

# THE DEMILLE LEGACY

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**LE GIORNATE  
DEL CINEMA  
MUTO**



Le Giornate del Cinema Muto



Edizioni Biblioteca dell'Immagine

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COSTS AND GROSSES FOR THE EARLY FILMS OF CECIL B. DEMILLE

Reliable figures on motion picture production costs and boxoffice grosses are notoriously difficult to find. Each January the weekly edition of *Variety* publishes theatrical film grosses for the previous year, but this became an annual feature only in 1946. For years the chart of "all time top grosses" had a cut-off of \$4,000,000 and included mostly films from the forties on, providing little information on films released before that time. In addition, the numbers listed by *Variety* are a mix of figures provided by the studios and *Variety's* estimates. While the studio figures should be reliable, producers have been known to provide the newspaper with deceptively high numbers to make films look more successful than they were.<sup>1</sup>

For films released late in the year, *Variety* projects grosses based on initial playdates and the numbers are not always revised. If a feature falls off rapidly in general release, or becomes more successful than expected, then the projections can be significantly high or low. Another distraction is that income from reissues is rolled into the original release figure, making it difficult to determine the original success of films which were reissued.<sup>2</sup>

A recent attempt by *Variety's* Lawrence Cohn to lower the all time grosses ceiling for pre-World War II films has resulted in a juxtaposition of solid information with educated guesses. The specific \$814,000 gross figure for *The Sea Beast* (1926) from Warner Bros. financial records is listed next to the ballpark estimate of \$2,500,000 for *The Sheik* (1921).<sup>3</sup> This poses a significant problem for researchers since *Variety's* annual listing is often treated as primary source material.

Accurate information on production costs is even more difficult to find, as it was never tracked on a consistent basis by the trade papers. Studios usually kept actual costs extremely confidential for competitive reasons. Details on individual films can sometimes be found, but comprehensive summaries are rare. Secondary sources are untrustworthy as publicized production costs were often inflated.

It is this situation which makes the availability of the production cost and boxoffice gross figures for the early films of Cecil B. DeMille all the more welcome. This summary of financial data for DeMille's first 61 films tells a story of the growth of Hollywood from modest films with stage origins to epic stories which could only be effectively told on screen. Because DeMille's career began with the five reel feature, these pages also follow his transition from production line methods, to an independent producer with his own company and back to the studio fold. And finally, they illustrate DeMille's disastrous transition to sound filmmaking before he adapted to a new method of storytelling.

The listing of costs and grosses was among material found in a file cabinet at the DeMille house on 2010 DeMille Drive in 1986.<sup>4</sup> There was no supporting information on how the figures were derived. DeMille was proud of his long string of successes, and his autobiography included information from these pages about the financial success of several of his productions.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that this list was prepared as supporting material to strengthen DeMille's position during contract negotiations with Paramount. The bottom line shows that through *The Plainsman* (1936), DeMille's films had cost an aggregate \$16,624,376.14, and grossed an impressive \$38,633,182.42.

It is very easy to use numbers to make nearly any point and this list is no exception. *The Godless Girl* (1928) certainly was the financial disaster which DeMille always said it was. And of course, the grosses on some of the more successful pictures are amazing. If the numbers on *The Squaw Man* (1913) can be believed (and they are marked "net!"), the return on investment was almost 16 fold, while DeMille's second most lucrative

film was *The Cheat* (1915), although the gross may include reissue income.<sup>6</sup> *The Whispering Chorus* (1917), grossing three times its cost and more successful than some of DeMille's other pictures, was later considered to be a commercial failure.

It seems fair to assume that these numbers were compiled by one of DeMille's assistants working from DeMille's financial records using the same criteria for each category. As a result, this list should avoid some of the most common mistakes of interpretation. Among these mistakes are comparing direct production costs with total production costs which include overhead and comparing worldwide grosses with domestic grosses.

There is false comfort in the precision of these numbers. Although each value is carried out to the penny, the lack of supporting documentation makes them of limited value. There are still too many unknowns. There is no information on how these figures were compiled, what the basis of cost was, what overhead was applied to the direct costs, what the distribution expenses for each film were, which films were roadshown, what time period the grosses cover, whether reissue income is included, and most importantly, how much profit (if any) each film made for the distributor, studio and producer. Are the cost of prints and advertising included? Were the films block booked or sold individually? Are the grosses the results of worldwide distribution or just for United States and Canada? Are these distributor grosses or the lower figure which internal accounting credited to the studio?

These numbers exist in a vacuum, so it is very risky to compare the grosses to numbers from other sources. They are best examined against each other. We can feel comfortable when these numbers show that *The Warrens of Virginia* (1914) cost twice as much to produce as *The Man from Home* (1914) because the results show up on the screen. What is not visible is Mary Pickford's salary for *Romance of the Redwoods* (1916) consuming over half of the budget, or the increase in overhead when DeMille had his own unit at Famous Players-Lasky in the early twenties.

DeMille's people worked only on his pictures and the cost of his staff and his salary was charged to his pictures. The fewer pictures he produced, the more idle time and preparation time would have been added to these cost figures. In the early 1920s at Paramount, DeMille had a \$6,500 per week draw against a guarantee of \$200,000 per picture. The longer the pre-production time, the more of that guarantee would be charged against each film's production cost in the form of DeMille's salary.

### *The Costs*

For reasons that will be discussed below, while there can be several possible numbers for a film's gross, cost figures are more likely to be accurate and consistent. The studio would, in general, charge as much as possible to a production to keep overhead down. These numbers most likely include overhead, because almost all production cost figures I have studied include overhead as a standard cost item along with "story costs" and "director."

How reasonable were these production costs? A review of ten years of production costs of films produced by Thomas H. Ince shows that in 1915 and 1916, Ince was producing 5 reel William S. Hart westerns for anywhere between \$11,000 to \$20,000, although a special like *Hell's Hinges* (1916) could go as high as \$32,000.<sup>7</sup> When Hart was releasing his initial series of features through Artcraft in 1917-18, still under the Ince umbrella, production costs soared to a range of \$46,000 to \$72,000.<sup>8</sup> DeMille's production costs for this era compare favorably to those of Ince, especially considering Ince's reputation for thrift.

From 1921 to 1924, after the departure of William S. Hart, Ince's production costs ranged from \$75,000 to a high of \$281,785.48 for *The Galloping Fish* (1924), a Syd Chaplin comedy. The inflation of production costs was inescapable. Ince's cheapest 1919 picture was \$17,000, while his least costly 1924 production was \$80,000.<sup>9</sup>

The negative costs of DeMille's later films are surprisingly reasonable when compared to other productions. This can be seen by scanning the negative costs of several silent Warner Bros. pictures. Like many of the smaller but ambitious studios, Warner's produced a few special attractions each season. The forgotten *Tiger Rose* (1923) clocked in at \$436,000, while *Beau Brummel* (1924), the first of Warner's John Barrymore pictures, cost a comparatively modest \$343,000.

The more elaborate presentation, *The Sea Beast* (1926) was \$503,000, and Warner Bros.' most expensive silent was Barrymore's *Don Juan* (1927) at \$546,000.<sup>10</sup> These costs speak well of DeMille's expensive looking features, admittedly lacking stars of Barrymore's caliber, putting them comfortably in the high range of production costs, with the exceptions of *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The King of Kings* (1927).

This is especially notable given that as the top studio in the industry, Paramount generally was able to spend more on their films than other studios, and their comprehensive distribution network allowed them to achieve higher grosses than could smaller companies.

## The Grosses

It is difficult to reach a consensus on what constitutes theatrical box office gross. There is one gross at the theater box office window, another amount which is returned to the distributor as rentals, and after deduction of a distribution fee, a lower amount which is returned to the studio. When one corporation controls the production company, distributor and theaters, they can shift income and expenses and control the numbers that result.

There are two numbers of interest to the outside observer: one is the total value of the admissions paid at the box office, which reflects the relative popularity of different films, and the other is the money available to pay off the cost of production, which is a determinant of profitability.

*Variety* uses "actual film rentals earned from theatrical release in the U.S. and Canada," accruing to the distributor.<sup>11</sup> This is the money paid by the theater to the distributor. This number is closer to the popularity indicator, although it does not include foreign gross income, which is difficult to find on all titles. Also it ignores the differences in return from percentage engagements versus flat rentals.

It seems likely that the gross numbers in this list are income after deduction of distribution costs. Those costs, an internal bookkeeping arrangement for Paramount, would have been in the range of 30 to 40 percent.<sup>12</sup> DeMille's percentage arrangements with Paramount provided him with a percentage of the profit. Since that would have been based on dollars accruing to the studio, he would have focused on income available to him.

DeMille's career parallels the growth of the motion picture industry and his films were sold by methods that were state of the art for their day. As these sales approaches evolved, the monies accruing to the producer varied over the years.

*The Squaw Man* (1913) was sold on a state's rights basis. Under this method of distribution, independent distributors would buy territories.<sup>13</sup> *The Virginian* (1914) was DeMille's second picture, and the first Lasky production to be released through Paramount Pictures Corporation. Like all Paramount releases of the time, *The Virginian* was sold to theaters as part of a block of films. As Mary Pickford and other artists with percentage agreements were quick to discover, this gave the distributor an opportunity to average income across the entire block. The overall result would be to flatten the range of grosses.

Beginning in 1918/19, but no later than *Male and Female* (1919), DeMille's pictures were sold to theaters individually on their own merits. Starting with *Something to Think About* (1919), he had his own production company, with a guarantee from Paramount of \$200,000 per picture against 30% of the net profits from world distribution. Each film stands on its own: the dogs died and the hits soared.

Information on the later films is harder to come by. However, after over a year of roadshow engagements, Pathé, distributor for *The King of Kings* (1927), sold the film individually on a percentage basis with exhibitors committed to a minimum allowable admission charge. Previous Pathé pictures had been sold in blocks on flat rentals.<sup>14</sup>

It is not clear whether these numbers included overseas income. At first glance, it would appear that they do not. The entry for *The Godless Girl* (1928) notes that "Foreign gross [is] not separated from total gross," which would indicate that it was the exception and only the domestic gross was given on the rest of the films.

However, since the running totals indicate that DeMille was trying to show that his films had grossed far more than they cost, it would have been in his interest to have included the higher gross figure. In addition, his production company received a percentage of the profits, and worldwide gross was part of the calculation.

Either way, it appears likely that despite all of the talk at the end of the twenties about silent films being a truly international medium, foreign gross was not as significant a factor as it became after the advent of sound. A 1928 study of the domestic and foreign grosses of FBO Productions indicated that overseas income provided only 20% of the total gross of a picture.<sup>15</sup> Prior to their acquisition of the overseas distribution organization of Vitagraph in 1925, overseas grosses for Warner Bros. features represented less than 10% of those films' total gross revenue. After gaining Vitagraph's overseas distribution network, foreign grosses grew to 25%.<sup>16</sup> This is far less than the fifty percent of theatrical income foreign revenue represents today.

The final question is "how profitable were these films?" That is very difficult to determine. *The Whispering Chorus* and *Adam's Rib* (1922) were major disappointments to DeMille at the time of their initial release, but according to these numbers they grossed a respectable 3.34 and 2.16 times their costs.

Undoubtedly, expectations enter into the picture. A disappointment may simply be a film which was released with high expectations, and did not become a hit. A negative critical reaction may dim the success of a profitable release. DeMille chafed over Adolph Zukor's need for cost control. Nonetheless, a surprise hit like *Chinmie Fadden* (1915) which grossed over seven times its cost probably returned less to the company than *Joan the Woman* (1916), which returned double its \$302,976.26 cost, but endured high roadshow and promotion costs.

Much further research is required before any firm conclusions can be drawn, but this information, despite its limitations, provides an insight into the financial vicissitudes which drove Cecil B. DeMille throughout his career.

Research is just beginning in the area of production costs and theatrical grosses for silent era films. Fortunately in the case of Cecil B. DeMille, many of the answers are waiting to be discovered in the director's papers.

1. See: Ron Haver's. *A Star Is Born: The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1983 Restoration* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 222. Haver describes how Warner Bros. told *Variety* that the Judy Garland film had grossed \$6,000,000, which would have made the film appear potentially profitable given a production cost of \$5,019,770, when the actual domestic gross for the reporting period was \$4,335,968.

2. For example, *King Kong* (1933) grossed \$710,653.08 from the original release and the 1938, 1942 and 1952 reissues added an additional \$1,607,999.93. Since figures from the 1956 and 1971 reissues are unknown, *Variety* used a total gross of \$5,000,000.

3. Lawrence Cohn. "All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, October 15, 1990, M-140.

4. Thanks to Helen Cohen and Bob Birchard for arranging for my visit. These pages should have been among the documents added to the DeMille collection at Brigham Young University, when the house was sold. Other summary financial documents in the folder included cost and gross figures for the three seasons of DeMille supervised films released through PDC and Pathe, and nine months of Paramount features from 1932.

5. The numbers for *The Ten Commandments* (1923) are noted on page 258 of DeMille's *Autobiography*. "Between 1913 and 1931, my pictures had, in round numbers, cost \$12,000,000 and grossed \$28,000,000." 305.

6. Adding to the confusion, in Samuel Goldwyn's ghostwritten *Behind the Screen*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923) 21, he notes the production cost of *The Squaw Man* as \$47,000.

7. *The Gatewood W. Dunston Collection Relating to William S. Hart*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Some of this information is included in Diane Kaiser Koszarski. *The Complete Films of William S. Hart: A Pictorial Record*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1980).

8. William S. Hart Collection, William S. Hart Ranch, Newhall, California. Thanks to Norm Phillips for his help in reviewing documentation relating to a lawsuit between Hart and Thomas H. Ince.

9. Thomas H. Ince Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

10. Jack L. Warner collection, Cinema-Television Library and Archives of Performing Arts, Doheny Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Thanks to Ned Comstock of USC and Bernard Sorkin of Warner Bros. for making these numbers available.

11. Cohn, M-140.

12. For in-house productions, in 1928 FBO shared revenue on a percentage basis: "60% was paid to FBO Productions, Incorporated, as the producing company, and 40% remained as income for FBO Pictures, Incorporated, as the distributor." Case study: "Accounting-Amortization of Motion Picture Values" in Howard Thompson Lewis, ed., *Harvard Business Reports, Volume 8: Cases on the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1930), 84. Admittedly, FBO was nowhere near as powerful or as vertically integrated as Paramount was by the early twenties. England provided 7 1/2 % of the 20% overseas gross. A Pathe case study on page 364 notes that Pathe charged a distribution fee of thirty to forty percent to outside producers.

13. Jesse Lasky remembered, "a print was sold for a flat sum to service a specified territory and could be rerun in its assigned region till it wore out. A small state got only one print, a large state two, and a block like New England, four or five." *I Blow My Own Horn*, (1957, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.) 93.

14. Case study: "Pricing-Basis Changed from Flat Rental to Percentage for Superspecial Picture" in Lewis, 404.

15. Lewis, 84.

16. Warner Bros. Grosses. Jack L. Warner collection, Cinema Television Library and Archives of Performing Arts, Doheny Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

season	number of pictures released	overseas gross income as a percentage of total gross income
1921-22	3	7%
1922-23	7	9%
1923-24	13	9%
1924-25	23	13%
1925-26	29	16%
1926-27	29	26%
1927-28	38	22%
1928-29	36	26%

Thanks to Bob Birchard, Scott MacQueen, James Bouras and Larry Cohn for their help in the preparation of this article.

## CECIL B. DEMILLE PRODUCTIONS

	PICTURE/ <i>Film</i>	COST/ <i>Costi</i>	GROSS/ <i>Incassi</i>
1913	<i>The Squaw Man</i> (net)/(netto)	\$ 15,450.25	\$ 244,700.00
1914	<i>The Virginian</i>	\$ 17,022.08	\$ 111,518.85
	<i>The Call of the North</i>	\$ 16,540.52	\$ 52,284.48
	<i>What's-His-Name</i>	\$ 12,233.97	\$ 61,560.19
	<i>The Man From Home</i>	\$ 14,221.99	\$ 62,090.77
	<i>Rose of the Rancho</i>	\$ 16,988.01	\$ 87,028.35
	<i>Girl of the Golden West</i>	\$ 15,109.69	\$ 102,224.46
	<i>The Warrens of Virginia</i>	\$ 28,359.59	\$ 85,768.96
1915	<i>The Unafraid</i>	\$ 14,226.50	\$ 63,944.02
	<i>The Captive</i>	\$ 12,163.54	\$ 56,074.88
	<i>Wild Goose Chase</i>	\$ 10,611.85	\$ 60,630.68
	<i>The Arab</i>	\$ 18,327.88	\$ 68,526.84
	<i>Chimmie Fadden</i>	\$ 10,504.39	\$ 78,944.49
	<i>Kindling</i>	\$ 10,039.52	\$ 66,036.42
	<i>Maria Rosa</i>	\$ 18,574.53	\$ 102,767.81
	<i>Carmen</i>	\$ 23,429.97	\$ 147,599.81
	<i>Temptation</i>	\$ 22,472.25	\$ 102,437.47
	<i>Chimmie Fadden Out West</i>	\$ 16,096.67	\$ 72,036.24
	<i>The Cheat</i>	\$ 17,311.29	\$ 137,364.87
	<i>Golden Chance</i>	\$ 18,710.81	\$ 83,504.03
	<i>Trail of the Lonesome Pine</i>	\$ 22,249.12	\$ 77,944.00
1916	<i>Heart of Nora Flynn</i>	\$ 21,998.57	\$ 87,738.27
	<i>Dream Girl</i>	\$ 13,523.19	\$ 66,724.59
	<i>Joan the Woman</i>	\$ 302,976.26	\$ 605,731.30
	<i>Romance of the Redwoods</i>	\$ 134,831.65	\$ 424,718.52
	(Cost included Mary Pickford's salary of \$96,666.67)		
	( <i>I costi comprendono il compenso di Mary Pickford pari a 96 666,67 dollari</i> )		
1917	<i>The Little American</i>	\$ 166,949.16	\$ 446,236.88
	(Cost included Mary Pickford's salary of \$86,666.66)		
	( <i>I costi comprendono il compenso di Mary Pickford pari a 86 666,66 dollari</i> )		
	<i>Woman God Forgot</i>	\$ 115,420.32	\$ 340,504.98
	<i>The Devil Stone</i>	\$ 67,413.36	\$ 296,031.58
	<i>Whispering Chorus</i>	\$ 72,499.55	\$ 242,109.27
1918	<i>Old Wives For New</i>	\$ 66,241.31	\$ 286,504.11
	<i>We Can't Have Everything</i>	\$ 61,267.83	\$ 207,890.42
	<i>Till I Come Back to You</i>	\$ 52,646.56	\$ 183,834.23
	<i>The Squaw Man</i> (2) #	\$ 43,858.96	\$ 283,556.56
	<i>Don't Change Your Husband</i>	\$ 73,922.14	\$ 292,394.10
1919	<i>For Better, For Worse</i>	\$ 111,260.93	\$ 256,072.97
	<i>Male and Female</i>	\$ 168,619.28	\$ 1,256,226.59
	<i>Why Change Your Wife</i>	\$ 129,349.31	\$ 1,016,245.87
	<i>Something to Think About</i>	\$ 169,330.00	\$ 915,848.51
1920	<i>Forbidden Fruit</i>	\$ 339,752.00	\$ 848,121.87
	<i>Affairs of Anatol</i>	\$ 176,508.08	\$ 1,191,789.19
	Forward:/ <i>A riportare:</i>	\$2,639,202.88	\$11,173,267.43

	PICTURE/ <i>Film</i>	COST/ <i>Costi</i>	GROSS/ <i>Incassi</i>
	Amount brought forward/ <i>Riporto</i>	\$ 2,639,202.88	\$11,173,267.43
1921	<i>Fool's Paradise</i>	\$ 291,367.56	\$ 906,937.79
	<i>Saturday Night</i>	\$ 224,635.05	\$ 753,807.83
1922	<i>Manslaughter</i>	\$ 384,111.14	\$ 1,206,014.65
	<i>Adam's Rib</i>	\$ 408,432.64	\$ 881,206.75
1923	<i>The Ten Commandments</i>	\$ 1,475,836.93	\$ 4,169,798.38
1924	<i>Triumph</i>	\$ 265,012.53	\$ 678,526.14
	<i>Feet of Clay</i>	\$ 513,636.27	\$ 904,383.90
	<i>Golden Bed</i>	\$ 437,900.66	\$ 816,487.88
1925	<i>Road to Yesterday</i>	\$ 477,479.29	\$ 522,663.77
	<i>Volga Boatman</i>	\$ 479,356.99	\$ 1,275,374.78
1926	<i>The King of Kings</i> #	\$ 1,265,283.95	\$ 2,641,687.21
1928	<i>Godless Girl</i> (Foreign gross not separated from total gross) ( <i>Incassi sul mercato estero non distinti dal totale delle entrate</i> )	\$ 722,315.17	\$ 489,095.49
1929	<i>Dynamite</i>	\$ 661,123.32	\$ 1,182,869.03
1930	<i>Madam Satan</i>	\$ 979,933.07	\$ 853,404.69
1931	<i>The Squaw Man</i> (3) #	\$ 722,811.93	\$ 584,630.60
1932	<i>Sign of the Cross</i> (Net profit-637,207.38)/( <i>Profitto netto</i> )	\$ 694,054.67	\$ 2,738,993.35
1933	<i>This Day and Age</i>	\$ 279,811.24	\$ 661,069.34
	<i>Four Frightened People</i>	\$ 509,006.96	\$ 494,425.97
1934	<i>Cleopatra</i>	\$ 842,908.17	\$ 1,929,161.10
1935	<i>The Crusades</i>	\$ 1,376,260.87	\$ 1,490,843.01
1936	<i>The Plainsman</i>	\$ 974,084.85	\$ 2,278,533.33
		[\$16,624,376.14]	[\$38,633,182.42]

# Approximate production cost but not exact/ *Costi di produzione approssimati, ma non esatti.*