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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

HOW LONG IS GOOD?

FOLLOWING criticism of the length of some recent films, and of the David Selznick production *Since You Went Away* in particular, I have been sent by United Artists a copy of a statement on the subject by Selznick himself. It is too long a statement to be given in full, but is of wide enough general interest to be worth quoting in part:

"Criticism of the length of pictures is nothing new (Selznick begins). It dates back to the first time some courageous producer of the pioneering days decided that pictures could be longer than the 15 or 30-second subjects of the Penny Arcades. I am sure that a little research would reveal that there was a great outcry when somebody took a chance and made a picture that actually ran a full reel in length. . . I myself have never believed in arbitrary lengths for motion pictures. A film can be too long in five minutes, and too short in three hours. It is entirely a matter of the subject, and how long it takes to tell it properly. Some of the greatest stories have been written in a few paragraphs: some of the greatest stories ever told, the works of Dickens and Tolstoy, for instance, each require a thousand pages or more of print.

"If you will accept this statement which I regard as axiomatic, the whole question narrows itself down to the ability of the producer to edit the picture to its proper length. As for myself, I have never made paramount either my own opinion, or the opinions of my associates in the production of my pictures: and I hope I will give no offence by saying that I have never made paramount the opinion of the professional critics either. (I hasten to add, fearfully but sincerely, that I await the reviews eagerly; and that I study them most avidly and most respectfully. There now!)

"Public is the Judge"

"I let the public be the final and sole judge. . . I have long since abandoned the simple preview card which is still used by most studios: instead I use a very elaborate questionnaire form. . . I have found that there is a good deal of truth to the statement that everyone has two businesses: their own and the picture business. Contrary to the predictions of the experts that the members of the audience would not be interested in filling out such a form, I receive two to three times as many answers and comments as studios normally receive on the usual preview card form. . . It is apparent that great care is taken with the answers.

"Two of the many questions on this preview form deal with length. The public is asked whether it has found the picture too long; and it is also asked what sections of the picture, or what individual scenes, it found too long. Additionally, it is asked what scenes it liked the least. All of these answers are carefully tabulated and analysed. If in a single audience there should be as many as a dozen people who react unfavourably, the picture is re-edited to meet this negative criticism. I have sometimes

previewed over a period of months, as many as a dozen times, until such criticisms are eliminated. I continue to edit, and continue to retake, until the preview reaction is not merely unanimously favourable but enthusiastic, and until all criticisms, including importantly those of length, are eliminated. . .

The Case of "Copperfield"

"There are many exhibitors who have always objected to very long films for the sound business reason that they result in a fewer number of shows per day. An exception from the outset has been Nicholas M. Schenck who, as President of Loew's, is not only the head of one of the most important producing companies (M-G-M), but also one of the principal exhibitors of the United States. At the time I produced *David Copperfield*, the average picture of importance ran 7,000 to 8,000 feet in length. . . In its first cut, *David Copperfield* ran over 14,000 feet, or almost twice the usual length of films at that time. As I was made somewhat nervous by the opinions of the 'experts,' I asked Mr. Schenck what was the maximum length in which he thought we could release *David Copperfield*. Mr. Schenck gave me a reply which I have never forgotten, and have often quoted. 'What do you mean, how long can you make it?' asked Mr. Schenck. 'How long is it good?' After many previews I edited *David Copperfield* down to approximately 11,000 feet; and there were no adverse reactions throughout the world.

"Perhaps contrary to general belief, I do not try to make pictures 'long.' In our editing, they are reduced to the minimum footage necessary to their effectiveness as entertainment. *A Star Is Born* ran one hour and fifty-two minutes. *Nothing Sacred* and *Intermezzo* ran only a few minutes more than an hour each. In each case the story was a simple one and required no more than this time to tell.

"In *Since You Went Away* I attempted to tell the story of an American family during wartime, and of the attitudes of the American people during the crucial year 1943. It was the most difficult construction problem we had ever faced, the more so because I wanted so far as possible to cover individuals in all walks of life, of all races and creeds, of all the services. To do this in terms of the story of one family, obviously made the problem doubly difficult. Yet despite its length and the resultant fewer number of shows per day, the picture has been the most successful film in this country since *Gone With the Wind*.

What Shaw Said

"I have never understood why motion picture audiences, many of whom are accustomed to seeing three or four hours of film on a double-bill, could be expected to criticise a picture that it likes solely because it is longer than the average film. Many an evening's film fare is composed of one picture that in quality usually ranges all the way from poor to excellent: a second picture that in quality usually ranges all the way from bad to mediocre; and a few short subjects. It seems to defy all logic to assume

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