

'Frankly, my dear, I do give a damn!'

By Joanne Engelhardt

For The Daily News

Want to see how the legendary movie "Gone With the Wind" really got made?

Check out Dragon Theatre in downtown Redwood City for "Moonlight and Magnolias," which gives the low down on -- and the high jinks of -- the inane trio of David O. Selznick (producer), Ben Hecht (writer) and Victor Fleming (who directed most of the film).

While those movie bigwigs aren't exactly household names today, 75 years ago, when "GWTW" was filmed, they were among Hollywood's *crème de la crème*.

What possessed playwright Ron Hutchinson to create such a zany piece in 2004 may forever be a mystery, but it's an intriguing concept and one that works well here, thanks to the frenetic pace director Lennon Smith requires of her three remarkably agile male actors.

Selznick (played flawlessly by an excitable, endearing and bug-eyed Aaron Weisberg) has already sunk a lot of his (and his studio's) money into purchasing the rights to Margaret Mitchell's grandiose 1936 novel of the rise and fall of the South during and after the Civil War. He had a script (but later decides it is drivel) and a director (George Cukor) who doesn't see eye to eye with either Selznick or Clark Gable. At the time, Gable was a top Hollywood star and was picked to play Rhett Butler (opposite Vivien Leigh's bosom-heaving Scarlett).

Selznick calls in venerable Chicago newspaperman-turned-scriptwriter Ben Hecht (a subdued, but credible Dave Leon) to rewrite the entire script in one week.

Unfortunately, as Selznick soon learns, Hecht is the only person on the planet who hasn't read the 1,037-page book that had been on the best-seller list for nearly two years.

That problem is overcome when Selznick pulls Fleming off of another 'little' movie

destined for greatness ("The Wizard of Oz") to direct "GWTW." Then the two of them (Selznick and Fleming) act out the entire novel, with little more than drapes and baskets as props, playing both the masculine and feminine roles.

A surprisingly comical Bill C. Jones as Fleming gets a chance to mug, prance and preen, and he almost steals the show, especially in the scene when he plays both Scarlett's cousin Melanie giving birth and Scarlett's rather silly young black maid Prissy. It is masterful.

Fortunately, Weisberg matches Jones' antics tit-for-tat, leaving Leon to play the role of straight man most of the time. Weisberg does more with his eyes than most actors do with their entire bodies.

There is a fourth character in "Moonlight" "" Selznick's faithful secretary, Miss Poppengul. But Sarah Benjamin plays her as a forlorn sad sack with poor posture, and her repetitive "Yes, Mr. Selznicks," which should be hilarious, are just annoying.

The plot thickens when Selznick, completely obsessed with making "GWTW" a great picture, actually locks himself, Fleming and Hecht in his office for five days with nothing to eat but bananas and peanuts. As the days go by, each of the men becomes more frantic and delusional in his own way.

But, in the end, although battle-scarred and exhausted, they have crafted one of the most beloved screenplays of all time.

There are other, secondary distractions: Three old-fashioned phones on Selznick's desk ring off the hook with calls from Leigh, Louis B. Mayer (Selznick's father-in-law) and even Ed Sullivan. Fleming accidentally injures his eye in the bathroom, and Selznick several times waxes philosophical about the art of making a movie and the producer's importance in that process.

The play is written as farce, but the characters do deal with some serious questions about race (especially inequities regarding Jews in Hollywood). Hecht is the mouthpiece for Hutchinson's opinions, although Selznick gets in the last word when he reminds him that the real power in Hollywood is the audience, the people who go to the movies.

Kevin Dunning's authentic-looking Hollywood producer's studio office works well on the off-center Dragon Theatre stage, with sound by Luis Hakuta and lighting by Jeff Swan spot on for opening night. All three of the men look as if they're definitely channeling 1939 in their three-piece suits with vests (or, in Leon's case, a sweater vest). That's the work of costume designer Erin Haney (even Benjamin's blue suit and blouse look authentic for the era).

Graphics are credited to both Bobby Buchser and Bobby Blue. They include the dropping of a large projection screen before the play starts when the entire grainy trailer for "Gone With The Wind" is shown. There's also a nice sideways visual of the movie's name at play's end.

It's almost all delicious, especially that witty bit at the end when Selznick and Hecht hit upon exactly what words to use in the oft-repeated sentence, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." It's classic.

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Theater

What: "Moonlight and Magnolias" Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays- Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Sept. 7

Tickets: \$30; 650-493-2006 or www.dragonproductions.net