



TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Monday 4 February 2008

Media and Technology

Film Review

John J McGowan

The Academy Awards

TONY RYAN

Welcome to Learning Works. Time now for another look at what's happening in the world of films. Here's Learning Works regular commentator John J McGowan.

JOHN J McGOWAN

It's awards time in Hollywood - but this year, the focus is on industrial awards as much as on glittering prizes. The strike by the Writers Guild of America has already caused one major upset, reducing the usually star-studded Golden Globes ceremony to a perfunctory press conference which took place on January 13.

There is now concern that the next casualty may be the massive 80th Academy Awards. Will the writers strike pull the red carpet out from under an event which has an anticipated global television audience of many millions and which, in its long history, has never yet been cancelled?

The Academy Awards are scheduled for February 24, just weeks away, and so far at the time of recording this review for Learning Works, there are no indications that Writers Guild members are about to end their strike. The latest public statement from the Guild, posted on its website on January 22, contains no suggestion that the strike may be heading towards some resolution. The media release states that the Guild and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers would "begin informal discussions to determine if there is a basis for both parties to return to formal negotiations."

There are enormous consequences at stake. For their part, the writers are seeking a package of benefits including a greater percentage of residuals from products sold online. Income from these sales is currently rated in millions of dollars but these figures are expected to ramp up rapidly into billions within the next five years.

Payments flowing to writers out of this income will clearly have a significant impact on the profits of the major production companies represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers.

And, in the short term, if the strike continues for much longer, severe disruptions can be expected to production schedules for this year's slate of movies and television productions.

Although, in their long history, the Academy Awards have never yet been cancelled, there have been postponements of a few days on three occasions. In 1938 floods in Los Angeles caused the ceremony to be delayed by one week. The 1968 ceremony was delayed by two days - from

April 8 to April 10 – following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and, in 1981, the assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan caused a postponement of 24 hours.

In 1939 the Awards also managed to survive a threatened strike and boycott by members of the Screen Directors Guild, just one week away from the scheduled ceremony. On this occasion, the events surrounding the threatened strike took on aspects of high drama – not unlike the plot of a movie – and even saw a South Australian-born director playing a major role.

The importance given to the Academy Awards by the motion picture industry as a vital publicity event is reflected in the fact that, in 1939, the threat that the 600 members of the Directors Guild would withdraw their support for the Awards was enough to bring about a speedy settlement of a dispute whose origins could be found in the massive pay cuts introduced by the studios some six years earlier.

Additional weight was given to the position taken by the Directors when the high-profile movie director Frank Capra, who was both president of the Guild and of the Academy, also threatened to withdraw his support for the Awards. Just days earlier, Capra himself had been snubbed and humiliated by Joseph Schenck, the chief negotiator for the Association of Motion Picture Producers, who had chosen to go to the racetrack instead of attending a scheduled meeting. It was the news of this insult which, when announced at a meeting of 250 members of the Guild, caused an eruption of anger and resulted in the decision to strike.

The dispute concerned the setting of minimum salaries and establishing a raft of working conditions and the effects of resolving these issues were momentous. The agreements reached between the Guild and the major production studios laid the foundations for all subsequent industrial agreements affecting members of the Guild to the present day and, in so doing, changed forever the industrial landscape of the Hollywood motion picture industry.

Later that year, Variety magazine summarised the outcome of the protracted industrial struggle under the heading: “Directors Win Big Victory.” Even the recalcitrant Joseph Schenck was humbled into the admission that the agreement was “a great thing for the picture industry.”

South Australian-born director, John Paterson (J. P.) McGowan, played a major role in these historic events. But his achievement is not well-known outside Hollywood.

J. P. McGowan had taken on the position of Executive Secretary of the Guild in 1938 and was one of its key planners and negotiators during the final twelve months which brought the bitter dispute to an end. In his key role with the Guild, McGowan not only helped to bring about a successful outcome to the dispute with the major studios but he was subsequently delegated by the Guild as its chief negotiator in its efforts to achieve similar agreements with the minor studios. This was not a simple “flow on” matter as the industrially powerful minor studios, like their larger counterparts, were also strongly opposed to the proposed changes to the conditions under which directors were employed.

However, McGowan was an ideal choice as the Guild’s negotiator with these low-budget or “Poverty Row” producers. These studios had been his employers and business collaborators for most of his extraordinarily prolific thirty-year career as an actor, director, writer and producer and he held the respect of the hard-nosed businessmen who ran the organizations. However, bringing these organizations into line with the major studios was not an easy task and negotiations stretched over many weeks. Eventually a further threat of strike action by the Guild brought a conclusion to the matter.

The part played by J. P. McGowan in bringing about a successful outcome for the Guild became one of his great personal triumphs.

McGowan continued to serve the Screen Directors Guild in the role of its second-ever Executive Secretary for a record-setting 12 years and, for two further years, handled its public relations until his death in 1952 at the age of 72. In 1951 the Guild recognised J. P. McGowan's great contribution to the organization with the award of Honorary Life Membership. He was only the eighth person to be so honoured by this award which placed him in the company of such great motion picture pioneers as D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin and Walt Disney.

He remains the only Australian-born person to have been honoured in this way.

After his death his obituary in The New York Times recalled the "prominent role" that he had played in establishing standards for minimum salaries and working conditions for members of the Guild. The Guild itself marked his passing with a notice from its president, George Sidney, placed in Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. The touchingly simple notice stated: "We announce with profound sorrow the death of our beloved member and colleague J. P. McGowan".

My next session on this program will be just after the Academy Awards are announced. My tip for the major prize this year is the movie *Atonement*. We'll see what happens.

TONY RYAN

And John J McGowan - our regular reviewer of films and commentator on what's happening in the world of the movies - has written a book on his South Australian-born namesake and Hollywood legend John Patrick McGowan. It's called **J. P. McGowan – Biography of a Hollywood Pioneer (Published by McFarland, 2005)**. It is available in Adelaide through Mary Martin Bookshop. There is also an extended audio interview and full transcript on the Learning Works website – [click here](#).