

## Taking "Gone With The Wind" from Screen to Stage

Director's Notes by Ira David Wood III, Executive Director, Theatre In The Park

A Theatre In The Park patron brought the play -- *Don't Cry For Me, Margaret Mitchell* -- to my attention several years ago. She had seen it at Virginia's Barter Theatre and thought it would be perfect for us. When I contacted Barter's Artistic Director, I was surprised and delighted to learn that one of the two authors of the play was a former friend and classmate of mine at The North Carolina School of the Arts - Duke Ernsberger. Everything else fell into place rather quickly after that.

The play - *Don't Cry For Me, Margaret Mitchell* - is based on a true story that has to do with the writing of the motion picture script for "*Gone With The Wind*". Three men - David O. Selznick, Ben Hecht and Victor Fleming - are locked in a room for a week in order to come up with a shooting script for the epic motion picture. They are allowed to eat nothing but bananas and peanuts. The situation is obviously ripe with comedic possibilities.

Most of us ... at least those my age ... certainly have specific memories of first seeing "*Gone With The Wind*". I honestly still get misty-eyed whenever I hear the score and read the opening prologue: "*There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world, Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered, a Civilization gone with the wind...*" Oh, my dear God! Could any true Southerner ever be emotionally immune to those words?

"*Gone With The Wind*" (1939) is of course considered to be the most beloved, enduring and popular film of all time. The script was derived from Margaret Mitchell's first and only published, best-selling novel of 1,037 pages that first appeared in 1936, but was mostly written in the late 1920s. Producer David O. Selznick acquired the film rights to Mitchell's novel in July, 1936 for \$50,000 - a record amount at the time to an unknown author for her first novel, causing some to label the film "Selznick's Folly."

Joel T. Horton, who plays David O. Selznick in our production, says: "Getting to play David O. Selznick, the famous producer, with his passion and obsession for perfection, in a story about the creation of the screenplay for "*Gone With The Wind*" is amazing and exciting. Working with Ira David Wood III for the first time makes this even more exciting. This is a really physical show, which I love, and I believe the audience will too. If you love great comedies, you need to see this show. If you are a fan of "*Gone With The Wind*", you HAVE to see this show!"

The business of motion picture making has always intrigued me - and I love the stories about what went on behind the scenes of some of the classic movies we enjoy today. For the burning of Atlanta in "*Gone With The Wind*", for instance, David Selznick burned down old movie sets still standing on MGM's back lot. Los Angeles panicked because of all the smoke. They thought the entire city was on fire!

For years, it was a closely guarded studio secret that Clark Gable wore false teeth. He was happiest in movie scenes of action and wisecracking, when he had to threaten sexuality rather than demonstrate it, and the part of Rhett Butler was the first in which he knew he'd have to explore himself. Even though he never attempted anything as complex before or afterwards, Rhett remains the part with which Clark Gable is most identified. Victor Fleming's most important contribution to "*Gone With The Wind*" was his personal knowledge of the actor, and his ability to release him from his fears.

Timothy Corbett, who plays the motion picture director Victor Fleming in our production, says: "It is a daunting task for an actor when you are portraying an actual person and not a fictional character. First you must take into account the history of the person but also

what is given to you, as an actor, from the script. Though the story is based on actual accounts liberties are taken on the characters and you want to respect the playwrights and their words, you want to bring some of the true history into your own interpretation of the character. Knowing that Fleming was once a stunt car driver and a very good mechanic before becoming a director and from the script he is described as a "man's man" I'm working him as a no-nonsense, straight to the point kind of man. He has the sense of mind that the other two men seem to lack. As they head off on a tangent, Victor tries to bring them back to reality and the task at hand. Sometimes he can bring them back but as the story continues he himself loses some of his sense and simply joins the insanity. That is where the fun of the play comes in and I hope the audiences truly enjoy not really knowing where these characters are heading from one line to the next."

Leslie Howard detested the role of Ashley Wilkes. "I hate the damn part," he wrote to his daughter. "I'm not nearly beautiful or young enough for Ashley, and it makes me sick being fixed up to look attractive." As for the film itself he described it as a: "terrible lot of nonsense -- heaven help me if I ever read the book."

Few people may know as well that toward the end of her life, Vivien Leigh actually turned against the character of Scarlett O'Hara. "I never liked Scarlett," she once remarked. "I knew it was a marvelous part, but I never cared for her." She also insisted that she never went after the role, that she believed George Cukor still favored Katharine Hepburn, and that the screen test was only a "lark." By this time, however, she was most probably tired of being haunted by a legend; and, of course, she was not well, and not happy. The truth is that she read "*Gone With The Wind*" in London when it first came out, and was chomping at the bit for a chance to do the role.

The more you know about a motion picture, the more you tend to appreciate all of the elements that had to come together in order for it to be made. Aside from royally entertaining you, this play also educates in a delightful sort of way.

Larry Evans, who plays writer Ben Hecht in our production says: "I can't remember a time in my life where I wasn't passionate about movies and show business. It was implanted in my brain very early that "*Gone With The Wind*" was the greatest movie ever made. At that time, of course, a 30 year old movie about a 16 year old tempestuous Southern Belle didn't have much of an appeal to me and my adolescent yearnings. Not until I picked up a film camera and starting making my own little films did the grand magnificence of "*Gone With The Wind*" occur to me. Working with David Wood and three excellent actors, has made it easy to immerse myself into the world of David O. Selznick, Ben Hecht, Vic Fleming and "*Gone With The Wind*". At times, I actually feel the daunting task of having only 7 days to write the screenplay for the greatest movie ever made. Sometimes I feel if I watch the movie I'll see my name in the credits."

It also occurred to me that there was more than a generous amount of serious theatre fare being produced on our area stages. In my opinion, there's always room for more comedy - even though comedies are actually harder to do than tragedies. I mean, you can fake a dramatic scene ...tears, anger ... but you can't fake comedy. A joke or sight gag is either funny or it's not -- and you're graded immediately by the audience.

Like language, laughter is a basic part of the being human. Additionally, comedies are good for your physical and mental health. You see, there's a physiological change when we laugh. Muscles are stretched in our face and body, the pulse rate and blood pressure go up, we breathe faster and as a result more oxygen is sent to the body tissues. Did you know that researchers have discovered that laughing increases both the heart rate and calorie burn by 20%. The longer people laugh, the greater the effects. Just 15 minutes of laughter

a day burns 40 calories ... depending on how much you weigh, and the duration and intensity of the laughter. How about that? It feels good and it's healthy for you too!

What makes *Don't Cry For Me, Margaret Mitchell* even funnier is that it's based on a true event. Selznick did indeed lock himself, Victor Fleming and writer Ben Hecht in his office in order to come up with a shooting script for "*Gone With The Wind*". This "imprisonment" nearly drove Ben Hecht nuts because he had to produce a script from a novel he'd never read. Believing that food slowed up the creative process, Selznick limited their lunches to a snack of bananas and salted peanuts. On the fifth day, in the act of eating a banana, Selznick collapsed and had to be revived by a doctor. On the sixth, a blood vessel burst in Fleming's eye. Hecht conserved his strength by dozing on a couch while Selznick and Fleming acted out the scenes, and at the end of the week he had completed a revised version of the first half. It was a performance of sheer technique, not invention, and he wanted no credit and took none.

That's cinematic history - and, as they say, truth is often stranger (funnier) than fiction.

What obviously jumps out at you is a totally insane and hysterical plotline for a truly hysterical play. It's certainly an opportunity to laugh and learn -- and that, in my opinion, is what constitutes good theatre.