

## World War II and the Movies

### *Brigham Young (1940)*

“It’s a raid. Why? They hate us, we’re Mormons.”

#### **Production Information**

Twentieth Century Fox production from studio of Darryl Zanuck who authorized an expenditure of \$2 million for the production of the film, a large budget in 1939. Directed by Henry Hathway borrowed from Paramount. Dean Jagger stars as Brigham Young; unknown stage actor, eventually marries a Mormon and converts in 1972. Joseph Smith played by Vincent Price. Alfred Newman as music director using LDS hymns from 1830s.

Some 90 percent of the production was filmed outdoors at six major locations in Nevada, Utah, and California. The Nauvoo set was built on Fox's lot and the Salt Lake City set (as it appeared in 1847) was constructed near Lone Pine, Calif.

#### **Film History**

Monopoly created by film studios attracted gov’t attention but as it becomes clear war is coming gov’t knows needs helps of film industry. After Pearl Harbor (Dec. 1941) Hollywood makes movies both with general wartime support—like *Brigham Young*--but also specifically propaganda films like Capra's *Why We Fight*. Films like *Casablanca* (1942) and a host of battle movies take various looks at war. Studios also supported by making newsreels, sending stars out to stump for Savings Bonds, and to boost morale among troupes.

European film industry suffers, Hollywood becomes world source. Production peaks between 1943 and 1946 with 1946 as all-time high for theater attendance.

Production Code fully in place (started 1934). Attempt by Studios to avoid local censorship by self-censoring. Code standards written by Daniel A. Lord, Jesuit priest and teacher at St. Louis Univ. PC Administration headed by Irish-Catholic Philadelphian, Joseph I. Breen. Had power to approve or disapprove film scripts. Supported by Martin Quigley, influential lay man who worked with Catholic Legion of Decency. Legion rated movies and encouraged all Catholics not to go to “bad” movies.

Recognition that movies are influential, so want only uplifting. Key elements for PCA: Any kind of evil must come to a bad end. No films where evil is made to appear attractive or alluring and good is made to appear unattractive. Clear boundaries between good and evil and sympathy of audience must be for good. No drug use. Liquor never excessive. Audience sympathy always constructed for marriage. No scenes of passion that might arouse viewers (thus only twin beds even for married). “Impure love”—homosexuality, for instance, must never be attractive, right, or permissible. Best never to

be detailed. No nudity, semi-nudity, sexy dancing, locations that are sexy (eg. brothels). No making fun of nations.

For our purposes: “The reason why ministers of religion may not be comic characters or villains is simply because the attitude toward them may easily become the attitude taken toward religion in general.” PCA text A contemporary *NY Times* reviewer sees influence on *BY*: “The absence of any more than casual reference to matrimonial matters and the singular uxorial devotion of Brigham to his No. 1 wife, Miss Astor, is an obvious Hays office compulsion.”

An amazing year (1940) for movies: *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio* (Disney feature cartoons); *Grapes of Wrath*; *The Great Dictator*, *Knut Rockney*, *All American* (starring Ronald Reagan); *Mark of Zoro*; *Philadelphia Story*; *Rebecca* (Hitchcock). General fads of late 30s and early 40s: biography and Westerns.

Darryl Zanuck founded Twentieth-Century Pictures and merged with Fox Film; creating Twentieth-Century Fox in 1935 with Joe Schenck. Zanuck was writer and in late 1930s [was] the only top studio executive with an active hand in actual production, personally supervised all “A” pictures. Zanuck wanted to make film. Initially screenplay based on novel was rejected by PCA because of polygamy, but Zanuck Wanted film to be anti fascist and against rising anti-Jewish sentiment in US. Important that Zanuck was one of few non-Jew studio heads.

Involvement of President Heber C. Grant for over two years with production, goes to CA for approval of text. Mormon technical advisor, George Piper, posed with Vincent Price for publicity photograph. Shot in 2 months. Premiered in SLC in August of 1940. Parade down Main Street with stars. Seven theaters, completely sold out. People wanting themselves to be on film, if not perfect. Pres. Grant said of the film that it was a "friendmaker. I would not change a line."

*New York Times*, September 1940 “For pretty close to two hours the picture rumbles ponderously across the screen, groaning under the weight of much patient suffering on the part of all. And, in spite of its studied effort to point a parallel between the wanderings of the oft-oppressed Mormons and the children of Israel, it all boils down to just another heavy and conventional covered-wagon trek film . . .”

## **Social History**

America was gearing up for war. Nazi troops had moved into the Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. They had invaded Poland, the Netherlands, and France. France and England had declared war. Jews around the country knew what was happening to Jews in Europe: Nuremberg Laws (1935) declaring Jews no longer German citizen and heightened discrimination; violence in Kristalnacht (1938), building of Auswitz summer 1940, Eventually 1941 “Final Solution” movement of Jews to ghettos, creation of labor camps the death campus. Jews (typically in vain) trying to get to US.

Mobs, book burning, appeasement.

Importance of unifying nation and convincing people broken by Depression that they had the will and ability to fight facism in Europe and Asia. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms (Jan. 1941) with "Freedom of Religion" one. *Variety* review picks up: "The pioneering spirit of the Americans of the century ago is depicted with both strength and vigor. There's a dramatic pleas for religious tolerance that applies to current conditions. . ." (Aug 28, 1940). Notion that what we all have in common is that we are persecuted—the myth of America as home for the persecuted. Then, of course, forgetting the persecuting nature of Americans.

"Bitter Fruit" popular Billy Holiday song of 1939 on white lynching of blacks: *Southern trees bear a strange fruit/Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.* Inversion in opening scene.

Jews not want to make movies about Jews. So make movie about a persecuted religious minority, driven from their homes and seeking refuge elsewhere.

### **Religious History**

Long history of anti-Mormonism in literature and in movies (cf. British silent film *Trapped by the Mormons* (1922)) LDS leaders not liking recently published popular novel, Vartous Fisher's *Children of God* and fearing the worse made PR effort to win over studio.

Controversial standing of UT Mormons with rest of country over polygamy and theocracy. Supposedly over with Manifesto in 1890 but still evidence of polygamy. Smoot hearings 1901-1907 sought to expel newly elected Reed Smoot (LDS apostle) from Senate. Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. creation of compromise with federal government. Acceptance of church-state separation and rejection of polygamy. Promotion of loyalty to US nation (rather than Zion) among Mormons. By 1940s encouraging foreign converts to build up LDS community abroad.

Supportive of Mormon perspective—innocent people persecuted by mobs not by legal government. By 1940s LDS antagonism with federal gov't over polygamy long over, importance of inspiration of Constitution. Acceptance of Brigham Young in transference of power after Joseph Smith's death (no Brigham Young in Nauvoo)—no possible alternative. Downplaying of polygamy (Brigham had 12 wives during the trek). BY in leadership role in Salt Lake w/crickets to end (rather than going back to bring more people over.

Stress BY's high moral convictions rather than sex drive. Also—and more controversial for believers—was his questioning. Clear why of establishing his humanity and his "just like us"-ness. Importance of film being about religious tolerance rather than Mormon

theology, which (natch) would not make money. Strong romance angle also dilutes religious preaching.

## References

<http://www.filmsite.org/>

James V. D'Arc, "Darryl F. Zanuck's *Brigham Young*: A Film in Context," *BYU Studies* 29 (1) 5 – 33.

Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (2004).

