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Supermen with Soiled Collars: Reporters in a Golden Age

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Theme: History

Today we call it breaking news, the story of the moment — before it changes again. A century ago it was what ran on the front page — the big story, the killer headline. But then as now, it is often tied up with ambitions, competition, and money.

The Front Page was also the name of a broadway play written more than 20 years before I was born. Yet I fell in love with its characters, stories and attitude by the time I was ten. Then it was called *His Girl Friday*, a Hollywood version often shown on early television, with Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell as Walter Burns, a manipulative Chicago editor, and Hildy Johnson, an ace reporter trying to escape the grind.

This was the second film version of the hit play about tabloid reporters on the Chicago police beat. Written by former reporters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, it was first produced in 1928, and quickly bought by Howard Hughes for the film adaptation by Lewis Milestone.

In early April, a restored version of the film was scheduled to open Global Roots 2020, a three-day festival about reporting and film, organized by the Vermont International Film Festival. Due to the coronavirus, however, all eleven films and panel discussions have been indefinitely postponed. Still, *The Front Page* is worth another look.

Grant and Russell in His Girl Friday

After all, the basic story has been retold on film, radio and television countless times. That includes four major films. The first, released in 1931, had a young Pat O'Brien as Hildy and Adolphe Menjou as Burns. In 1940, director Howard Hawkes updated the tale with *His Girl Friday*, featuring the fast-talking Grant and Russell, along with a gender switch. Then came a 1974 remake with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthew as a journalistic odd couple, and 1988's *Switching Channels*, a return to the Russell-Grant model with Kathleen Turner as Hildy and Burt Reynolds as a cable TV Burns. There were also radio productions in the 1930s and 1940s, two television versions, a British musical called *Windy City,* and a 2016 revival of the play with Nathan Lane and John Slattery in the key roles.

In the 1950s, watching old movies on TV, I was fascinated by Grant and Russell, who seemed to both personify and hilariously exaggerate the struggle between newspaper editors and reporters, and also between men and women. The fast-talking repartee was like jousting, and the situational ethics used to get what they wanted was a revelation.

The society they inhabited was rough, lively and seductive; there were tough reporters barking into telephones, corrupt politicians and life-and-death cover ups, a ruthless editor racing deadlines and looking for angles, his defiant star reporter, a misunderstood outlaw on the run, and a good-hearted prostitute, plus other enduring types and tropes. But what really cemented the impressions was reading the play itself, one of the learning tools used by my junior high school English teacher to keep us interested.

Since then, I've been a major fan of Ben Hecht. Journalist, screenwriter, novelist, and activist, Hecht was a literary phenomenon, a defiant, complicated, unapologetic Jewish-American writer. Jean-Luc Godard once said, "He invented 80 percent of what is used in Hollywood movies today." Pauline Kael annointed him "the Greatest American screenwriter." And then, with the rise of Hitler and World War II, he continued to evolve, gradually becoming a Jewish radical and dedicating much of his last decades to the cause of Israel. At his funeral, Menachem Begin summed it up, "He wrote stories and he made history."

Menjou and O'Brien in the original film version

In addition to *The Front Page*, Hecht wrote or worked on scripts for classic films like *Underworld* (the 1929 silent film for which he won the first-ever Academy Award for best story), *Scarface, Design for Living, Viva Villa!, Topaze, Twentieth Century, Barbary Coast, Nothing Sacred, Gunga Din, It's a Wonderful Life, Angels Over Broadway, Comrade X, Lydia, SpellBound, Notorious, Kiss of Death, Monkey Business,* and *A Farewell to Arms.* He also had a hand in *Gone with the Wind, Foreign Correspondent, Gilda,* and *Roman Holiday.* In all, Hecht worked on at least 140 films. What range!

And what a life! Running away to Chicago at 16, he "haunted streets, whorehouses, police stations, courtrooms, theater stages, jails, saloons, slums, madhouses, fires, murders, riots, banquet halls, and bookshops," Hecht recalled. By the 1920s he was a noted journalist, foreign correspondent, and literary figure. And that was before Hollywood called.

In 1928, *The Front Page* became a hugely popular Broadway play, a sharp-edged valentine to the scruffy newsmen of an earlier era. At the time, though, many people thought Hecht and MacArthur had invented the characters and fabricated their stories. But Hecht later claimed that, in his youth, sometimes he and a photographer would actually stage shots at times to back up their made-up scoops — like a brave tugboat captain who fought off pirates on Lake Michigan, or digging a trench to fake a severe earthquake photo. On the other hand, they met everyone and covered everything — floods, funerals, trials, and hangings.

Later, Hecht described the times this way: "We were a tribe of assorted drunkards, poets, burglars, philosophers and boastful raggamuffins. Supermen with soiled collars and holes in our pants, stony broke and sneering at our betters in limousines and unmortgaged houses. Cynical of all things on earth including the tyrannical journal that underpaid and overworked us and for which, after a round of cursing, we were ready to die."

The actress Helen Hayes said of their work on *The Front Page*, "They took the corset off American theater." Tennessee Williams once acknowledged that the play made it possible for him to conceive his own work. British Critic Kenneth Tynan described it as "the best American comedy ever written." And playwright Tom Stoppard called it "the only American comedy of the 1920s in the way that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the only English comedy of the 1890s.

I don't know any play which sustains its verve so well."

Nevertheless, the source material of this classic story describes a very different time, one in which objectivity and facts were the last thing on most reporters' minds. Almost century ago, *The Front Page* revealed a hidden world, one based loosely on reality and filled with slippery politicians and hungry reporters, where getting the story first and boldest was considered more important than getting it right.

But their already-nostalgic vision also placed a high value on courage, community, and having a heart. In today's white-hot media environment that unfortunately begins to sound like a romantic, and possibly obsolete notion.

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