking in revolutionary value.

In *Moonlight and Magnolias* we see these opposed forces confront each other in the clash between Hecht on the one hand, and Fleming and Selznick on the other.

Hecht is a medicine man—in principle, at least. As he says more than once, he wants *Gone with the Wind* to be a kind of purgative, forcing America to look at its “ugly mug.” This, he believes, will cause the country to recoil from its racism, and it might even undermine any latent sympathies with the racist and anti-Semitic dictatorships in Europe.

Fleming and Selznick are cherry-pickers. They desire that *Gone with the Wind* be a huge popular hit, delighting millions, and advancing their careers. Which is what it turned out to be.

In subsequent years, Hollywood has been dispensing medicine more liberally than Selznick did. Films such as *12 Angry Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Schindler’s List* and *Philadelphia*—to name a very few—have clear designs on the moral sentiments of the audience, imparting lessons about racism, anti-Semitism, and homosexuality that Hecht surely would have endorsed.

There’s another running dispute in *Moonlight and Magnolias* about who contributes most to the gestation of a film. As we saw, Hecht votes for the writer; Fleming for the director; and Selznick for the producer. Nobody nominates the actors—the film artists who make the most vivid impression on the public. The great director, Alfred Hitchcock, is rumored to have said that “actors are cattle.” The paying customers see them as more like gods. This play mostly ignores them, instead showing how the cinematic sausage is made by desperate men toiling unglamorously in an “apocalyptically” chaotic office.

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. Do you have to be familiar with *Gone with the Wind* to appreciate *Moonlight and Magnolias*?
2. If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Which character do you sympathize with the most? Why?
4. For which character do you have the least sympathy? Why?

5. Do you think works of art such as plays, movies, novels, and paintings have an obligation to teach moral lessons? Why? Why not?
6. Do you think it's enough for a work of art just to be beautiful and enjoyable? Why? Why not?
7. Is Selznick's behavior toward Hecht and Fleming justifiable? Why? Why not?
8. Have you thought about the relative importance of directors, writers, and producers in the making of a film? Which character do you agree with about this issue?
9. What does the producer of a film actually do?
10. There were writers for silent movies even though there was no dialogue the audience could hear. Why do you think this was so?
11. How important to the meaning of the play are the physical changes in the set?