

## Chapter 1

# American Variety and/or Foreign Features

### *The Throes of Film Distribution*

Imagine that you are a young woman who has decided to join one of your store clerk or stenographer friends going to the movies after work in downtown Des Moines, Iowa, in the spring of 1913. On Sunday, May 4, you read the *Des Moines News* and know what programs will be playing in at least four moving picture theaters that next week.<sup>1</sup> On Tuesday, for instance, what are your choices? At the Casino (just opened in December) is *Pathé's Weekly* (a newsreel), Essanay's *The Crazy Prospector*, and Vitagraph's *Cinders*. At the Family, Bison-101's two-reel *The Indian's Secret* and *Billy's First Quarrel*. At the Unique, Majestic's two-reel *Children of St. Anne* and *Her Sister's Secret*. The Colonial has a special feature (running all week), the five-reel *Satan* or "The Drama of Humanity . . . from Creation to the present time."<sup>2</sup> Which theater you and your friend choose could depend on several factors, but, as a frequent moviegoer, you could count on familiarity and the relative quality of the variety programs at three of these theaters, each changed daily and supplied by a different film service or distributor: the Casino (General Film), the Family (Universal), and the Unique (Mutual). You also could be attracted, however, by *Satan's* promotion as a sensational historical epic or by its novelty as a special feature (from Europe, no less), since the only previous film of four reels or more to play in the city was *Queen Elizabeth*, with Sarah Bernhardt, the previous September.<sup>3</sup> And you could not see that film, either when it was booked at a legitimate theater, the Berchel, because the tickets cost twenty-five to fifty cents (those to *Satan* cost just ten cents), or when it returned in early February by special request to a neighborhood theater, Namur's University Place, because you could not make time to take the trolley after work on Wednesday, the only day it was screened.<sup>4</sup>

This snapshot of a fictional moment in the everyday life of an "ordinary" moviegoer can serve to introduce an important, highly contested arena for

this study of the “imagined communities” of US cinema during the transition era of the early 1910s. That arena is film distribution, or what Ivo Blom recently described as a “missing link” in histories of early cinema.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, how were moving pictures packaged for distribution to exhibitors? What strategies of packaging were dominant between 1910 and 1914, what changes occurred in packaging, and what companies were involved in either promoting those changes or sustaining already profitable strategies of distribution? Previous studies—most notably by Janet Staiger, Robert Anderson, Eileen Bowser, and Michael Quinn<sup>6</sup>—have provided invaluable research information and analyses of these turbulent years in which the distribution model of a variety program of short films was increasingly challenged by several alternative models that featured a long film of three or more reels. They have tended to focus, however, on the effect of economic and legal practices in creating an industrial structure of distribution (Staiger), on the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) and its distribution arm, General Film (Anderson), or on attempts to create a viable model of distributing feature films (Bowser, Quinn). While this chapter obviously relies on that research, particularly that of Bowser and Quinn, it aims (1) to draw a rather differently contoured map of how distribution models worked at the local or regional level, and at different moments, by examining newspaper ads in selected cities chiefly from the Northeast to the upper Midwest,<sup>7</sup> in conjunction with trade press ads and articles; and (2), looking forward to later chapters, to situate those models and their changing modes of operation within the broad framework of Americanization, its assumptions of more or less distinct national identities, and its conflicted principles of assimilation and exclusion, especially because so many of the initial attempts to distribute features involved imported European films from Italy, France, Denmark, and Germany.

### Standardizing the American Variety Program

Officially announced in early 1909 (although incorporated in September 1908), the MPPC sought to rationalize the US film industry by pooling the patents of the Edison and Biograph companies in order to regularize (and monopolize) film production and exhibition. Seven other US companies besides Edison and Biograph—Vitagraph, Selig, Lubin, Essanay, Kalem, Georges Kleine, and Star Film (Gaston Méliès)—along with the largest producer of all, Pathé-Frères, joined the new combination as members licensed to manufacture and/or sell moving pictures and equipment in the United States. Once established, the MPPC also moved to control distribution by licensing many of the country’s more than 100 rental exchanges so as to force exhibitors to show only its films. As Staiger and others have argued, the MPPC’s later claim that it helped to stabilize the industry and improve ser-

vice to exhibitors was largely correct. Prints circulated more efficiently and in greater numbers based on set weekly fees; new titles became more attractive because used prints were recalled after a certain length of time; affordable fire insurance was made available to licensed exhibitors. Yet “the Trust,” as it was soon dubbed, excluded several important European manufacturers (Great Northern/Nordisk, most Italian firms) and a significant number of rental exchanges, especially in Chicago. Moreover, its two-dollar weekly licensing fee angered exhibitors, which soon provoked major exchanges run by Carl Laemmle, William Swanson, and others to withdraw.<sup>8</sup> Strong market demand also encouraged nonlicensed manufacturers to emerge: New York Motion Picture (NYMP), Laemmle’s own Independent Motion Picture (IMP), Powers, and Thanouser. Despite difficulties in creating a stable distribution system, their gradual success in competing with the MPPC is evident in one of the first weekly columns devoted to moving pictures, in the *St. Louis Times*.<sup>9</sup> Two months after first mentioning “independent” films, in early January 1910, the column gave “top billing” in consecutive weeks to a NYMP “Bison” brand western and an IMP sensational melodrama.<sup>10</sup> Further evidence can be found in a *New York Morning Telegraph* report on the accomplishments of the “independents,” also in early January, or be gleaned from the opening of more and more “independent” picture theaters such as the Jewel in downtown Lowell, Massachusetts, in late March 1910.<sup>11</sup>

When the combined strategy of licensing and lawsuit threats failed to squelch the so-called Independents, in April 1910, the MPPC formed the General Film Company, which purchased controlling interest in nearly all licensed exchanges in order to create a coordinated national distribution network for its films. By guaranteeing licensed exhibitors a “complete service,” General Film rationalized the industry around a variety program of single-reel and split-reel films that could be “freshened” each day. It also instituted a system of standing orders for weekly programs and another of run-clearance zoning that classified theaters so that a limited number had exclusive rights to “first-run” pictures in their area. Through General Film, the MPPC used a proven industrial logic to market a variety package of standardized commodities (indistinguishable except in brand name), equating cans of film with any other kind of canned goods. Within a month of General Film’s founding, IMP and NYMP set up their own distribution arm, the Motion Distributing and Sales Company (Sales), which adopted many policies and practices advanced by their competitors, especially the variety package of films that could be changed daily and give priority to “first-run” films.<sup>12</sup> This time the column of “Moving Pictures and Vaudeville” ads in the daily *St. Louis Times* suggested both General Film’s initial advantage and Sales’s growing market niche, abetted by IMP’s publicity stunt about the “death and resurrection” of its star, Florence Lawrence (see chapter 6).<sup>13</sup> Almost all the major theaters, especially those downtown like the Grand Cen-

tral, Casino, and New Bijou, as well as others in secondary commercial districts, were supplied by General Film. Yet, beginning with the Clinton in north St. Louis and the 600-seat New Theater in south St. Louis, more and more theaters contracted with Sales, most notably the 1,000-seat Vandora, which opened downtown on April 27 to show “the celebrated IMP pictures” (including those of Lawrence) and others on the first day of their release.<sup>14</sup> By the end of May, at least a half dozen theaters explicitly were advertising “independent” films, and one even got away with calling itself the Imp.<sup>15</sup>

Over the course of the next few months, Sales enlarged its portion of the market considerably, largely due to the strenuous efforts, so *Billboard* claimed, of Laemmle.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of July, Sales could distribute just two titles per day, Monday through Saturday, to little more than thirty exchanges, including those of Laemmle (Chicago, Minneapolis, Omaha), Swanson (Chicago, St. Louis), William Steiner (New York), W. E. Greene (Boston), and Miles Brothers (San Francisco).<sup>17</sup> That month consolidation with two other Independent factions, however, more than doubled the number of titles on its programs to four or five per day, and those now offered two titles each from IMP, Bison, Powers, and Thanouser, as well as one each from a half dozen European manufacturers—Great Northern, Éclair, Lux, Cines, Itala, and Ambroiso.<sup>18</sup> By September, Sales was funneling its weekly programs to fifty exchanges throughout the country, with important additions in Ohio—Victor Film (Cleveland) and Toledo Film (Toledo).<sup>19</sup> That fall and winter, major downtown picture theaters in a wide range of cities could depend on a regular supply of Sales’s films. In Massachusetts, they included newly constructed theaters such as Louis B. Mayer’s 1,800-seat Broadway in Lawrence and the 1,500-seat Central Square in Lynn.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere in the state, the Jewel was joined by the Scenic and Star in Lowell.<sup>21</sup> In Ohio, three of the earliest downtown theaters to advertise in the *Toledo News-Bee* featured Sales’s films: the Isis, Hart, and Crown.<sup>22</sup> Farther west, in Des Moines, Sales’ programs were restricted to the Family and Unique until a remodeled Elite opened on the city’s east side, in May 1911, and repeatedly advertised its “famous IMP films.”<sup>23</sup> By then, Sales had a near monopoly on Independent film distribution, having added American, Reliance, Solax, and Rex product to its programs, funneled through even more exchanges such as Lake Shore (Cleveland) and Western Film (New York, Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Seattle).<sup>24</sup> Within just one year, the company had gained control of close to one-third of the market.<sup>25</sup> If, in cities from Washington or Toledo to Des Moines, licensed films remained dominant, in others, such as Cleveland, the vast majority of downtown “photoplay” theaters presented “Independent shows.”<sup>26</sup>

By the spring of 1911, consequently, film distribution seemed a “closed market.” All but a handful of European manufacturers were excluded from circulating their films, and Pathé had been cajoled into limiting its imports of French films and, at a new studio in Jersey City, producing what manager

# THE DOERS

ARE THE MONEY MAKERS AND CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY

## WIDE AWAKE EXHIBITORS

Look over this list of **DOERS** in the **Independent Film Exchange Business**, every one of whom is a **Business Builder**. See if your Exchange is a **DOER**.

### LIST OF BUYING EXCHANGES

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>CANADA</b><br/>                 Allright, L. J. &amp; Sons, 107 Yonge St., Toronto, Ont.<br/>                 Canadian Film Exchange, Calgary, Alberta.<br/>                 General Co., 124 St. Catherine St., Montreal, Que.<br/>                 G. L. Watson Film Co., 411 Adelaide Street, Winnipeg, Man.<br/>                 Greater Association for sale of Western F. Ex., 3441 Victoria<br/>                 Bldg., Vancouver, B. C.</p> <p><b>CALIFORNIA</b><br/>                 California Film Ex., 148 Union St., San Francisco.<br/>                 Film Ex., 120 York St., San Francisco.<br/>                 Film Ex., 411 West 4th St., Los Angeles.<br/>                 California Film Exchange, 112 St. Los Angeles St., Los Angeles.</p> <p><b>CONNECTICUT</b><br/>                 Connecticut Film Ex., 100 State St., Hartford, Conn.<br/>                 W. S. Swanson Film Ex., 200 Railroad Bldg., Detroit.</p> <p><b>DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA</b><br/>                 Washington Film Ex., 410 1st St. N. W.</p> <p><b>FLORIDA</b><br/>                 Consolidated Film Ex., 2100 E. 1st St., Atlanta.</p> <p><b>ILLINOIS</b><br/>                 All Right Film Co., 128 W. Lake St., Chicago.<br/>                 Film Ex. Service, 210 Fifth Ave., Chicago.<br/>                 S. &amp; S. Film Exchange, 10 Jackson Bldg., Chicago.<br/>                 Landon Film Service, 100 LaSalle St., Chicago.<br/>                 Standard Film Exchange, 120 N. Washington St., Chicago.</p> <p><b>INDIANA</b><br/>                 Central Film Service, 122 North St., Indianapolis, Ind.</p> <p><b>IOWA</b><br/>                 Landon Film Service, 201 S. 1st &amp; 125 Broadway St., Des Moines.</p> <p><b>KANSAS</b><br/>                 Wichita Film &amp; Supply Co., 112 N. Market St., Wichita.<br/>                 Film Ex. Co., 720 Main Street Bldg., New Orleans.</p> <p><b>MARYLAND</b><br/>                 Motion Film Supply Co., 401 Washington St., Baltimore.<br/>                 W. &amp; S. Film Ex., 120 Broadway St., Newark.</p> <p><b>MASSACHUSETTS</b><br/>                 Boston Film Ex., 85 N. State St., Boston.<br/>                 Landon Film Service, 100 Broadway St., Worcester.</p> <p><b>MISSOURI</b><br/>                 Michigan Film &amp; Supply Co., 1100 Union Trust Bldg., Detroit.<br/>                 Motion Film Ex., 21 Grand St., Vermont.</p> | <p><b>MINNESOTA</b><br/>                 J. W. Huxley, 1101 Market St., Kansas City.<br/>                 Missouri Standard Film Co., 222 Broadway St., LaSalle.<br/>                 Western Film Exchange, 11 W. 10th St., Kansas City.</p> <p><b>NEBRASKA</b><br/>                 Landon Film Service, 1107 Jackson St., Omaha.</p> <p><b>NEW YORK</b><br/>                 See Film Exchange, 418 Broadway, Albany.<br/>                 Film Ex. Service, 20 Church St., Buffalo.</p> <p><b>NEW YORK CITY</b><br/>                 District Film Exchange, 110 E. Broadway St.<br/>                 Great Eastern Film Exchange, 8 E. Broadway<br/>                 Motion Film Exchange, 1 East Broadway St.<br/>                 Metropolitan Film Exchange, 110 Fourth St.<br/>                 Western Film Exchange, 143 West 45th St.</p> <p><b>OHIO</b><br/>                 Buckeye Lake State Film Co., 415 N. High St., Columbus.<br/>                 Universal Picture Film Co., 210 W. 10th St., Cincinnati.<br/>                 Lake Shore Film &amp; Supply Co., 100 Fremont Ave. S. E., Cleveland.<br/>                 Motion Film Service, 120 Erie St., Toledo.<br/>                 Film Ex. Service, Prospect &amp; Stone Sts., Cleveland.</p> <p><b>OREGON</b><br/>                 Independent W. F. Ex., 14 7th St., Portland.</p> <p><b>OKLAHOMA</b><br/>                 United Motion Picture Co., 112 West St., Oklahoma City.</p> <p><b>PENNSYLVANIA</b><br/>                 Eagle Film Exchange, 25 Fifth Ave St., Philadelphia.<br/>                 Universal Picture Film Co., 20 St. Peter St., Westmoreland.<br/>                 Philadelphia Film Exchange, 418 1st St., Philadelphia.<br/>                 Philadelphia Production Co., 54 So. 5th St., Philadelphia.<br/>                 Pennsylvania Film Ex., 110 N. 5th St., Philadelphia.<br/>                 Independent Film Exchange, 412 Ferry St., Pottsville.<br/>                 Progress Picture Co., 423 Fourth St., Pottsville.</p> <p><b>TEXAS</b><br/>                 Texas Film Exchange, 1215A Elm St., Dallas.<br/>                 Consolidated Exchange Co., 101 St. Thomey Bldg., Houston.</p> <p><b>UTAH</b><br/>                 Deseret Film Ex. Co., 20 1/2 Ave. West, Salt Lake City.</p> <p><b>WASHINGTON</b><br/>                 Pacific Film Exchange, 1000 1/2 4th Ave., Seattle.<br/>                 Western Film Exchange, 27 Third Ave., Seattle.</p> <p><b>WISCONSIN</b><br/>                 Western Film Exchange, 217 Wisconsin Bldg., Milwaukee.</p> |
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## MONEY DOESN'T "MAKE" ITSELF

IT HAS TO BE MADE

And the necessary ingredients for making money in the Moving Picture Business may all be summed up

IN TWO WORDS

## QUALITY AND SERVICE

The Motion Picture Distributing & Sales Co., with the following Weekly Program:

Monday—Dope, Yachow, Echo, Champion, American.	Thursday—Eps, Dips, American, Top.
Tuesday—Bingo, Power, Thunder.	Friday—Vander, Thunder, Lick, Slick, Blast.
Wednesday—Belmont, Stern, American, Champion, Dope.	Saturday—Powers, Belmont, Guss, American, Lick, Blast.

Gives you **QUALITY** unequalled, and your Exchange man if he is a Door will give you **THE SERVICE**

**NOW IS THE TIME TO DECLARE YOUR INDEPENDENCE**

Every day spent in your present business makes it harder for you to get out of the rut of a poor service. Why not start M. P. D. & S. Co.'s office in your home, and then build up a profitable business where you are master of your own situation, and reap the rewards more in future?

## Motion Picture Distributing & Sales Co.

111 East 14th Street, New York City

FIG. 4. Motion Picture Distributing & Sales Co. ad, *Moving Picture World* (5 August 1911), 260.

Jacques Berst called “American films” for “the national tastes of America.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even US entrepreneurs wanting to invest in new firms found it difficult to gain a foothold in a market so tightly controlled by the two combines. General Film and Sales could supply their exchanges regular weekly shipments of films, a daily mix of dramas, comedies, and “educational” films averaging four to five reels, which in turn could be shipped on just as regularly to their contracted exhibitors.<sup>28</sup> In Cleveland, the General Film office could stock first-run licensed theaters, for instance, with Biograph, Pathé, Selig, and Lubin films on Mondays and Vitagraph, Kalem, Pathé, and Edison films on Fridays. At the same time, Lake Shore and Victor could stock first-run Independent theaters with a selection of American, IMP, Éclair, Yankee, and Champion films on Mondays and Bison, Thanouser, Solax, and Lux films on Fridays. Indeed, the dominance of these two combines is strikingly evident in the unusual ads that General Film, Victor, and Lake Shore all placed, in December 1911, on the first Sunday moving picture pages of the *Cleveland Leader*.<sup>29</sup> However, enough films—from small US manufacturers and especially European firms (e.g., Messter, Deutsches Biograph, Film d’Art, Hepworth, Aquila, and Comerio)—remained available beyond the reach of either General Film or Sales and enough new theaters were opening that a second Independent company, National Film Distributing, attempted to package a competing weekly program of at least three titles per day.<sup>30</sup> Although it never accumulated enough customers ultimately to survive beyond early 1912, National Film Distributing certainly publicized its presence—for instance, matching the full-page Sales ad with one of its own, in the *Morning Telegraph*’s special Christmas issue.<sup>31</sup>

Success, however, did not safeguard either Sales or General Film from internal dissensions and disputes, and Sales proved the more vulnerable, at least in the short run. In October 1911, the company’s general manager, Herbert Miles, resigned to head a new production firm, Republic Film.<sup>32</sup> Three months later, when Gaumont voided its contract with Kleine, it chose not to join Sales but to sell its films without affiliation to either distribution faction.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, a proposed plan to combine all of Sales’ contracted exchanges into one, similar to that of General Film, so sharply divided members that half threatened to bolt the organization.<sup>34</sup> A further sign of the split was Sales’ refusal to admit another new company, Gem Films (financed by Swanson, one of its own founders), to its membership, which pitted those who wanted to maintain the current system against those who believed that a more open market would raise the level of film product.<sup>35</sup> In early February, the disquiet became public in a *Billboard* article, “Is the Open Market Inevitable?”; by late March, despite its insistence that “everybody’s doing it . . . the independent trot [and to its very own beat],” Sales was breaking up.<sup>36</sup> The precipitant, Staiger and Bowser suggest, probably was Harry Aitken, the successful owner of Western Film Exchange, who took over both Majestic and Reliance in late 1911.<sup>37</sup> In March, with the support of Wall Street bankers, he established Mu-

tual Film as a rival Independent faction, supported by an arrangement with his exchanges to distribute the films of the companies he controlled (he also had interests in American and NYMP).<sup>38</sup> The objective of Mutual, according to the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, was “to buy out exchanges and consolidate them along the line of the General Film Company.”<sup>39</sup> By May, Sales was little more than a shell, with the majority of its remaining members reorganized as Universal Film Manufacturing and the others joined together with Mutual Film and Western Film Exchange in a second combination, Film Supply.<sup>40</sup>

Initially, Universal seemed to be in a stronger position to distribute its variety package of weekly programs. It boasted of more than forty exchanges across the country, but concentrated along the eastern seaboard and in the upper Midwest, all contracted to rent twenty-one reels a week.<sup>41</sup> Its IMP, Bison, and Rex films especially were reputable and popular; moreover, Éclair, which also now was producing American films at its Fort Lee facilities, joined Universal after a brief month or two with Film Supply.<sup>42</sup> The latter company also distributed twenty-one reels weekly through thirty exchanges, concentrated at first in the Midwest and South, with its most popular American brands coming from Thanouser, American, Reliance, and Majestic.<sup>43</sup> In the *Cleveland Leader*, Lake Shore Film made a point of promoting its alliance with Mutual and, thereafter, advertising its “exclusive service” from Film Supply, “the cream of the world’s independent films.”<sup>44</sup> Tellingly, both companies, much like General Film, offered American films for the most part and a very limited number of European films: Universal’s weekly programs included only one reel each from Éclair, Itala, and Ambrosio; Film Supply had slightly more, with Gaumont (whose director, Herbert Blaché, played a leading role in organizing the company) providing at least two reels and Lux and Great Northern one each.<sup>45</sup> Not long after it added Éclair to its ranks, however, Universal went through a bitter, protracted struggle (allegedly marked by raids and gunfights) with NYMP, which announced its own withdrawal from the company in late June.<sup>46</sup> Although Universal eventually gained control of its Bison brand, NYMP negotiated a deal with Mutual by August to distribute its reorganized and enhanced production of Kay-Bee, Broncho, and Keystone films.<sup>47</sup> The deal helped Mutual quickly raise its number of purchased exchanges to twenty-six, from New York and Boston through Cleveland, Toledo, Des Moines, and beyond.<sup>48</sup> That fall its “invasion” of the Northeast was especially impressive as more and more theaters—for example, the Star and Washington in Boston, the Scenic in Lowell, the Star in Pawtucket—contracted with its weekly service.<sup>49</sup> In November, the 4,000-seat National Theater in Boston (perhaps the largest in the country) switched to Mutual films, as did the 1,500-seat Central Square in Lynn.<sup>50</sup> By December, Mutual’s affiliation with Film Supply was no longer needed, and it acquired exclusive rights to distribute as well the core of its former partner’s programs—Thanouser, American, Reliance, and Majestic.<sup>51</sup>



dent Exchange, but this turned out to be little more than a promotional gimmick.<sup>52</sup> Blaché succeeded in reorganizing what remained of Film Supply into Exclusive Supply, but its releases from Gaumont, Great Northern, Solax, and several other minor firms hardly amounted to a full weekly program—a further indication of how weak was the position of foreign imports, at least as the potential core of a variety package for distribution.<sup>53</sup> One sign of the relative degree of stability that the three companies achieved, at least for US manufacturers, was the even more prominent ads for General Film, Victor, and Lake Shore that ran in the *Cleveland Leader* in December 1912.<sup>54</sup> Another in the same newspaper was a weekly report on upcoming films in early February: they would be appearing in first-run theaters already “branded” as Universal, Mutual, and General Film houses.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in Pawtucket, each brand had its own picture theater: General Film, the Music Hall; Mutual, the Star; Universal, the Globe; and Film Supply, the Pastime.<sup>56</sup> Signs of the Independents’ strength were even more evident. In late January, Mutual took out a joint half-page ad with the Unique Theatre in the *Des Moines News*, celebrating not only their reciprocally profitable alliance but also its own status as a “synonym for progressiveness” in the industry.<sup>57</sup> Three months later, both Mutual and Universal ran special ads on a new weekly moving picture page in the *Minneapolis Journal*.<sup>58</sup> Simultaneously, and just as my imagined young woman was deciding on what movie theater to attend, the two distributors began running strip ads in the *Des Moines Register and Leader* that simply circulated the brand names of their regular programs.<sup>59</sup> Although General Film did not itself run similar ads there, one of its members, Essanay, did, promoting its “five-a-week” programs of “pure photoplays.”<sup>60</sup> These dueling strip ads, which also included those of one Independent manufacturer, Reliance, ran each Sunday from late April until late July.<sup>61</sup>

In September 1913, *Motography* claimed that “the single-reel subject” remained “the backbone of the business,” strongly implying that the variety program of daily or frequently changed short films would continue to attract audiences throughout the coming season.<sup>62</sup> That claim gained some credence from Mutual’s campaign for its regular programs, in late 1913 and early 1914, with exceptionally prominent ads in such newspapers as the *Minneapolis Journal* and the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the variety package that any exchange sent to its customers was not unlike a daily newspaper or a constantly updated popular magazine that moviegoers could browse at will in the continuous programs that many theaters still offered.<sup>64</sup>

### Opening the Market with European Specials

Those in the trade press who opposed a “closed market,” whatever its efficiency and profitability, had long argued for an “open market” (more common in Europe, especially Great Britain and Germany) that would not only

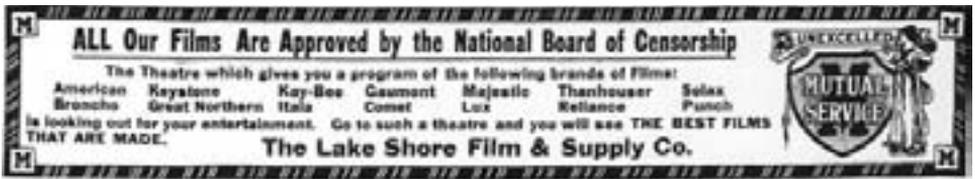


FIG. 6. Lake Shore Film & Supply Co. ad, *Cleveland Leader* (15 December 1912), S5.

encourage new manufacturers and distributors to invest in the business but also produce more expensive, higher-quality films that could have a much longer “shelf life,” as well as reach the “better classes.”<sup>65</sup> One strategy that both *Moving Picture World* and *Billboard* promoted to create a more open market was the production and distribution of “specials” or “features,” usually (but not always) longer films.<sup>66</sup> Their prime example was Pathé’s four-reel *Passion Play* (1907), which still was in circulation, usually for religious holidays, four years after its initial release. Yet this and other examples—for example, sports films such as the Gans-Nelson wrestling championship or the Jeffries-Johnson boxing championship, Wild West entertainments such as *Buffalo Bill Wild West* and *Pawnee Bill Far East*—were singular subjects and not susceptible to standardized production. Among MPPC manufacturers, Vitagraph had produced a few multiple-reel films such as *The Life of Moses* (1910) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1911), but General Film distributed them as single reels within the usual weekly variety program, respectively, in consecutive weeks or on consecutive days. It was special European imports that gradually would break open the market and eventually challenge the variety model, with the assistance of none other than Sales.<sup>67</sup>

An initial breach came with Sales’s distribution of Itala’s two-reel *The Fall of Troy* in the spring of 1911. One month in advance of its release, the *Morning Telegraph* urged independent exhibitors to “strive valiantly to secure” this “spectacular” production, and the *Dramatic Mirror* printed a glowing review, praising its “vast, stupendous beauty.”<sup>68</sup> In Youngstown, Ohio, the “special and exclusive . . . \$30,000 Motion Picture Spectacle” was the featured attraction at the Park (a vaudeville house) on Easter Sunday, and the local newspaper printed a half page of still photos from the film.<sup>69</sup> In Lowell, the Jewel ran a rare ad in *L’Etoile*, the local French-language newspaper, for a four-day showing, also over the Easter weekend; two weeks later, the Scenic Theatre did likewise, in the *Sunday Telegram*, for its own three-day showing of “this mammoth feature.”<sup>70</sup> At the Janet Theatre in Chicago, a *World* reporter had trouble gaining admission to the film one evening because “a mass of waiting people filled the lobby and extended out into the street.”<sup>71</sup> A writer for *Motion Picture Story Magazine* was enthralled at the end: “By moonlight the Grecians, hidden within the great wooden horse, climbed out, and with

torches, flaming yellow, fired the city. A last glimpse showed the doomed lovers looking thru the marble pillars of the palace at the red destruction.”<sup>72</sup> “Seen as far and wide” as the lavish review in the *Morning Telegraph* predicted,<sup>73</sup> *The Fall of Troy* led to other imports that summer: two more Italian epics, Cines’s four-reel *The Crusaders, or Jerusalem Delivered*, and Milano’s five-reel *Dante’s Inferno*, as well as a sensational melodrama, Great Northern’s three-reel *Temptations of a Great City*. In July, all three were advertised as distributed by either Sales or Pliny P. Craft (producer and distributor of *Buffalo Bill Wild West and Pawnee Bill Far East*), who shared a Union Square address in New York.<sup>74</sup> Yet within weeks, not only were the latter two films now distributed exclusively by Monopol Film (with Craft as general manager), with an uptown address near Times Square, but *Dante’s Inferno* also had been licensed by General Film.<sup>75</sup> Although these moves remain murky, Monopol’s handling of the latter film initiated two new distribution strategies that would differentiate “features” from variety programs.

The first strategy, the road show, came from the legitimate theater: a distributor took a film “on the road,” renting individual theaters on a percentage-of-the-gross basis. Monopol pioneered this strategy with *Dante’s Inferno* by advertising the film as “the successor to the Passion Play” and booking it for at least one-week runs in the prestigious Shubert theater circuit, beginning with two shows daily (ticket prices were fifteen to seventy-five cents) at the Auditorium Theatre in Baltimore, on 14 August 1911.<sup>76</sup> Business reportedly was brisk, and the film was rebooked for a second week, a phenomenon repeated at Klaw & Erlanger’s Grand Opera House in Cincinnati. In late August and early September, just prior to the opening of the fall theatrical season, *Dante’s Inferno* played for a week or more at other Shubert theaters in such cities as Montreal, Chicago, St. Louis, Brooklyn, and Washington. At the Belasco Theatre in the latter city, accompanied by a “lecture and appropriate music,” it “scored a tremendous success” and was held over an extra week.<sup>77</sup> The second strategy was a “state rights” system of distribution in which a person or firm purchased the right to license a film’s exhibition in a particular territory—at legitimate, vaudeville, and/or picture theaters. Although it had been used irregularly for previous “specials,” Monopol showed the system off to real advantage with *Dante’s Inferno*.<sup>78</sup> The earliest state rights bookings came in mid-September: in Lawrence, surprisingly, where the film played for a full week at the Grand Opera, and in Cleveland, also for a full week at a downtown picture theater, the Mall (and at the regular price of ten cents).<sup>79</sup> During the next three months, the film ran anywhere from three days to a week or even two weeks (sometimes with an increase in price), in chronological order, at the Opera House in Providence, the Opera House in Lowell (with special sound effects), the Palace in Youngstown, the Grand Opera in Boston (with a lecture performed by W. Stephen Bush),<sup>80</sup> the Colonial in Rochester, the Mazda in Minneapolis, the



FIG. 7. Mall ad, *Cleveland Leader* (17 September 1911).

Colonial in Des Moines, and the Manhattan in New York.<sup>81</sup> And it continued to reappear throughout the following year—for example, in February, at the Star in Pawtucket and the Elite in Des Moines; in mid-May, at the Rex in Youngstown for a full week; and in July, at the Empress in Toledo, where “so vast were the crowds” that it was booked an extra day.<sup>82</sup>

If *Dante's Inferno* demonstrated the viability of the road show and state rights systems of distribution for longer films, it remained a singular subject, much like the *Passion Play*, best promoted as a “special event.” Moreover, its visual spectacle was validated by cultural and/or religious respectability. So too were *The Crusaders*, if to a lesser extent (since it was adapted from a less familiar Italian epic), and another Monopol import, Milano’s three-reel *Homer's Odyssey*.<sup>83</sup> The initial licensees for *The Crusaders* apparently were World’s Best Films of Chicago and Feature & Educational Films (F & E) of Cleveland. In September 1911, World’s Best boasted that it had sold rights to eight states in the Midwest and Northwest;<sup>84</sup> at the same time, F & E booked engagements in northern Ohio: one Sunday at the Elysium (a legitimate theater) in Cleveland and, to “great interest,” the “first four days of Aviation Week” at the Auditorium in Canton.<sup>85</sup> Another two months passed before the film was featured one Sunday at the Park in Youngstown. Only in December and January did its circulation widen farther into New England, for three-day or full-week runs—at the Palace in Boston, the Jewel in Lowell, and the Victoria in Lawrence.<sup>86</sup> The response to *The Crusaders* in Boston was conflicted, to say the least: although it “drew big crowds to the Palace [and] was viewed by many school children,” the state police refused to allow screenings on Sundays, allegedly because one scene “revealed two warriors in a terrific duel.”<sup>87</sup> By March, other licensees were booking it at the Star in Pawtucket (where it did only moderate business) and the Isis in Minneapolis; that summer, the film finally played at major theaters in Lynn, Toledo, and Des Moines.<sup>88</sup> Monopol first broached news of *Homer's Odyssey* in Octo-

ber 1911 but did not advertise it until four months later, then lined up licensees with assists from Jake Wells's purchase of "ten southern states rights" and a two-page promotion in the *New York Sunday American*.<sup>89</sup> One of the film's initial bookings turned out to be a full-week run in April at the Auditorium in Minneapolis, and it returned in early June at the Metropolitan.<sup>90</sup> The following fall, the film could be found at picture theaters from the Columbia in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to the Jewel in Lowell, and in November it still could be booked for a full week at the Colonial in Des Moines.<sup>91</sup>

In May 1912, W. Stephen Bush singled out these "three great features," all "clean and classic subjects," as a portent of the future, for so unexpectedly finding "favor with the American public."<sup>92</sup> The French-American Film Company set out to duplicate Monopol's success, but with two multiple-reel French films, Film d'Art's *Camille* and *Mme Sans-Gene*, that it combined in a five-reel package that could be exhibited either as one or in consecutive programs.<sup>93</sup> The attraction here, of course, was the stars, Bernhardt and Réjane, respectively, who had agreed to reprise two of their more famous stage roles in moving pictures. After the company mounted an extensive ad campaign in the *Morning Telegraph*, the films won a lengthy adulatory review from Bush in the *World* and convinced the *Dramatic Mirror* to inaugurate a new weekly column, "Reviews of Feature Subjects."<sup>94</sup> Initial bookings were widely distributed in legitimate theaters or vaudeville houses: *Camille* alone at the Valentine in Toledo one weekend in March; and both films together at the Lyceum in Rochester also in March, at the Majestic in Brooklyn in May, where they were "admired by big audiences," and at the Lasalle Opera House in Chicago, where the pair ran for a record ten weeks, by far the longest yet for a moving picture.<sup>95</sup> In Cleveland, the films shifted from road show to state rights performances, playing for two weeks at the Alhambra in April, another week at the Princess, then one week more at the Mall in May.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, the films were being leased as a special package elsewhere in Ohio, for instance, to vaudeville houses in Canton and Youngstown,<sup>97</sup> and throughout the summer in regular picture theaters in the upper Midwest and the Northeast. Indeed, one or both films remained in circulation in New England well into the fall, finally showing up in early November at the Dreamland in Lynn, where each film, consecutively, enjoyed a two-day run.<sup>98</sup>

Although the trade press consistently advocated the production and distribution of "special" films or "features," it recognized the difficulty of countering the industry's dependence on the "popular cry" for "first-runs" in variety programs.<sup>99</sup> Rather than a few scattered "special event" films that took six months or a year to circulate widely, argued the *Dramatic Mirror*, there had to be "a reasonably dependable supply of new and appealing productions of sufficient strength" and number for the state rights system not only to demonstrate, as Epes Winthrop Sargent put it, that "a photoplay" could be much more than "a daily newspaper" but also to be profitable more quickly

and assuredly.<sup>100</sup> Sargent also was well aware that features required more time, energy, and money to market and demanded of both distributors and exhibitors “a radical departure in [the] usual styles of advertising,” promoting each title’s unique attraction and targeting its most likely audience, especially through local newspapers.<sup>101</sup> Here again, F & E may have served as a model, even if its experience licensing *Temptations of a Great City* is difficult to assess. The film had several Sunday engagements early on: at the Auditorium in Canton in October 1911 and at the Lyric in Youngstown in December.<sup>102</sup> After that, there are few traces of its appearance: at the Star in Pawtucket in February 1912, at the Orpheum in Toledo in June, and at the Alpha Theater in the black ghetto of Cleveland in early September.<sup>103</sup> Yet, unlike the previous films, this sensational story of a wealthy young man tempted by “wine, women, and song and reduced to poverty” enjoyed little press coverage other than to dismiss its “cheaper melodramatic character.”<sup>104</sup> If the strong box office garnered at the Pawtucket Star is any indication,<sup>105</sup> however, the film must have prompted F & E to risk acquiring rights to the other multiple-reel sensational melodramas being released with increasing regularity by Éclair and Great Northern’s new affiliate in charge of “special features.”<sup>106</sup> For several months in the winter of 1911–12, F & E mounted a big publicity campaign not only in the trade press but also in the *Cleveland Leader*, most notably for Éclair’s three-reel crime thriller, *Zigomar*.<sup>107</sup> The unexpected success of this film and the relative failure of later French thrillers will be analyzed in some detail in chapter 5, but, for now, it is worth noting that *Zigomar*, along with other imports such as Éclair’s *Land of Darkness* and Great Northern’s *A Victim of the Mormons*, allowed F & E to expand its Cleveland office, as well as establish branches in new territories—in Indianapolis, Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee.<sup>108</sup>

Now that “feature films,” in the words of *Billboard*, had to be considered “an important branch of the moving picture business” by early 1912, the market broke wide open, as an increasing number of “outsiders” not aligned with Sales hastily organized to rent exclusively to Independent exhibitors.<sup>109</sup> Most followed F & E’s lead by securing rights within a given territory to distribute a group of two- and three-reel films (chiefly sensational melodramas and historical dramas) by at least one European company.<sup>110</sup> From its headquarters in Chicago, Feature Film offered a selection of French titles from Pathé, including *The Siege of Calais*, *Notre Dame de Paris*, and *Victims of Alcohol*.<sup>111</sup> Apparently, the company did well enough to open branch offices from Columbus and Toledo to St. Paul and New Orleans.<sup>112</sup> New York Film offered some of the same films in the Northeast.<sup>113</sup> In Springfield, Massachusetts, Century Film gained the rights to handle Éclair features, beginning with *The Land of Darkness*, for much of New England.<sup>114</sup> And Warner’s Features got its start by selling the rights to another Éclair film, *Redemption*, through offices from New York to California.<sup>115</sup> In the wake of the *Titanic* disaster, World’s Best

Films seized on the sensational elements of Great Northern's *The Wreck of the Aurora*.<sup>116</sup> In Toledo, Tournament Film secured the rights to distribute Deutsche Biograph's German features starring Asta Nielsen, beginning with *Gypsy Blood* and *The Traitress*.<sup>117</sup> A good number of these state rights firms succeeded, at least in the short term. Between March and May, either F & E or Feature Film supplied the Park and/or Orpheum in Youngstown with weekly Sunday shows that included *A Victim of Mormons*, *Siege of Calais*, and *The Land of Darkness*.<sup>118</sup> In April and May, World's Best Films shipped *The Wreck of the Aurora* to theaters from Toledo to Des Moines.<sup>119</sup> And, from April through July, Tournament booked its Asta Nielsen features into the Hart and Empress in Toledo, the Park and Orpheum in Youngstown, and perhaps even the Central Square in Lynn.<sup>120</sup>

However much controversy these sensational melodramas from Europe later provoked, together with other Italian and French "specials" they did have an impact on both General Film and Sales. In October 1911, shortly after *Dante's Inferno* began its lengthy run, General Film modified its weekly variety package to include two- and three-reel specials (eschewing any hint of sensational melodrama), beginning with Selig's *Two Orphans* and Kalem's *Colleen Bawn*. Although these specials had no regular release pattern, they did seem aimed at first-run picture theaters that changed their programs two or three times a week rather than daily so that reels could be shown one after the other on a program or separately on consecutive days.<sup>121</sup> The Lyric in Minneapolis showcased this strategy, presenting three-day runs of *Two Orphans* (early October), *Colleen Bawn* (late October), Kalem's second Irish drama, *Arrah-Na-Pogue* (early December), Selig's *Cinderella* (early January), and Vitagraph's *Vanity Fair* (late January).<sup>122</sup> The *Cleveland Leader* reveals how General Film circulated a popular feature like *Cinderella*, starring Mabel Taliaferro,<sup>123</sup> through its hierarchy of theaters: in early January, the film played at the downtown Avenue on Monday and Tuesday, then at the Cameraphone the following Sunday; two weeks later it was at the Home for a special Thursday showing; in February, it played first at the Cozy and then at the Superior, both on a Monday and Tuesday.<sup>124</sup> Yet not all first-run theaters in other cities specialized in General Film "features," even when they did not change programs daily; instead, the Comique and Olympia in Lynn, the Voyons in Lowell, and the Odeon in Canton all remained more committed to the variety program of single reels. In late 1911, Sales also experimented with distributing multiple-reel films such as Thanhouser's *Romeo and Juliet* and *David Copperfield* and occasional foreign imports such as Ambrosio's *The Golden Wedding*, which reportedly "made a great hit" at Chicago's Janet Theater.<sup>125</sup> Yet the company experienced difficulties (best taken up in chapter 2) in trying to distribute Bison-101 multiple-reel westerns on a more regular basis in the spring of 1912, which may well have contributed to its dissolution.

Selig's three-reel *The Coming of Columbus* inaugurated a further change in

General Film's distribution policy. Shot before and during a Columbus Day pageant organized in Chicago in October 1911, perhaps in an attempt to create an American "national epic" to rival the Italian features, the film's release was delayed until May 1912, for reasons that remain unclear.<sup>126</sup> Whatever the case, General Film used the film to begin releasing multiple-reel "specials" on a regular basis.<sup>127</sup> Benefiting from unusual coverage in the trade press, as well as Selig's own extensive ad campaign that reached out to local newspapers,<sup>128</sup> *The Coming of Columbus* played often and widely. For a full week in early May, once again the Lyric in Minneapolis showcased its presentation, demonstrating, in the words of the *Minneapolis Journal*, "the undeniable value of moving pictures as a means of visualizing past historical events for their keener comprehension by both grownups and children of today."<sup>129</sup> Later that month, in Los Angeles, Clune's Main Street Theater kept it for "a full week instead of the usual three or four days" and still turned people away at the last performance.<sup>130</sup> In Des Moines, the Colonial reproduced Selig's publicity illustration for its four-day run, adding this caveat: it was "endorsed by educators, press, pulpit, historians, and public."<sup>131</sup> In Canton, in order to kick off its summer schedule of pictures, the Orpheum picked up on another Selig promotional idea—an essay contest on the subject of the film for schoolchildren—and gave them a special morning matinee two weeks before its scheduled weekend run.<sup>132</sup> For parents, the *Canton News-Democrat* published a full-page article on the film's making, with ten accompanying photos, both probably supplied by Selig.<sup>133</sup> Yet not all bookings were successful: a Salt Lake City exhibitor lost money by deciding to show the film not at his own 1,000-seat venue but at a larger legitimate theater.<sup>134</sup> The unusual attention to *The Coming of Columbus* in Canton (and perhaps similar cities) highlights the controversy over how "aliens" could be "Americanized" during this period, and how moving pictures might be used for such ends. In this case, concerns over the recent influx of Italian immigrants into the area and the desirability of their assimilation may have prompted these strategies;<sup>135</sup> yet such a hypothesis has to account for the absence of any reference to the film being shown in nearby Youngstown, where a larger Italian immigrant population had five small picture theaters catering specifically to them.<sup>136</sup>

Throughout the summer and into the fall of 1912, General Film stuck to a release schedule of one two- or three-reel "special feature" each week. Initially the films were as likely to be imported as "made in the USA"—for example, Pathé's *The Orleans Coach* (June) and *Fire at Sea* (August) or Cines's *Rameses King of Egypt* (August) and *Daughter of the Spy* (September)—but increasingly American titles predominated, as US manufacturers stepped up their production.<sup>137</sup> The success of these "special features," or at least the demand for them from exhibitors, convinced General Film to announce that, beginning in November, it would "offer its customers two multiple-reel sub-





## General Film Service is the magnet that draws the crowds

**W**HEN you were a kid you had a magnet. Every youngster had. You marvelled at the way objects of steel were attracted to it. You didn't worry much about the principle of the thing or attempt to analyze why they fairly jumped at the magnet. They did—and that was enough.

General Film Service is the magnet of the exhibiting business. It draws the crowds right in your door. The reason is easily explained; but here again you needn't worry. The continued popularity of General Film Service is dependent upon our maintaining its present high standard. And that standard will be maintained so long as motion pictures are exhibited. We put

the stuff in our programs that insures the success of your show. About all you have to do is arrange for the service.

Just the other day an exhibitor in Kansas said: "We have tried out other services, but the General beats them all." His case is not unusual by any means. The staunchest friends General Film Service has to-day are exhibitors who first tried some other service, and, in some cases, several others! Why not investigate now?

We have printed a little booklet that we'd like you to have. It's a concise review of the things that stamp General Film Service as superior. The colored cover alone is worth the stamp it will cost you to get it. Mention the News when you write.

## General Film Company

200 Fifth Avenue, New York

Distributing offices everywhere

FIG. 9. General Film Co. ad, *Moving Picture News* (26 April 1913), 5.

for the company, as lengthy features from Europe made further inroads into the US market.

### Standardizing the Features Market with American Films

In September 1912, a *Billboard* writer claimed that “novelty foreign pictures are exceedingly popular,” and nothing perhaps demonstrates that more clearly than *Queen Elizabeth*.<sup>141</sup> Prompted in part by the success of *Camille*, exhibitor Adolph Zukor and Broadway producer Daniel Frohman founded Famous Players Film in New York expressly for the US distribution of this second Bernhardt vehicle, a three-reel French-British adaptation of another of the actress’s stage roles (in a Victorien Sardou play), whose initial ads displayed a morbid fascination with “MURDER” and Elizabeth’s climactic death scene, which was turned into “Sarah Bernhardt Is Going to Die!”<sup>142</sup> After previewing the film in New York for “a large and enthusiastic gathering of newspaper men and critics,” Famous Players adopted a combined road show and state rights strategy of distribution for this “artistically tinted and toned” historical drama (with a special musical score composed by Joseph Carl Breil), modeled partly on what had worked so well for *Dante’s Inferno* the year before.<sup>143</sup> According to Frohman, Zukor even got him to persuade the MPPC to license their film, to ensure wider distribution.<sup>144</sup> On August 12, *Queen Elizabeth* opened at the Powers Theater in Chicago, for a five-week run (tickets cost twenty-five cents to one dollar); by early September, through an arrangement between Zukor and Marcus Loew (former business partners), it was playing in Loew’s seventeen theaters throughout New York City—which, on average, drew “\$200 a day more” than usual.<sup>145</sup> For the next several months, on the added strength of excellent reviews and a front-cover illustration for *Photoplay* (September 1912), Famous Players booked the film for road show engagements, usually for a week, at a range of legitimate theaters: the Berchel in Des Moines in mid-September, the Colonial in Cleveland in October, and the Valentine in Toledo in December.<sup>146</sup> At the same time, however, through state rights licensees, it also played in major picture theaters, either for a week—at the Opera House in Lowell or the Colonial in Lawrence in October (where tickets cost ten to fifty cents), the Olympia in Boston (lectured by Geoffrey Whelan), and the Casino in Washington, “surrounded by a bill of refined vaudeville specialities”—or even for one- or two-day runs (at regular prices)—at the Rex in Youngstown in November, the Hippodrome in Rochester in December, or the Grand in Canton in February.<sup>147</sup> In Cleveland, probably as in other large cities, *Queen Elizabeth* also processed through regular picture theaters, including a new suburban theater, the Quincy, in December.<sup>148</sup>

Although Famous Players announced ambitious plans for a series of feature-length American films, the company encountered difficulties in



FIG. 10. *Queen Elizabeth* (production still), *Photoplay Magazine* front cover (September 1912).

both production and distribution and “flirted with bankruptcy throughout early 1913.”<sup>149</sup> Meanwhile, other US companies sought to duplicate the success of a singular film like *Queen Elizabeth*. Masko Film set out to exploit an American stage actress, Blanche Walsh, who re-created a well-known role in a three-reel adaptation of Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*.<sup>150</sup> After initial screenings in regular picture theaters in New York City and Lawrence in July 1912, the film’s bookings seem to have been few and far between: the Garden in Washington in September, the Premier in Lowell in October, the Colonial in Rochester in December, and the Colonial in Des Moines, six months later.<sup>151</sup> United States Film challenged Famous Players by casting Helen Gardner as Cleopatra, in a five-reel adaptation of another Sardou play. Much like a theatrical show, *Cleopatra* was “given a try-out . . . at a large picture house a few miles outside New York City” in mid-November 1912 and then heavily pro-

moted not only in the *Dramatic Mirror* but also in the *Cleveland Leader*, in a full page of publicity stills of Gardner as the “Sorceress of the Nile.”<sup>152</sup> At first, its bookings seemed propitious: two weeks at the Duchess in Cleveland through Christmas and New Years, one week at the Garden in Washington in March, a special engagement at the new Gordon Theater in Rochester also in March, another at the Boston Symphony Hall in late April.<sup>153</sup> Thereafter, it worked its way around the country ever so slowly and usually for short runs: three days at the Crystal in Minneapolis in May, two days at the Alhambra in Toledo in August, two days at the Palace in Cedar Rapids in September, and a full week at the Star in Des Moines, promoted by an unusual half-page newspaper ad, but not until May 1914.<sup>154</sup> In Quebec, it was even censored as “too voluptuous for the general public.”<sup>155</sup> Gardner at least had the financial clout to produce other features, beginning with *A Princess of Bagdad* (1913); the Dudley Company offered a more feeble challenge with its five-reel version of *Richard III*, starring the Shakespearean actor Fredrick Warde.<sup>156</sup> The recent rediscovery and restoration of a surviving print of the latter film probably has received more attention than the original ever did.

Other new or established companies sought to exploit religious subjects on the order of *Dante's Inferno*, but with mixed success. Neither Crown Feature, with Milano's three-reel *St. George and the Dragon*, nor World's Best Films, with Ambrosio's four-reel *Pilgrim's Progress*, could muster significant circulation.<sup>157</sup> New York Film must have thought it had the goods with a four-reel adaptation of Max Reinhardt's *The Miracle*,<sup>158</sup> but the owner of a stage production that had “played in London for more than a year” sued, delaying its release, and its distribution also suffered.<sup>159</sup> Even General Film experimented with a state rights licensing of Kalem's five-reel *From the Manger to the Cross*.<sup>160</sup> Previewed “for church people in the fall of 1912,” this American “Passion Play” (shot on location in Palestine and Egypt) was praised by some but condemned by others, which compromised its distribution.<sup>161</sup> Supposedly “a decided hit in Boston” the following spring, it had rare bookings elsewhere: a single Saturday at the Coliseum in Des Moines, a single Wednesday at the Voyons in Lowell, two days at the Crystal in Cedar Rapids.<sup>162</sup> Still, it featured prominently for three days in April (and again in May) at the Lyric in Minneapolis, where special stage settings, an augmented orchestra, and a chorus framed the screen.<sup>163</sup> The only film that came close to matching *Dante's Inferno* was the four-reel *Satan*, sold directly to state right licensees by Ambrosio's US agency, which promoted it as “suitable for schools, churches, and theatres.”<sup>164</sup> Reviews described as “impressive,” even “brilliant,” its handling of sin's powerful sweep through four ages: Satan's “plans to conquer the earth” after his expulsion from heaven, his taunting (as a Pharisee) of Christ, his temptation of a medieval alchemist, and his melodramatic involvement in a modern clash of class and romantic interests.<sup>165</sup> Most bookings of the film were for heavily advertised full-week runs: the Mall in Cleveland (February), the new Gordon

Curious Customs in Asiatic Theatres--Goldie  
JULY 24, 1912 PRICE TEN CENTS

THE NEW YORK  
**DRAMATIC  
MIRROR**



HELEN GARDNER AS CLEOPATRA

Influence of Modern Burlesque on the Theatre--Grau

FIG. 11. Helen Gardner, *New York Dramatic Mirror* cover (24 July 1912).

in Rochester (March), the Empress in Toledo (March), and the Colonial in Des Moines (May), where “10,000 saw this magnificent photoplay.”<sup>166</sup> But *Satan* also swept through other theaters (the Alhambra, Globe, and Olympia) in Cleveland in March, was rebooked at the Colonial in Des Moines in June, and played twice in Canton (at the Auditorium in March, then at the Orpheum in June). In Ohio alone, “more than 200 days’ bookings [had] been secured” by May, and 15,000 people reportedly attended the High Street Theater in Columbus during an eight-day run.<sup>167</sup>

If *Satan* can be seen as a little-recognized model for Griffith’s more complex treatment of a similar subject in *Intolerance* (1916), it more immediately set a precedent for George Kleine’s distribution of Cines’s eight-reel *Quo Vadis?* After Gaumont ended its contract in early 1912, Kleine had acquired exclusive rights to distribute Cines films within General Film’s weekly programs, but he had not previously sought to import any production as big as this adaptation of Joseph Sienkiewicz’s best-selling novel of spectacular degradation (and Christian suffering) in Nero’s Rome. On 21 April 1913, Kleine boldly premiered *Quo Vadis?*, much like a Broadway play, at the Astor Theatre in New York City (tickets for the twice-daily show cost 25¢ to \$1.50).<sup>168</sup> Reviews were ecstatic, and Kleine reprinted a half dozen each from New York and Chicago in full-page advertisements in much of the trade press.<sup>169</sup> He also used his branch offices to set up fifteen touring companies to road show the film, beginning in early May, at McVicker’s Theatre in Chicago, the Garrick in Philadelphia, the Academy of Music in Baltimore (where 20 percent of the population saw the film), and Teller’s Broadway Theatre in Brooklyn.<sup>170</sup> In late June, *Quo Vadis?* opened at the Tremont in Boston (admission was twenty-five to fifty cents), where it ran for three months; in July, it began a four-week run at the Hippodrome in Cleveland (also accompanied by a full page of publicity stills in the *Cleveland Leader*), after which it played another week at the suburban Alhambra.<sup>171</sup> By August, it was running almost simultaneously in cities across the country (again, at ticket prices of twenty-five to fifty cents): two weeks at the Auditorium and then three weeks at Mason’s Opera House in Los Angeles, three weeks at the Columbia in San Francisco, two weeks at the Opera House in Providence, one week at the Berchel in Des Moines, three days at the Alhambra in Toledo.<sup>172</sup> That fall, Kleine continued to book the film for weeklong runs: at the Lyceum in Rochester, the Metropolitan theaters in both Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Opera House in Lawrence, and the Star in Pawtucket.<sup>173</sup> By December and January, it was returning to cities from Rochester and Toledo to St. Paul and San Francisco; in New York, it was rebooked for a week at a new palace cinema, the Regent.<sup>174</sup> Publicity stills stressed the film’s reproduction of famous nineteenth-century paintings, attesting to its status as art, but, more important, local ads tended to “Americanize” the production, attributing it to Kleine and sometimes erasing any reference to its Italian origins.

Long before Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Quo Vadis?* thus established "the dollar photoplay attraction in . . . regular theaters,"<sup>175</sup> and Kleine made plans not only to secure other spectacular Italian features such as Ambrosio's *The Last Days of Pompeii* but also to invest in a studio of his own for their production in Italy.<sup>176</sup> Simultaneously, World Special Films gained exclusive rights to distribute Pasquali's version of the same title, forcing the two films to compete for theaters that fall and winter.<sup>177</sup> In cities such as Des Moines and Canton, audiences could even see both films in the same week at different downtown theaters. The only other European feature that almost measured up to *Quo Vadis?*, however, was Pathé's four-part *Les Misérables*. Unable to release its French films of more than three reels through General Film, Pathé had supported K. W. Linn (the former manager of its Chicago office) in founding a separate distribution firm, Eclectic, in New York City in late 1912.<sup>178</sup> Although Eclectic handled other films such as *The Mysteries of Paris*, the company's primary title clearly was *Les Misérables*.<sup>179</sup> Despite impressive reviews in April 1913, Eclectic had difficulty selling states rights for the original twelve-reel version, and Linn was forced to reduce the US print to eight or nine reels.<sup>180</sup> That film seems to have premiered at the New Grand Central in downtown St. Louis in early July and, much like *Quo Vadis?*, then played legitimate theaters from San Francisco to Boston in August and September.<sup>181</sup> Bookings thereafter included large picture theaters such as the Knickerbocker in Cleveland (held over for a second week in late September) and legitimate theaters such as Orchestra Hall in Chicago (for most of October) and the Grand Circus Theater in Detroit and the Shubert Masonic Theater in Louisville (at least through November).<sup>182</sup> Its greatest success undoubtedly came at the Tremont Temple in Boston, where it ran for nearly three months straight, through late November; by contrast, the film did not appear in New York until January 1914, at the Carnegie Lyceum (where tickets cost twenty-five cents to one dollar).<sup>183</sup> Although not quite the smash hit that *Quo Vadis?* was, *Les Misérables* did "have legs" (when it finally appeared in certain "unsold" regions): in April 1914, it was booked for a week at the Berchel in Des Moines, as well as for four days at the Palace in Cedar Rapids (at both theaters, tickets were twenty-five cents); the Palace even took the unusual step of running a full-page ad for the film in the local newspaper.<sup>184</sup>

Perhaps provoked by the success of many of these (mostly foreign) blockbusters, in the summer of 1913 two US firms, seeking to avoid the problems faced by a film such as *Cleopatra*, set out to regularize feature film distribution.<sup>185</sup> One of these has been largely ignored: Warner's Features. The previous summer, Warner's had begun distributing multiple-reel films, initially sensational melodramas of one kind or another, through nine offices located in the Northeast and Midwest.<sup>186</sup> In late 1912, the company gained a measure of respectability by contracting to release the films of Gene Gauntier Feature Players, directed by Sidney Olcott.<sup>187</sup> The following spring, soon after more

offices were opened from Los Angeles to Washington, Abe Warner issued this claim—"American features, made in America by American actors and actresses, now have the call over those made abroad"—and exhorted manufacturers to respond to the "the future demand for features."<sup>188</sup> In August, the company was reorganized, as Pat Powers became president, and geared up to begin offering "an exclusive and permanent weekly service of three incomparable three and four reel features," all bought on the "open market" from eighteen independent producers (among them, besides Gauntier, were Helen Gardner Picture Players and Marion Leonard Features) and distributed through some two dozen offices.<sup>189</sup> The Warner brothers' long familiarity with northeastern Ohio may have led the company to use its Cleveland office to inaugurate this service: while newspaper ads stressed the company's "variety of features," in language ("Boys, We've Got the Goods") reminiscent of "straight-talking" Carl Laemmle several years earlier, the downtown Princess began to feature Warner's films exclusively.<sup>190</sup> Other picture theaters soon followed: in New England, the Boston office signed up exhibitors like the Bijou in Pawtucket and the Opera House in Lowell; in the upper Midwest, the Des Moines Colonial abandoned its mixed schedule of American and foreign features for Warner's service.<sup>191</sup> By November, one of Rochester's more "progressive exhibitors," Fitzbaugh Hall, also was showing Warner's Features.<sup>192</sup> The company was successful enough to run one-page bulletins in the *World* through March 1914, supply one of Toledo's principal downtown theaters, the Alhambra, well into the summer, and sustain its advertising campaign in the *Cleveland Leader*.<sup>193</sup> Yet there were signs that its films (perhaps stigmatized as sensational melodramas, more suitable for working-class audiences) eventually could not compete with longer, more "respectable" features: the Des Moines Colonial dropped Warner's Features in December 1913, and the Lowell Opera House and Pawtucket Bijou switched to Famous Players' service in early 1914.<sup>194</sup>

Although it took more than a year for Famous Players to put its ambitious 1912 plans into full operation, the company probably was more responsible than Warner's for regulating and standardizing feature film distribution and programming. In the summer of 1913, Quinn argues, Famous Players concluded that the current state rights system was proving unworkable and moved quickly to establish five affiliated companies (in Boston, New York, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Chattanooga) that would not only distribute but also participate in financing the company's films.<sup>195</sup> In addition, distribution contracts were issued to a half dozen other established exchanges (in New York, Detroit, St. Louis, Kansas City, San Antonio, and San Francisco) to handle what ads proclaimed would come to "30 Famous Features a Year."<sup>196</sup> The initial films released in early September exemplified the company's policy, in contrast to Warner's, of headlining renowned stage actors in film adaptations of major authors and playwrights: Minnie Maddern Fiske in *Tess of the*

## Another Pleasing Surprise for the New England Exhibitors

**I**N addition to our contracts already signed for New England on all of the FAMOUS PLAYERS FEATURE PRODUCTIONS, we have closed contracts with the ALL STAR FILM CORPORATION for New England on all of their productions this season.

First release, "*Arizona*," Sept. 15th. Produced by Augustus Thomas. Is this not a wonderful combination?

Mrs. Fiske in "*Tess d'Urbervilles*" and Mary Pickford in the "*Bishop's Carriage*" have already made a wonderful success, just as we said they would.

The FAMOUS PLAYERS and ALL STAR Circuit of Theatres are forming fast. Below is a list of theatres that have signed exclusive contracts for their city or town.

GORDON'S OLYMPIA .....	Boston, Mass.	EMPIRE THEATER .....	Bridgport, Conn.
KEITH'S BIJOU DREAM .....	Boston, Mass.	KEANEY'S THEATER .....	New Britain, Conn.
OLYMPIA THEATER .....	Chelsea, Mass.	FOLI'S THEATER .....	Waterbury, Conn.
WALTHAM THEATER .....	Waltham, Mass.	LYCEUM THEATER .....	Meriden, Conn.
DORCHESTER THEATER .....	Dorchester, Mass.	DAVIS THEATER .....	Stamford, Conn.
PARK THEATER .....	Worcester, Mass.	EMPIRE THEATER .....	Norwich, Conn.
CRESCENT THEATER .....	Revere, Mass.	CASINO THEATER .....	Hartford, Conn.
MAJESTIC THEATER .....	Fitchburg, Mass.	STAR THEATER .....	Providence, R. I.
ACADEMY OF MUSIC .....	Lowell, Mass.	OPERA HOUSE .....	Pawtucket, R. I.
FAKE THEATER .....	Taunton, Mass.	NEW PORTLAND THEATRE .....	Portland, Me.
VICTORIA THEATER .....	Lawrence, Mass.	GRAPHIC THEATER .....	Bangor, Me.
ORPHEUM THEATER .....	Haverhill, Mass.	MYSTIC THEATER .....	Lawrence, Me.
PALACE THEATER .....	Fall River, Mass.	ROCKLAND THEATER .....	Rockland, Me.
GLOBE THEATER .....	Brockton, Mass.	GREY AND McDONNOUGH .....	Augusta, Me.
NATIONAL THEATER .....	Winchendon, Mass.	DREAMLAND THEATER .....	Bath, Me.
STAR THEATER .....	Manchester, N. H.	NICKLE THEATER .....	Portland, Me.
WHITE'S OPERA HOUSE .....	Concord, Mass.	JOHNSON OPERA HOUSE .....	Gardiner, Me.
GREY AND McDONNOUGH .....	Portsmouth, N. H.	MAJESTIC THEATER .....	Burlington, Vt.
OLYMPIA THEATER .....	Lynn, Mass.		

Is your House, Mr. Exhibitor, listed above? If not, we advise you to Hurry. You have no time to lose. We can only sign up a limited number of exhibitors in New England. Remember, we have in stock, in addition to the FAMOUS PLAYERS and ALL STAR Feature Productions, "300" other big features at your disposal. A line will secure for you all the information you desire.

### Famous Players Film Co. of New England

HARRY ASHER, General Manager

100 Boylston Street Telephone, Oxford 2100 BOSTON, MASS.

FIG. 12. Famous Players Film Co. ad, *Boston Journal* (13 September 1913), 5.

*D'Urbervilles* and Mary Pickford in *In the Bishop's Carriage*.<sup>197</sup> Distributed widely around the country, beginning with full-week runs at the Knickerbocker in Cleveland, these two films served as a lure to entice major exhibitors to sign up for the regular schedule instituted later that month.<sup>198</sup> The tactic seems to have worked, as flagship cinemas from Gordon's Olympia in Boston, Gordon's in Rochester, and Saxe's Lyric in Minneapolis to Tally's Broadway in Los Angeles and Grauman's Imperial in San Francisco elected to become exclusive venues for Famous Players films.<sup>199</sup> Within another month or two, they were joined by other "first-class houses," from the Olympia in Lynn and the Star in Pawtucket to the Orpheum in Canton and the New Majestic in St. Paul.<sup>200</sup> Bolstered by a contractual arrangement to also distribute All-Star features, along with selected foreign features such as Pasquali's *The Last Days of Pompeii* in certain regions, by November Famous Players increased its schedule of releases from three features per month to three or four per week.<sup>201</sup> Although certain titles—especially All-Star productions such as *Chelsea 7750* and *Checkers*, with prominent stage actors—did not measure up to the high quality promised by the company and did rather poorly at the box office,<sup>202</sup> overall the Famous Players features proved successful, due in no small part to stars like Pickford in *Caprice* (1913), *A Good Little Devil* (1914), and *Tess of the Storm Country* (1914) and Dustin Farnum in *Soldiers of Fortune* (1914). Perhaps there is no more typical example of the company's success than this: when the first palace cinema, the Garden, opened in Des Moines in early May 1914, a special newspaper supplement promoted it as the city's first exclusive venue for Famous Players features, which likely would have delighted the fictional young women of my opening.<sup>203</sup>

### Open or Closed, It's Got to Be American

In September 1913, a *Morning Telegraph* writer—using a phrase previously reserved for the legitimate theater—described what to look for in the "coming season" of motion pictures.<sup>204</sup> So profound was the impact of "big films" or features that, in the year-end reports on the industry, the US trade press almost unanimously agreed that, yes, 1913 "was peculiarly the year of the feature."<sup>205</sup> The term included specials of five reels or more, typically foreign features, irregularly distributed either through a system of road shows or through state rights licensing. Yet, by the spring of 1914, it also included the regular weekly program of up to a half dozen releases of four reels or more, nearly all of them American, a standardized program whose viable *seriality* Warner's and Famous Players had now demonstrated, but in slightly different ways.<sup>206</sup> Whereas Warner's built up a brand name based on the variety and novelty of its sensational melodramas (and thus remained closer to the variety model established by the major distributors), Famous Players secured its brand with adaptations of "classic" literary texts and especially stage and

screen stars. Building on the latter model, for the 1914–15 season, Paramount promised to institutionalize the standardized feature program even more securely, by introducing a form of block booking, for an even greater number of features.<sup>207</sup>

This is not to say that the familiar variety program of shorter films (also largely American) distributed by General Film, Mutual, and Universal (and which still could be changed daily) was about to disappear.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, at least two innovations served to sustain the format in the face of feature films. One was General Film's grudging acceptance of a modified "open market," advocated initially by Universal and Mutual, which allowed exhibitors to show "independent features in conjunction with licensed pictures."<sup>209</sup> If this "open market" seemed to offer distributors a potentially larger market share, it also exacerbated competition and kept either Warner's or Famous Players from dominating the distribution of features. Still, General Film hedged its bets by adopting an exclusive service for selected "first-class houses," which guaranteed that no other licensed theaters in their area could show the same weekly programs of new films.<sup>210</sup> The other innovation was the introduction of sensational melodramas in serial form, typically released in weekly or bi-weekly episodes (of one or two reels each) over the course of three or more months—a distribution format designed to compel moviegoers to return again and again to their favorite theaters. Beginning with Selig's *Adventures of Kathlyn* (1913–14), most of these made women characters (and American female stars) the central attraction of their stories (see chapters 5 and 6). Even though they may have acknowledged that features had their place on the US market, many trade press writers (and even manufacturers), well into 1914, firmly agreed with the following assessment by the *Dramatic Mirror's* "Film Man": "From my own contact with photoplay fans . . . , it is the varied programme [of short films] that has produced the best results."<sup>211</sup>

Document  
 "The Backbone of the Business," *Motography* (20  
 September 1913), 191–92

While split reels, as an American institution, have not entirely disappeared, lingering still in the old combination of comedy and scenic, they have lost their importance to the manufacturer. The tabulation of current releases from week to week shows a slowly but constantly increasing number of two-reel subjects, with an occasional three-reel to show the modern trend.

There is no argument against multiple reel subjects. On the contrary, there is no question that the future of motography as an entertainment is calculated to fill comfortably the gap between dinner time and bed time—with, of course, sufficient allowance for the conveniences of dressing, conveyance, etc. This gives, as a maximum, about three hours, and a minimum of say two

hours. This space of time may be filled in with a number of short subjects, constituting a sort of motographic vaudeville, or with one long subject, the "motographic legitimate." That the latter course is successful is proven by the popularity of "Quo Vadis" and "Les Miserables," for example.

The future of the multiple-reel subject is among the most interesting speculations of the motion-picture business. The tremendous themes that may be encompassed in several thousand feet of film, the practically unlimited field of exploration among the classics of literature as well as the adaptation of modern sources of fiction, render the long motion picture an object of extraordinary interest for its artistic as well as its remunerative value. The competition of the film with the staged drama, always potential, is made dynamic by the picture of equivalent scope and length. So the multiple-reel subject is unquestionably worthy of our keenest effort and most careful study.

Nevertheless, while concentrating our best effort for the development of the future on the multiple-reel "feature," we must not overlook the present demand of the pleasure-seeking public.

The backbone of the motion-picture industry is now, as it has been for several years, the single-reel subject.

The metropolitan theater, a visit to which entails considerable preparation and some transportation, provides only a minor proportion of the enjoyment of today's picture fan. The neighborhood theater is, after all, still the great boon to mankind that the motion picture first made it. And there is no question that the neighborhood theater depends for its popularity on the short, diversified program; generally three reels and a song—an hour's show. The boundaries between one show and the next, though definite, are not important, and the visitor may drop in at any time, whenever he and his family get ready or get the notion, and remain until the return of the scene which was showing when he entered. The diversity of subjects presented in the one program is largely responsible for his interest, for he is reasonably sure of finding at least one theme of interest.

The down-town theater which caters particularly to the transient day trade, the after lunch and few-minutes-to-spare patronage, is in the same category. The program may run for an hour or more; but a considerable portion of the patronage never remains for the whole show, but departs after a reel or two. This particular clientele regards its nickel well spent, even for one reel, since the time was pleasantly "killed" until the important business or social moment had arrived.

In each of these places the multiple reel subject is inappropriate and out of harmony. Attendance at the show is not an important matter, perhaps; it is merely pleasant occupation of the otherwise idle time. The big subject requires in such cases too much application, too long attendance.

Yet these people of brief attendance are by no means ignorant of dramatic usage, nor are they satisfied with mere slapstick entertainment. Perhaps they

are the very ones to appreciate the "features" in their place: but they do not want features every night, nor at noon. What they insist upon having is single reels of all possible strength and excellence, features cut short.

What we are trying to emphasize by all this argument is that the long feature show answers an entirely different demand from that for the regulation mixed program and cannot be a substitute for it. The same people attend both, to be sure, but they go under different circumstances. All the feature shows in the world, welcome as they are, will not lessen the continued demand for the program of single reel, and perhaps split reel, subjects.

The point is that it will not do to make the single reel production suffer for the multiple reels. If the producer this year can make a better feature than he could last year, he should also be able to make a better single reel. The danger is that the enthusiasm for bigger things may overshadow the real importance of the smaller, and that the production of the plebian single reel, become commonplace, may be unconsciously neglected. It is so easy to slur over the finer points when production becomes an old story to the manufacturer, and he is turning out so many a week in standing orders.

Develop the multiple-reel feature as fast as the market will stand it; but do not forget the value and importance of the single, nor the fact that it, too, may be further developed and improved.