



CurtainUp

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A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review ***Moonlight and Magnolias***

By [Laura Hitchcock](#)

*David {O. Selznick}, you and I know the screenplays are just a
pimple on the ass of the production. --- Victor Fleming*

Like British actress Vivien Leigh, Irish writer Ron Hutchinson has inserted himself into that American classic *Gone With The Wind* by conceiving a hilarious week in which its producer David O. Selznick (Rob Nagle) locked writer Ben Hecht (Kip Gilman) and director Victor Fleming (Greg Mullavey) in his office to write the screenplay for Margaret Mitchell's best-seller. You don't have to be familiar with that or with movie-making to enjoy this full-blooded romp. Hutchinson uses the screwball comedy genre with a dash of Frank Capra ladled into Ben Hecht's political speeches and it all works.

We don't need to worry about historical accuracy here, since what happened at Tara stays at Tara. We know there was lots of fiddling with the script credited posthumously mainly to Sidney Howard. Hecht, a respected journalist was also a dab Hollywood hand with scripts, and Fleming, a man's man, was Clark Gable's director of choice, brought in after Gable complained that George Cukor, beloved by his female stars as a woman's director, was paying too much attention to them.

After Selznick (Rob Nagle) orders his unquestioning robotized secretary Miss Poppengul (Lynda Lenet) to bring them writing supplies and a week's worth of peanuts and bananas, he locks the door, pockets the key, and, in a glorious travesty of a torture chamber, he and Fleming act out GWTW while screaming "Write it!" at Hecht. Hecht rages that nobody wants to see Civil War movies (that's an error, *Birth of a Nation* was one of the first box office hits) and Fleming boasts that he created Clark Gable but by the top of Scene II, the floor is strewn with crumpled papers, the dapper executives designer shirts are limp and Hecht turns green at the sight of a banana.

Hutchinson, whose 1984 debut play *Rat in the Skull* (see link) about an IRA suspect arrested by the police, doesn't stray completely from the political

scene. Hecht, desperate to write about important issues, seizes on the scene where Scarlett slaps the Negro maid Prissy when she finds out Prissy lied about knowing everything about birthing babies.

As Fleming writhes in Melanie's birth throes, Hecht rants at Selznick that their joint Jewish heritage should compel them to write about real people in the throes of political oppression and that Scarlett slapping Prissy is racist. His efforts to prove his point range from writing a Communist manifesto for Prissy to calling Hollywood executives and asking them if they consider Selznick a Jew or an American. Unmoved, or at least not physically, Selznick responds with an almost poetic speech about the power of the people, the ticket-buying public, climaxing with, "To stay in business, you have to give people what they want, not what is good for them." To which Fleming responds with his one perceptive line, "You can't blame how lousy the movies are on the movie audience." Despite Selznick's professed materialism, he made a masterpiece out of Mitchell's melodrama with a lot of help from people who were far from friends.

Laura Fine designed a generic executive office for Selznick, Gelareh Khalioun on costumes had the most fun with Miss Poppunghul, Lindsay Jones' sound design pulled in all the GWTW themes with sly consistency and Derrick McDaniel used his lighting design to make the act of creation a dream fugue state. Director Scott Cummins knows his way around a screwball comedy without losing sight of Hecht's passion, Selznick's perseverance and Fleming's preening vitality. They're abetted by a delicious turn by Lynda Lenet as Selznick's 1940s-type slave-secretary Miss Poppunghul. Kip Gilman anchors the cast in a characterization that displays comic timing as well as committed and passionate outrage. Mullavey's versatile comic skills are indispensable and he has a lovely tenor voice we'd like to hear more of than "Tara's theme." Nagle plows dead ahead with his eye on the through line as a determined Selznick, who never lets us forget the importance of the producer whose credo is, "In the beginning was the deal."

Editor's Note: Maybe this play needs a California audience to really resonate-- as it didn't during its run in New York where CurtainUp was not alone in being less than enthused in its comments. To read that review [go here](#). Hutchinson's *Rat In the Skull*, garnered a more favorable review when it was revived I at Berkshire Theatre Festival. To read that review, [go here](#).

MOONLIGHT AND MAGNOLIAS

Playwright: Ron Hutchinson

Director: Scott Cummins

Cast: Kip Gilman (Ben Hecht), Greg Mullavey (Victor Fleming), Rob Nagle (David O. Selznick), Lynda Lenet (Miss Poppunghul)

Set Design: Laura Fine

Lighting Design: Derrick McDaniel

Costume Design: Gelareh Khalioun

Sound Design: Lindsay Jones

Running Time: Two hours fifteen minutes with one intermission

Running Dates: September 2-November 5, 2006.

Where: The Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles,

Reservations: (310) 477-2055.

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on September 2.

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