



Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in "Gone with the Wind," 1939. Paulette Goddard, right, almost got the role of Scarlett O'Hara.

‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a hoot’

R. Marc Kantrowitz//December 30, 2023

On Dec. 15, 1939, "Gone with the Wind" premieres at Loew's Grand Theater in Atlanta. At approximately four hours, it is the longest and most expensive movie to date. It is also one of the most successful and acclaimed films ever, despite racial criticisms.

In all imaginable ways, the making of the movie was a monumental task, thought initially to be insurmountable. Among the battles the producers, writers and director had to contend with were the censors. A single word — "damn" — threw all concerned into a tizzy.

So popular and well-known is the movie that a detailed synopsis is not really needed. The story's melodrama is overshadowed not only by the sheer spectacle of the movie using new coloring techniques, but by the brilliance of the performances, which garnered Oscar nominations for Best Actor, Best Actress, and two for Best Supporting Actress.

The journey started nearly a decade earlier with Peggy Marsh laboring over her Civil War novel — named at different times "Bugles Rang True," "Tote the Weary Load," "Another Day," and "Not in Our Stars" — about Pansy O'Hara living in Fontenoy Hall.

With many stops and starts along the way, Marsh, at the urging of her husband, John, traveled to a local hotel where Harold Latham, a book editor from New York's Macmillan Publishers, was in town looking for southern authors. Marsh, who had earlier met Latham at a luncheon, handed him 1,200 sloppy and misshapen pages, some typewritten, others written by hand, with cross outs and edits, all secured by a string. Latham took the manuscript and placed it in a satchel he had to purchase to lug the pile of pages back to New York. There he grew enchanted at the depth and grandeur of what he was reading.

When he received a telegram from Marsh telling him to send the manuscript back as she had changed her mind, he responded with a contract, complete with an advance, to finish the book. Initially hesitant, she acquiesced, once again with the encouragement of John. Over the course of six months, she diligently sat and reworked and rewrote. She renamed the work, inspired by a line in a poem she had recently read about a man pining over a lost love: "I have forgot much, Cynara. Gone with the wind."

Pansy became Scarlett and Fontenoy renamed Tara. And last of all, Peggy Marsh decided to use her formal first name, Margaret, along with her maiden name, Mitchell.

Hollywood was approached prior to publication. MGM's Louie B. Mayer thought a movie about the Civil War with selfish and profiteering protagonists and an unhappy ending was unappetizing. Jack Warner mulled lending Bette Davis and Errol Flynn to play the lead roles but passed when Davis didn't want to work with Flynn again.

RKO thought the costs of production unacceptably high. David O. Selznick, who had recently created International Pictures, read the telegram his story editor, Kay Brown, sent from New York to "drop everything and buy it." His response: "[M]ost sorry to have to say no in face of your enthusiasm for the story."

Tunes changed when Macmillan released the thousand or so page tome, which immediately became a critically acclaimed bestseller, soon garnering a Pulitzer and the National Book Award. Realizing the error of his earlier judgment, Selznick quickly reversed course and offered more money than had ever been offered before to purchase the film rights — \$50,000. For Selznick, a compulsive and reckless gambler, it would be his greatest wager.

The young and mercurial Selznick, who meticulously, painstakingly and maddeningly would oversee every single aspect of the film, was off and running and assembled his team. The acclaimed George Cukor was named director, and Clark “The King” Gable was immediately pursued to play Rhett Butler. Samuel Goldwyn noted Gable’s star power: “When someone like Robert Montgomery comes on the screen, you know he has cojones. When Gable comes on, you can hear them clanging.” While other leading men were briefly considered, the role was Gable’s.

It would not be so easy casting Scarlett O’Hara. The two years it took to cast the sexy, sassy, smart, selfish, self-reliant and attractive female lead involved nearly every age-appropriate actress in Hollywood and beyond. Some 1,400 would be considered in one way or another. As Selznick became overwhelmed, he whittled down the list to about 60 and then decided to go with an established actress, the well-respected, attractive and talented Paulette Goddard.

There was only one problem. Goddard was living with movie star Charlie Chaplin. Given his rather scandalous private life (his first two wives were 16 years old) and controversial left-wing leanings, Chaplin had baggage. Although claiming to be married in Singapore, they could not produce a marriage license. Given the times, the moralists and religious howled, and Goddard was out.

Selznick’s brother Myron, the head of Hollywood’s most powerful talent agency, provided the solution. Prior to the cast even being assembled, the Atlanta burning scene was filmed. As the ruins of Atlanta smoldered late into the night, a rather inebriated Myron arrived from England with his client, Vivian Leigh, who was unknown in America, and introduced her to his brother. “Hey, Genius, here’s your Scarlett O’Hara.”

Selznick was instantly taken, later exclaiming, “The dying flames were lighting up her face. I took one look and knew that she was right. It’s a look I’ll never forget.”

That she had a somewhat similar Chaplin-Goddard “sinful” relationship with her English boyfriend and fellow actor, Laurence Olivier, for whom she left her husband and 5-year-old daughter, apparently served as little deterrence to her hiring.

The remaining casting, both before and after Leigh was brought on board, went more smoothly, although there were some bumps along the way. After the

Atlanta scene, filming started out slowly with the respected Cukor, whom Gable disliked and with whom Selznick had creative differences. He was fired and replaced by a friend of Gable, Victor Fleming, who was pulled away from directing “The Wizard of Oz.”

Once hired, Fleming complained of there being no workable script. Despite many having worked on the script — 11 paid, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, and six informally solicited — no coherent script existed. Filming was shut down as yet another writer, Ben Hecht, was grabbed from the Marx Brothers’ “At the Circus” and brought in.

When filming resumed, the two stars occasionally clashed: Leigh, the well-prepared and at times irritating perfectionist, at odds with the more laid back, not as well-prepared and less hard-working Gable.

Scenes that were shot were often hectic, with obstacles that needed to be overcome. Twenty-seven different deteriorating versions of a dress worn by Leigh over a lengthy passage of time were required and assembled, as were 1,500 costumes for the dying and wounded Confederate soldiers lying on the grounds of the Atlanta railway. The fact that half were dummies made no difference since they still had to be dressed. Additionally, hundreds of hoop dresses were made, 1,500 drawings sketched, and numerous sets and models built.

Though the film was faithful to Mitchell’s book, changes nevertheless had to be made to satisfy the “Hays Code” — named after Will H. Hays, a Presbyterian elder who was president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America and who set up the Motion Picture Production Code and its guidelines. Kisses had to be relatively brief, sexual heat turned down if not off, a woman’s leg hidden unless dancing, neither man nor woman shown in bed even if married, only the bad smoked, soldiers never cursed, and the “n” word was never used.

And then, one final roadblock. The booked ended with, “My dear, I don’t give a damn.” While three different writers claimed to have added “Frankly,” Hayes banned all cursing. Alternate lines such as “Frankly, I don’t give a hoot,” “Frankly, my dear, I just don’t care,” “It has become of no concern to me,” “My indifference is boundless,” and, what had to be a favorite among the very few, “It makes my gorge rise,” were all considered and rejected as Selznick recognized the power of the line as it had been written. After much dickering, Hayes finally came around, whether due to his love of the book, his artistic admiration of the word’s

necessity, or perhaps money or other perks exchanged. Tales of his levying a \$5,000 fine exist to this day.

A preview in September resulted in a standing ovation. The 37-year-old Selznick and his cohorts seated in the rear knew they had a hit. It had to be after spending more than \$4 million, the most money ever to make a movie. A grand budget required grand publicity, and the city of Atlanta obliged with a three-day celebration involving hundreds of thousands of fans and culminating in a statewide holiday.

The stars arrived to raucous cheers. Former President Jimmy Carter later shared that the spectacle was “the biggest event to happen in the South in my lifetime.” Well over a thousand viewed the movie and eagerly embraced the story of their past with its “eye-arresting, pulse-quickening, heart-warming details,” as reported by the *Atlantic Constitution*.

Sadly, due to segregation, Hattie McDaniel could not attend despite Gable insisting she be allowed. Rather than create a distraction, McDaniel bowed out.

The nation flocked to and adored the epic, making it the number 1 movie ever up to that point. The 12th Academy Awards fell in line with 13 nominations. There were 10 wins, two of which were honorary. Emcee Bob Hope joked, “Welcome to this benefit for David Selznick.”

The major awards won included Selznick for Outstanding Production; Leigh for Best Actress (“Leigh doesn’t play Scarlett; she is Scarlett,” said Hedda Hopper, who earlier predicted doom when she was cast); Fleming for Best Director (despite the contributions of three others); Hattie McDaniel for Best Supporting Actress; and, after he was tragically killed in a tractor accident on his Massachusetts farm, Sidney Howard for Best Screenwriter (despite nearly a score of others contributing).

A disappointed Gable lost to Robert Donat, who starred in “Goodbye Mr. Chips.” As for McDaniel, *Daily Variety* wrote, “Not only was she the first of her race [to be nominated and] to receive an Award, but she was also the first Negro ever to sit at an Academy banquet.”

Criticized by some for playing the role as she had, McDaniel reacted as Mammy might have, feistily retorting, “[I’d] rather make \$700 a week playing a maid than \$7 being one.”

As for Mitchell, she never published another book.

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