

Greetings, Domitor. My name is Derek Long, and I'm an Assistant Professor of Media and Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Today I'd like to share some research from my book *Programs, Playdates, and Percentages: Film Distribution and the Making of the Hollywood Studio System*, which is under contract to University of Texas Press. The book is a history of film distribution practice in the United States from 1910 through 1930. What I'll be sharing today is from the second chapter, in which I cover the origins of certain distribution practices in Vaudeville and legitimate theater. One of the major arguments of my book is that the regularization of distribution practice after 1915 was at least as important to the formation of the Hollywood oligopoly as vertical integration into exhibition, and the importation of preexisting booking practices used in live theater was a crucial part of that. The case study I'll look at today, the Shubert Motion Picture Department, is a good example of how theatrical models *didn't* necessarily translate effectively into feature film distribution.

The Shuberts don't get a whole lot of attention in film studies, but they were one of the most powerful theater production, management, and booking organizations in the United States in 1914, and they controlled dozens of legitimate houses in New York and throughout the eastern half of the country. This meant that they were a major force in this important period of the mid-teens when I would argue that film distribution is importing certain practices from live theater as it moves toward more programmatic, regular distribution of longer feature films. I won't have time to go into the full history of the Shuberts today, but from 1914 they were major investors in the World Film Corporation, and had strong connections with the Goldwyn Studios from 1916 on, so their distribution operations in connection with this Pathé film are certainly of interest to historians working in this area.

Before moving on to the *The Life of Our Saviour* specifically, I'd like to offer a brief overview of some of the theatrical practices that the Shuberts would deploy with that film and the others they

distributed. The most important of these practices is the combination company, which transformed American theater in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Theater historians like Alfred Bernheim and Jack Poggi have pointed to the increasing importance of star actors over the course of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as the origin of the combination system. Around 1870, power in the theater industry began to shift decisively away from the country's myriad theaters and their stock companies performing a repertory of productions. Instead, stars increasingly organized theatrical "combination companies" around themselves, made up of a single rehearsed production or a limited selection of plays, complete with their own actors, sets, costumes, and stagehands. These companies, booked centrally from New York, could then tour widely using the new national railroad network. Under this new system, it wasn't just the star who was a special draw to theatergoers; it was the entire play, with its enhanced production values and world-famous acting talent. Over the course of the 1870s and 1880s, the combination system became the default in American theater, completely replacing the stock company by 1900.

I think we can see in the combination company an important originating model for feature film distribution. This is certainly true in the case of the roadshow in film distribution, which as William Paul notes is essentially the combination system applied to cinema. But I think the combination company was also an important model for regular, programmatic feature film distribution along the lines of Paramount or Triangle as it emerged in the mid-1910s. In the 1880s, theatrical producers increasingly toured multiple companies of the same production at a time; according to Poggi, in the 1882–1883 season, actor-producer Steele MacKaye's 1880 hit *Hazel Kirke* had fourteen companies on the road, all centrally managed from New York. In its basic form, the Shuberts' distribution of *The Life of Our Saviour* in 1914 using nineteen companies wasn't that different.

Along with the combination company, the Shubert Motion Picture Department also deployed legitimate theater's pricing practices, which were based on percentages rather than flat fees. Typically, the house and the company split each performance's gross receipts, with the exact percentage division varying widely depending on the theater and its location on the company's route. This contrasted with the typical arrangement at film houses in the 1910s, where films tended to be rented for flat fees, although bigger features might warrant a percentage arrangement depending on the house. One of the reasons that theatrical pricing tended to rely on percentages in the combination company era, in addition to the generally bigger income that percentage arrangements could yield, was that the company manager was actually on site at the venue, and could easily check each performance's ticket sales and enforce the collection of their fair share of receipts. This generally wasn't the case in film distribution unless the distributor went to the expense of hiring a "checker," which in most venues generally wasn't worth it given the lower prices charged for film. In addition, depending on the particular production and venue, company managers in legitimate theater sometimes had the clout to negotiate the actual scale of prices charged at the door. This was the case with the Shubert companies handling *Saviour*—ticket prices were generally set in New York, in consultation with the local theater owner and the company manager.

Finally, a crucial practice in theatrical booking was efficient circuit routing for each combination company. Because of the expense involved in moving an entire company to their various bookings, both in railroad fares and hotel accommodations, planning the company's route such that it was kept constantly working was a key factor in its profitability. The typical strategy was to book as many so-called "one-night stands" as possible in smaller towns that lay between multiple-night bookings in larger and more profitable venues in cities, most of which the booking organization (in this case the Shuberts) controlled to some extent. This was a major difference between theatrical and film distribution; a film print sitting around not being played certainly didn't

generate any profit, but it also didn't generate any significant loss either. This would turn out to be a major weakness of the Shuberts' company system in distributing *The Life of Our Saviour*. Because they directly sold and booked the film through Priest's office rather than through an exchange system, its run depended on continuously generating new bookings in order to cover the ongoing costs of the road companies.

The Shubert Motion Picture Department deployed all of these practices in its distribution of *The Life of Our Saviour* in March and April of 1914. The film itself was a Pathé production, essentially a version of Ferdinand Zecca's *La Passion de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* from 1907, augmented with a significant amount of newly-shot footage and hand-colored. Sources vary as always about the exact length of the film, and distinguishing among the *many* passion plays with similar titles made in this period can be tricky. But as far as I have been able to determine, *The Life of Our Saviour* was more than twice as long as *La Passion*. In modular American terms, the 1907 film was a three-reeler (3114 feet/950 meters) and the 1914 version an eight-reeler (~8000 feet/2400 meters), though in practice it was generally cut down to seven or even six reels. While Shubert handled the 1914 roadshow release of the film in the United States, Pathé Exchange itself would distribute the film in its many seasonal re-releases, typically around Christmas or Easter. This happened nearly every year from 1915 until 1921, when Pathé released still another version of the film, this time with the title *Behold the Man*, with a modern frame story directed by Spencer Gordon Bennet.

The Shubert roadshow of *Life of our Saviour* was managed by Robert W. Priest, who at the time was also the publicity director of the Shubert-owned New York Hippodrome theater. Priest had already managed a release of footage from Robert Scott's ill-fated 1910 expedition to Antarctica, and he would handle similar roadshows in 1914 for the films *America* and *The House of Bondage*, the former of which was a filmed reproduction of the stage show that had originated at the Hippodrome. Priest's career in film would continue; he managed the booking of the Hippodrome

when it converted to features, and in 1916 he managed the roadshow companies for Thomas Ince's *Civilization*. He continued to manage various Shubert theaters and started his own ventures in state rights and nontheatrical distribution in the 1920s.

The material in the Shubert Archives covering the 1914 release of *The Life of Our Saviour* spans over a thousand pages, so what I present to you here is by necessity both partial and condensed. The roadshow was comprised of nineteen separate combination companies; here's a list of the companies with their initial bookings. Each company had a single print of the film as well as a manager, who reported directly to Priest and Shubert Booking Department manager Jules Murry, who tended to handle the logistical details. These company managers were not salaried Shubert employees. Rather, they were hired on a weekly basis at the IATSE union scale for road workers of \$40.00/week (though more than one manager attempted to negotiate a higher pay rate from Priest). The managers' primary job was to drum up publicity for *The Life of Our Saviour* in their individual markets in advance of their premieres. These were scheduled for the week leading up to Easter Sunday, which in 1914 was on April 12 for Catholics and Protestants. The films were planned to open in Shubert-controlled houses for weeklong runs after a premiere the week before at the Manhattan Opera House. The managers would then continue this work in subsequent shorter one- or two-day runs for their print, based on the publicity of the film's performance during Holy Week. This was essentially the circuit-routing model applied to cinema, and it would be a major reason for the film's failure.

These managers' jobs were actually quite tenuous and depended wholly on the performance of their company. Managers who were given a route with insufficient small bookings between cities might be asked to "lay off" the intervening days without pay, as happened to Company #9 between the April 11 conclusion of a St. Louis booking and an April 17 premiere in Minneapolis. If the film performed poorly enough in their market, they might find their company abruptly recalled and their

employment ended—a circumstance that befell many of the managers on the film. This temporary hiring of road managers seems to have been a routine affair; there are many examples in the correspondence of managers or ex-managers writing Priest to “keep them in mind” for any future company work. Some of the managers Priest hired for *Life of Our Saviour* had experience with film roadshows like *Quo Vadis*, having been recommended by a correspondent of Priest who worked for George Kleine, while others seem to have worked only with theater companies. Much of Priest’s job was hiring, firing, and communicating with these road managers, though he also corresponded extensively with the theater managers, most of them Shubert-affiliated, who had booked the film.

Although the local road managers had discretion in setting up details, the exact form that each company’s presentation of *The Life of Our Saviour* took was ultimately controlled and approved from New York by Priest personally. Bookings were also handled centrally from New York, by Jules Murry, who also ran the Shuberts’ theatrical booking, and generally went like this: after contacting or being contacted by Priest’s office, interested theaters signed a contract like the blank one seen here. It specified that the theater paid for local newspaper advertising and provided the projector and operator, organ and organist, as well as a “booth, calcimined screen, and everything else in accordance with the laws prevailing” in the city of exhibition. The local company, for its part, provided the film itself and all advertising material complete with the dates of the performance, and arranged for a lecturer and choir to accompany the film.

Underpinning the basic strategy for the roadshow of the film was the idea of tying in with local church groups, and a major responsibility of the local managers was to promote the film with local clergy. This was in part in the hope that they might lecture alongside the film and provide choirs or organists to accompany it. But the managers also directly marketed the film to clergy, schools, and religious organizations such as the local YMCA by allowing them to sell so-called “exchange tickets” to their members. These were discounted tickets that effectively cut local

religious institutions in on the film's grosses—sometimes as much as 25%. The idea was to make money on volume by filling theaters as close to capacity as possible; while the typical undiscounted ticket price at the legitimate theaters where the film played was between 25 and 50 cents, about on par for a feature film in 1914, it was still significantly lower than the typical admission for a live theatrical performance in the same venue, which might run one or two dollars. A major ostensible advantage of having a local company manager was to ensure advantageous ticket price scales—not too low such that the company would not make money, but also not higher than was typical for feature films in the local market.

Appealing to religious groups through reduced ticket pricing and a general sense of Holy Week reverence was a key aspect of the Shubert roadshow strategy on *The Life of Our Saviour*. These were audiences for whom the local theater was not generally held in high regard, and the Motion Picture Department positioned the roadshow to theater owners as being able to bring in a new type of patron. Priest pitched the overall strategy to Joseph Weimer, manager of the Auditorium Theater in Toledo, Ohio in March 1914: “Our main endeavour is to relegate the air of the theatre, and supersede it by the air of a great religious revival...Make the bait as strong as possible to appeal to the religiously inclined. We do not intend to cater to theatre-goers, but to cater almost exclusively to church-goers.” A letter Priest sent to theaters with suggestions for advertising the film repeated this message, suggested paying local clergy \$50 for their involvement, and emphasized hiring a church organist wherever possible to accompany both the film itself and the singing of hymns during reel changes.

This focused appeal would seem at first to suggest that the Shubert roadshow of *Life of Our Saviour* was a one-off example of Holy Week seasonal distribution, totally separate from more standard models and practices of film circulation in the 1910s. Indeed, scholarship on the roadshow tends to downplay its significance in the development of feature distribution, certainly as compared

to the state rights system or the program system used to distribute variety shorts. But I think roadshows such as this one were a crucial link between the distribution practices of legitimate theater and those of the growing feature film industry. This was a period when many legitimate theaters were being forced to convert at least part-time to motion picture exhibition, and specially-presented roadshows like *The Life of Our Saviour* allowed such theaters to differentiate themselves from the so-called “picture houses” that played exclusively film while still remaining solvent. Live-theatrical language suffused the correspondence between Priest and his managers as well as the contracts with theaters. Managers were expected to conduct a “rehearsal” of the film before its local premiere “performance,” and runs of a particular print constituted its “season.” As a rhetorical strategy, the film itself and its particular framing as a price-friendly roadshow positioned the Shuberts’ foray into film distribution as both elevated and accessible—a live-theatrical presentation at feature film prices.

From the standpoint of distributors like Shubert, classifying film releases as theatrical roadshows could also have financial benefits, since IATSE rules specified standard wage scales for roadshows. For the kinds of theaters that played *The Life of Our Saviour*, many of which did not have their own projectors or booths, these rules required that the attending operator set up and take down film-related equipment as part of their flat \$40 salary for the week, as long as they did not work outside the term of the booking. This was true whether or not the operator traveled with the company to multiple venues, and so it represented a manageable cost for theaters that played the film for a full week. However, Union rules also complicated the roadshow, particularly when it came to music. Since theaters were often obliged to pay their house orchestra or band whether they played or not, many dispensed with hiring a separate organist to accompany the film, arguably diluting the religious quality of the presentation.

The release of *The Life of Our Saviour* also differed in important ways from both the typical combination company run in live theater and the feature roadshow. For one, the only actual “combination” on tour in this case was the film and its road manager, rather than a whole company complete with projector, organist, and commentator—in every case, the theater had to provide those separately, with the assistance of the company manager. Given that the film’s distribution was by necessity organized around a specific Holy Week release date, it actually resembled a standard program feature release to some extent. The film’s premiere presentation run in New York at the Manhattan Opera House began on March 30, which generated publicity for the nineteen companies booked for weeklong runs the following week, from April 6 to April 11, primarily in Shubert houses. The hope was then to book the film in subsequent-run houses in smaller towns. This diverged from the strategy of most film roadshow releases of the period, in which the timing of a film’s distribution across a territory was generally of lower priority than the quality of the presentation. The idea was to generate extended runs in prestigious venues that would justify higher ticket prices, not to book the film widely to as many venues as possible.

Finally, *Saviour’s* roadshow was geographically limited. The Shuberts’ distribution of the film in the United States was hardly national—it was certainly not of the scale of *Quo Vadis*, which George Kleine had been roadshowing across the entire country for the previous year. As you can see in this slide, the vast majority of *Saviour’s* companies toured east of the Mississippi, with several concentrated in New York State and Ohio, and very few in the South. This geographic pattern essentially represents the Shuberts’ theater holdings, and it suggests that the company was not very successful in booking the film outside of houses it didn’t already control.

All of this added up to the film’s failure in distribution. While the local managers did pick up a few one- or two-day bookings for the film the week after Easter, by mid-April it was clear that the film was a dud. In his correspondence with Priest, St. Louis company manager Henry Pierson

attributed this failure primarily to the lack of cooperation from local clergy, who were generally too busy during Holy Week to assist in the presentations of the film. Despite the use of exchange tickets, attendance was not up to expectations, even in the film's New York run. There were also a number of problems with the physical distribution of the film prints. Pathé sent at least two companies prints with mixed-up reels, and one company received the film without any reels at all—just the film. The humidior boxes carried by each company to preserve the hand-coloring of the prints could not accommodate Pathé's 12-inch reels, and so each road company had to re-cut and re-wind their print onto 10-inch reels once they received it. These issues revealed the Shuberts' relative inexperience with the logistical and technical side of film distribution.

To conclude, the fundamental problem with the roadshow of *The Life of Our Saviour* was the Motion Picture Department's assumption that the live-theatrical logics of the combination company would directly translate to film distribution in an era when multireel features were beginning to dominate the screen. Certainly, passion plays had been successfully distributed via roadshow in the United States since as early as 1897, when Klaw and Erlanger distributed *The Horitz Passion Play*. Part of the appeal of such films had been their length relative to other films. But by 1914, the novelty of the filmed passion play had worn off, and a film like *The Life of Our Saviour*, comprised as it largely was of seven-year-old footage, needed careful film-specific distribution to turn a profit. Priest did seem to realize this to an extent, given his strategy of focusing solely on churchgoers rather than a more general audience. But the distribution of the film relied almost exclusively on its performance in Shubert-controlled theaters in large and mid-size cities. There was simply no Shubert exchange system, apart from Priest's New York office, where exhibitors or interested religious organizations could seek out the film. Some theater owners and state rights companies did write Priest directly to inquire about separate distribution rights for the film, but Priest flatly refused, insisting that the film was not available as a "regular feature release" for "picture theaters." This may have been because

Pathé had reserved that right for itself, and indeed the company would seasonally release the film through its own exchanges throughout the second half of the 1910s. But in any case, the film's failure demonstrates the continued importance and influence of live-theatrical thinking among the feature distributors of the mid-1910s. Thank you!