

The Provocation of Imagination
In
Three Small Books by Two Insightful Authors
By
Neil Thomas Proto



Opening Sequence*

A discernable era of transformation and aspiration occurred in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: European playwrights were challenged successfully by American ones, notably Eugene O'Neill; European techniques of theatre and movies, including by Friedrich Murnau and Fritz Lang, and the works of varied American playwrights and novelists were transformed into American

silent movies; the technology of sound and talkies and theories of presentation to American movie audiences were formed in Hollywood, especially by Irving Thalberg; and the contentious power of and between the director and producer emerged. Stella Adler, actor and teacher, described one thread of the era without constraint or audition: "[W]e played *their* [European] plays. We saw them and acted in them...and didn't understand one word of it." ¹

Adler was speaking for actors “on stage” in any medium. She was speaking, too, of the opportunity for imagination in theatre and movies in this era of transformation by all its aspiring participants: writers, directors, producers, lighting, staging, and costume experts, audiences, and, from the outset, labor union and commercial institutions with grand financial social imperatives not always congruent in purpose.

These three books reflect essential threads in understanding that transformation and beyond it, not as history or conventional biography, but a deeper melding of both of those into a functional and theoretical analysis that underpin the making of theatre and movies. That is, the making of the American culture and the aspirations of those who defined it.



Dr. Ana Salzberg, University of Dundee, Scotland, UK



Director Arne Zaslove, Seattle, Wa.

The two authors are Dr. Ana Salzberg and Director Arne Zaslove. Their books, in the order I read them: *Produced By Irving Thalberg, Theory of Studio-Era Filmmaking* (2020) and *Beyond the Looking Glass, Narcissism and Female Stardom in Studio-Era Hollywood* (2014), both by Dr. Salzberg, and *UnMasking the Mask, Insights from Physical Theatre and Life* (2020) by Director Zaslove.

Although I know Zaslove as the historically imbued practitioner (described in the review), I came to their work foremost through Salzberg, not as the skilled academic historian that she plainly is, but as the cultural window she opened that shed light and welcomed inquiry into the imagination and collaborative impulse of those that made plays and movies such a force in tempering the American as much as the audience’s identity. Her work also gilded, unexpectedly, anecdotal dimensions onto the practical implications and meaning of Zaslove’s work.

I read both authors during the winter of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and in the midst of promotion for

Fearless, my biographical exploration of A. Bartlett Giamatti, and other projects that mattered to me, including a new play, “Hourglass.” Threads of that work centered on the meaning and tumult of immigration and migration over generations during this same era of transformation and aspiration and the values in play that defined how to be a “good American” or “responsible citizen.” Theatre and movies mattered, knowingly to all the participants, in the making of those judgments. I expected engaging, albeit focused work from these modest sized books, not a serious distraction from my

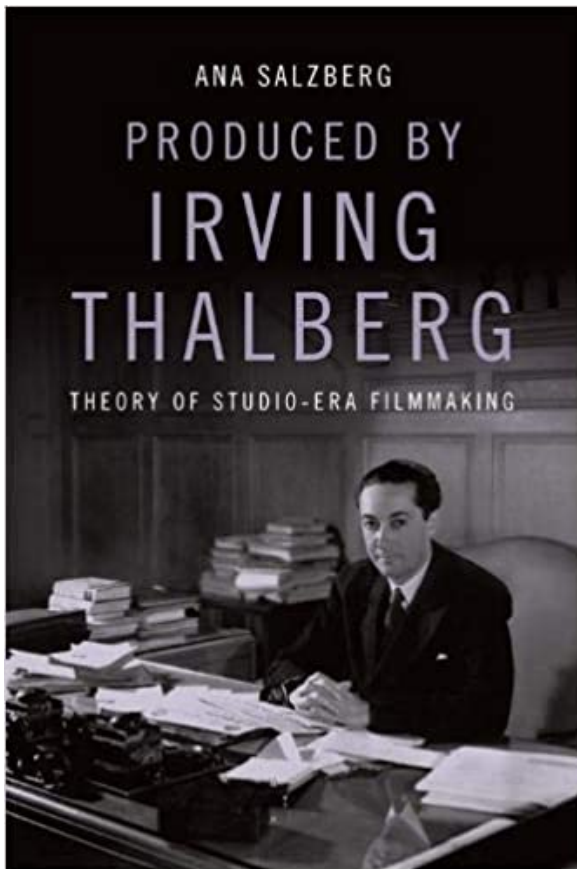
obligations. That small aspiration failed, yet for reasons I welcomed.

Below are the three reviews, written for Amazon. By the third book, Zaslave’s, I came to appreciate that I’d learned much more than I expected and wanted to craft into words, if only in preliminary tribute to each book, praise and criticism intended, in part, to encourage more readers to read them. And, in that “serious distraction from my obligations,” extended now with the preparation of this Opening Sequence, I expected to gain moments of contemplative joy. I did. I learned yet more.

* “Opening Sequence” or “Title Sequence” is the art form of introducing a television series, its setting, main characters, writers, producer and director, usually accompanied by theme music that, when successful, set a deeply memorable image of the characters. Classic examples of success are *St. Elsewhere*, *Law and Order*, *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*, and *ER*. Also the reviews as posted have neither endnotes nor images. Although I’ve added images in the reviews reproduced here, I’ve confined the endnotes to the “Opening Sequence.”

¹ *Stella Adler on America’s Master Playwrights* (ed. by Barry Paris), Alfred A. Knopf: New York (2012) 4. See also *Stella Adler*, “Eugene O’Neill,” Chapter Two, 16-80; Peter Bogdanovich, “American Theater,” *New York Times* (December 2, 2012), 14 (review of *Stella Adler*); Murnau’s “Sunrise” (1927) captures his cinemagraphic skill and future influence, including on director John Ford, Tag Gallagher, *John Ford, The Man and His Films*. University of California Press: Berkeley, California (1986) 49-54, et sec. See also Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean, A Biography*, St. Martin’s Press: New York, 52. George Stevens, Jr. *The Great Moviemakers, The Next Generation*, Knopf: New York (2012) 695 (Francois Truffaut). On Fritz Lange, see, for example, “Four Around the Women” (1921), described as his “geometric visual style.” *New York Times* (November 11, 2012) 19. See also *The Great Moviemakers*, 58 (Peter Bogdanovich), and the contrast among Murnau, Ford, and Lang, *John Ford, The Man and His Films*, 53-54, et sec.

One other thread in this transformation—in ballet, music, and song—can be gleaned from the life and the European-Russian-American cultural imperatives of Sol Hurok. See, generally, Harlow Robinson, *The Last Impresario, The Life and Times, and Legacy of Sol Hurok*. Viking Press: New York (1994). And, for a broader, and deeper framework involving class and politics, see, for example, Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own, How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Crown Publishers: New York (1988); and Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood, Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*, Princeton University Press: Princeton (1998).



Edinburgh University Press: UK 210pp (2020)

Dr. Ana Salzberg's *Produced by Irving Thalberg* is far more than merely illuminating about Thalberg's contribution to movie-making. She has provided an analytical framework and, within it, a comprehensive and comprehensible understanding of how Thalberg developed and gave very practical and moving life to his theory of how to ensure a movie was transformed from an afternoon or evening theatre event to something quite enduring and memorable. So memorable that, as Salzberg accomplished in explanation in *Produced*—and, as she points out, Thalberg sought and accomplished—his movies, in their themes, often bold even in 21st century ethical and moral terms, and his principles (like oblique casting) that he placed in each, ensured authentic story-telling and special moments that mattered in the

memory of audiences, the actors, and the directors. His work, when melded with the collaborative work of others that he encouraged and channeled, may have tempered the broader public definition of romance, in forms not thought of as conventional.

"I wanted to learn...the 'analytical why' the Motion Picture Academy periodically grants a Thalberg Award....Salzberg, in answering that question, may place in doubt whether some of its recipients warranted receiving it...."

Salzberg's work is not, deliberately, a biography, as she makes plain. *Produced* is properly filled with and praises primary and secondary sources, but not at the cost of getting deep and satisfyingly into what truly endures in Thalberg's brief but accomplished life: his movies and how he thought, theorized, wrote, spoke to others, and acted daily with respect to each of them. During and after reading each section—and watching all of the Thalberg movies that now are readily available—Salzberg's insight comes readily to the fore. She captured more than a conventional biography could. She has shown how, properly examined and without a prejudice to color or to even "talking", Thalberg's movies and the actors—Garbo, Gilbert, Gable, Laughton, Frederic March, especially Norma Shearer and Lon Chaney—warrant renewed entertainment and often awesome revelation in the use of production values (lighting, camera angles and placement, costumes, writing) and acting skills more than any recently produced genre of movies on the market, and, indeed, for far less expense.

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Norma Shearer, Thalberg's wife, and the replica used for the award

Thalberg Award. I now know, and can only suggest that Salzberg, in answering that question, may place in doubt whether some of its recipients warranted receiving it, while affirming the Academy's decision to create and periodically recognize Thalberg's persistently exercised foundational genius in defining the movies and the movie industry at its inception. If six stars existed in tribute to her work, I would have highlighted each.

Neil Thomas Proto
Posted: October 2020

I wanted to learn about why, the "analytical why," the Motion Picture Academy periodically grants a



Thalberg: "Every great film must have one great scene." It began with *Ben-Hur* (1925)

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As good fortune would have it, I read and reviewed Ana Salzberg's recently published, *Produced by Irving Thalberg* (2020), before reading her earlier work

Beyond the Looking Glass, Narcissism and Female Stardom in Studio-Era Hollywood (2014). "Good fortune" because I could recognize the clarity in the evolution in her more succinct

analytical skills, and the origins of her deep and wide knowledge of motion pictures. Like *Thalberg*, *Looking Glass* is best appreciated, in fact I think can only be appreciated, if the reader recognizes Salzberg as the teacher and guide, and the movies, at least the critical ones (she identifies those; and, they are available), as required “reading.” And it’s the movie’s effect as well as its content that matters: her insightful exploration of a movie’s display of narcissism on the movie watcher, who is as much a participant in her analysis as the female actors on the screen. Although the text is not long (178 pages), *Looking Glass* should be savored, over time, including the periodic value of rereading the subtleties and welcoming the imagination to re-appreciate old movies she hasn’t examined.

“*Looking Glass* is best appreciated...if the reader recognizes Salzberg as teacher... and the movies...as required ‘reading.’”

Lurking behind and within each movie, as Salzberg emphasizes, was the “Motion Picture Code” or its lingering values after it ended as understood by directors, producers, and actors that defined how a woman’s aspirations, often the basis for her “narcissism,” were to be molded on film. As best I can tell, all the directors and producers were men: that is, well intentioned and highly skilled, they were both adhering to and interpreting the Code and its lingering values. Salzberg begins with *All About Eve* (1950), the perfect example for her analysis, and, just when you think she might safely end, say with Marilyn Monroe in *Bus Stop* (1956) and *The Misfits* (1961), she examines Grace Kelly (in a brilliant comparison between Kelly and Hepburn in *High Society*

(1956) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), respectively), and then Elizabeth Taylor in, among others, *The VIPs* (1963), in order to dwell on subtleties often missed in the external glamour (the audience expectation as viewer) of the female star and the movie’s cinematic assets.

In *Beyond the Looking Glass*, as in her more recent work, Salzberg forces you back into the movie, to appreciate threads and ideas in it that the director, maybe the producer, definitely the lighting and cinematographer, and the writer, intended and contributed, with the actor’s skill, to transforming the written word onto the screen. Here is where melding her *Thalberg* into *Looking Glass* mattered in what we saw, or what Salzberg embraces as a cinematic moment that mattered in creating the ultimate effect of what we saw. My favorite example was the Hepburn-Kelly comparison, where the director/producer’s interpretive addition, then deletion of a singular scene in the related production, made Hepburn the more realistic character. What might be understood, once both books are read, as a “Thalbergian Moment.”



The Philadelphia Story (1940)
The sequence that matters

My only observations, not criticisms, flow from Salzberg’s thoroughness and provocation. Would, based on their work, or did a woman director, Ida Lupino comes to mind mold the

“narcissism” differently? Before or after the Code? And, though mistakenly the media evolution of political campaigns is often attributed to Madison Avenue advertisement, early on Hollywood created the best lessons of how to do it (including MGM and Thalberg), that Salzberg, perhaps unwittingly, comes right to the edge of exploring.

demonstrates that with respect to the new, perhaps only transitory, moguls of the movies, Norma Desmond had it right: “*I am* big. It's the pictures that got small.”

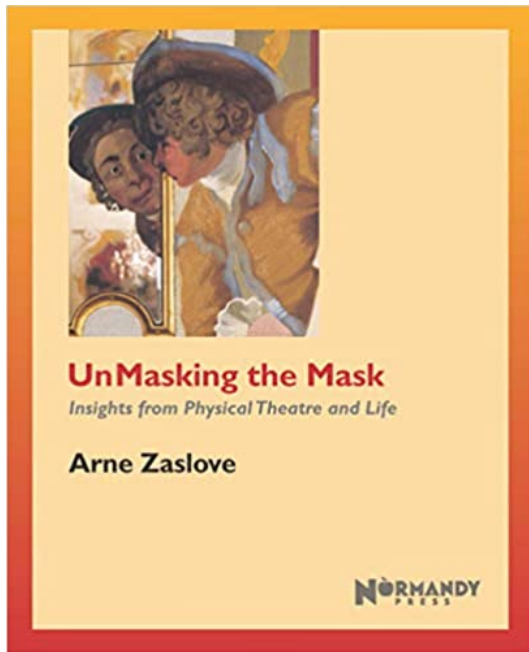
Neil Thomas Proto
Posted: January 2021



“*I am* big. It's the pictures that got small.”

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Finally, Salzberg, with interesting insight reflected in both books, recognizes how the high tech, social media tools of mobile and definitely small screens (compared to a theater) have provided renewed access to silent and classical Hollywood movies and actors for all to see, often as if their content was still the subject of debate and analysis. Foremost, that reality makes Salzberg’s work all the more relevant and engaging. Yet, one thing we've learned, in the late months of 2020 and the pandemic, is that as movies translate and migrate into small, unshared medium by necessity, the vast proliferation of “original movies”—until we find a better term— appears to demonstrate that the high tech social media moguls have plenty of money but, with exceptions that don't make the rule, not the artistic discernment of MGM or Irving Thalberg. In both her works, Salzberg, however unwitting or politely,



Normandy Press: Seattle, Wa. 135 (2020)

Director, Mentor, Historian, and Professor Arne Zaslove has given depth and practical life to one essential perquisite to understanding the art and meaning of acting and the actor and, in its way, as a framework within which the most central participants in theatre—setting designers, costumers, lighting experts, and the audience—find a source of aspiration and imaginative thinking. The development of “masks:” the covering of the face in whole or part in a defined personage with distinctive character and physical attributes agreed upon among the mask’s originators. That development shifted the performance burden to actors in a unique manner that needed to be conveyed to other actors and to audiences necessarily, at the outset, without words. In a way both understandable and cogently analyzed, Zaslove has made a useful contribution to those among us on the informed periphery of how to

appreciate the value of theatre in any culture, especially in America. Which gets me to the most engaging thread in *UnMasking the Mask*.

“[Masks] shifted the performance burden to actors in a unique manner that needed to be conveyed...at the outset, without words.

It warrants an acknowledgment that has enhanced my appreciation of what Zaslove has written: without my understanding fully the meaning of his knowledge and skill, he was retained as the director of my play, “The Reckoning: Pecora for the Public,” staged successfully in Seattle in 2016. Central to my appreciation is that it is a one-person play, Ferdinand Pecora (Robert DeDea), counsel to the 1933 US Senate investigation into the causes of the 1929 stock market crash. DeDea played, within minutes, multiple, complex characters, each unique in physicality, social, geographic, economic, and cultural experience, in an evolving and actively staged story of courage, thoroughness, wrongdoing, selfishness, and consequential harm to the nation’s poor. Each character portrayed by DeDea, as Zaslove reminds us, also “carry their conflicts with them,” that warranted expression (*UnMasking*, 67). The full meaning of “Masks” and Zaslove’s deeply informed knowledge—often expressed through the conviction of practical doability—when conveyed to a talented, welcomed actor, melded, as I’ve now learned, Pecora/ DeDea back into the Italian history of masks and how playwrights, including Shakespeare, melded that history and culture into

theatrical performance. Zaslove transformed the words and framework of “The Reckoning” into a highly praised production. “Masks,” in their historical influence and in Zaslove’s temperament, mattered in that praise.

Two threads of thought especially struck me. Foremost, his treatment of silent movies (*UnMasking*, 75). “Once the actors saw themselves in films,” Zaslove writes, “A great change occurred. They didn’t have to act so large to express the story.” Moreover, “films that were made in the late 19th century and early 20th century were silent! ...The movement and scenes were played expressively and physically.” The advent of sound and talkies changed that dramatically; they altered, yet did not diminish the enduring value of “masks.” I’ve recently read and reviewed (October 16, 2020) Professor Ana Salzberg, *Produced By Irving Thalberg, Theory of Studio-Era Filmmaking*. Essential to her pedagogical presentation of Thalberg’s theory of approach is an analysis of the movies Thalberg made in his historically important, at times contentious role as producer. Those movies included silent movies, including such actors as Greta Garbo and Lon Chaney. Continuity in expression changed with talkies, but only modestly by Garbo and likely in the mentality of directors, certainly Thalberg, who, in their way, understood the meaning of masks. Thalberg’s theory of “oblique casting” underpins, and perhaps embraced deliberately that mentality. Salzberg describes it this way: “Rejecting the stasis of typecasting—what he called ‘slow death for actors’—in favor of ‘oblique casting,’ Thalberg pursued roles that would develop alternate

facets of, rather than simply reinforce, a star’s public image.... [in order] to ‘see’ the star in a different way....”

Second, not by way of criticism but encouragement for an anticipated Volume Two: Zaslove writes, “As a Director, I use the techniques that are appropriate to the particular production, and often train the company in exactly the skills needed.” Now that the history and framework have been solidly and provocatively established, Zaslove’s own work—which he often described to me and others, and I witnessed in “The Reckoning”—warrant recitation in a form and manner that shows how he gave practical life, often unanticipated and perhaps under appreciated, to the history and culture of “masks.” That is the fitting way of further “UnMasking the Mask.”

Neil Thomas Proto
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“The Reckoning: Pecora for the Public”



“Zaslove transformed the words and framework of ‘The Reckoning’ into a highly praised production. ‘Masks’... mattered in that praise.”

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