

'It's No Use to Have an Unhappy Man': Paul Fejos at Universal

Richard Koszarski

During the early 1970s I spent several years researching the career of Carl Laemmle and his operation of Universal Pictures, first for the American Film Institute, and later for the Museum of Modern Art. The monograph *Universal Pictures: 65 Years*, published by the Museum in 1977, was one result of this.

My work consisted of interviews, screenings and research in Universal's own archives, which at the time were scattered on both coasts and poorly organized. Although some fresh materials have surfaced more recently, I was shown certain documents during this period which never seem to have reappeared. The most interesting item was a handwritten ledger detailing the negative cost and total world revenue of all Universal releases from the early 1920s through the end of the Laemmle era in 1936. It had been kept in an old safe, along with other Laemmle-related materials, in a warehouse in New York (since closed).

The figures given in that ledger did not agree with other figures which I located in various other account books that overlapped this period. There are several possible explanations for this, but I like to think that 'Uncle Carl' was keeping the real numbers to himself.

One of the peculiarities of this ledger was that a large portion of it had the film releases organized by director, no matter how insignificant the title or the director's contribution. Universal was never considered a 'director's studio', but Laemmle, and his son Junior (Carl Laemmle, Jr., born Julius Laemmle in 1908), apparently had more faith in their directors than historians had allowed. Especially during the period when Junior was in charge of production, this group included such interesting and occasionally

unconventional figures as James Whale, William Wyler (Junior's second cousin), Paul Leni and Paul Fejos. Things were done rather casually at Universal when Junior was in charge – which led to some terrible financial problems – but this *laissez-faire* management style also allowed for the creation of some of the most original films produced in Hollywood during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Today Paul Fejos's films stand out even in this group, but exactly how they came to be made has never been entirely clear.

Fejos was born in Budapest in 1897 and first became involved in theatre and film after the war (he had earlier been a medical student). He directed films in Hungary between 1920 and 1922, but left for America the following year, where he eventually found work as a laboratory technician at the Rockefeller Institute in Manhattan. In 1926 he went to Hollywood where, according to his own testimony, he slept on unused film sets and survived on a diet of fruit pilfered from local orange groves.¹ He did receive screen credit for the script of a B-western, *Land of the Lawless* (Liberty Pictures, 1927), and in October of that year managed to promote \$5,000 to make a feature film, *The Last Moment*. Fejos convinced Georgia Hale, star of *The Gold Rush* (1925), to work in the picture for little or no money; studio space was rented by the minute (at night, when it was cheaper); and Leon Shamroy, who had photographed *Land of the Lawless*, cut similar corners with the cost of film stock and camera rentals.² The film, photographed

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in a variety of impressionistic techniques and presented without inter-titles, recounted the life of a suicide as it flashed before the man's eyes at the moment of death. Now regarded as the first feature-length American avant-garde film, *The Last Moment* would eventually prove a great critical success, at least with those critics for whom the European art film remained the gold standard ('From Hollywood at last comes the experimental film', the National Board of Review announced).³ But first it needed to find a distributor. Fejos began screening the film to local tastemakers, beginning with the high-minded local critics Welford Beaton (*The Film Spectator*) and Tamar Lane (*The Film Mercury*). They in turn put Chaplin onto the film, and helped arrange a preview screening at the Beverly Theater in Los Angeles, which proved a spectacular success. On 26 November 1927, Beaton headlined his review, 'Introducing You to Mr. Paul Fejos, Genius'.⁴

Meanwhile, over at Universal City, Carl Laemmle had been planning a great new future for Universal. Budgets were going up, and talented Europeans like Paul Leni, Conrad Veidt and E.A. Dupont were coming in. In a move to get some young (Laemmle) blood into the operation, Uncle Carl had already made his precocious teenaged son, Junior, a full producer. Laemmle had purchased the rights to the stage success *Broadway* on 30 September 1927 for \$225,000, but the studio was having a great deal of trouble putting it into production. Some sources claim that only 'silent picture' rights had been acquired, and that 'talkie' rights needed to be negotiated subsequently, but there is no evidence of this in the studio's *Catalog of Library Properties*, from which much of the information presented here on the development of Fejos's films is taken. While Universal was considering what to do with this very expensive acquisition, news of the sensational preview screening of *The Last Moment* raced through Hollywood. Fejos was the industry's celebrity *du jour*, having accomplished the same sort of overnight success achieved by von Sternberg two years earlier with *The Salvation Hunters*. In 1972, while interviewing the reclusive Junior Laemmle in his Beverly Hills home on Tower Road, I asked him if it was true, as legend had it, that he had hired Fejos after seeing this legendary avant-garde feature. No, Junior told me, he never did see *The Last Moment*. He hired Fejos entirely on the strength of the buzz surrounding the preview. It was a dramatic – possibly foolhardy – gesture, the impulsive act of an ambitious son look-

ing for some spectacular way to get out from under his father's shadow.

Universal bought an 18-page story called *Lonesome* from the writer Mann Page on 14 December 1927, and Fejos and Junior quickly agreed that this slight sketch would be the basis for their first joint effort.⁵ Edward T. Lowe, Jr., one of the studio's staff writers, was set to work on a screenplay and delivered a first draft of 385 scenes on 18 January 1928, and a revised 294-scene version on 25 January. Fejos is not credited in the official records, but would certainly have involved himself with this work. The film was completed by March, but Universal seemed in no hurry to release it. Fejos told the *New York Times* that month that it would not be released until the winter.⁶ Welford Beaton, one of Fejos's early supporters, published a pre-release notice in June. While he found it less memorable than *The Last Moment*, Beaton still found much to praise in the film, especially when judged as the product of a Hollywood studio. 'What surprises me about the picture is that it was made. There is nothing in it that the producer insists must be in every picture to assure its success. In trying to discover how it happened I learned that Carl Laemmle, Jr. battled everyone on the lot on behalf of the script and finally won his father's consent to its production', Beaton declared. 'I think it will make money, but in any event it was a fine thing to have done.'⁷ Beaton was a proponent of the 'titleless' silent film (one reason he so adored *The Last Moment*) and his main complaint was that the new film seemed burdened with a number of unnecessary titles. Unfortunately, by the time it opened in New York on 30 September 1928, it was also burdened with a number of awkward talking sequences, hastily added during the summer to enhance the film's commercial prospects.

In one form or another, *Lonesome* was a solid financial success – indeed, the only financial success Fejos ever had in Hollywood. According to Laemmle's ledger it was produced for \$156,734.64, a bargain price even for Universal, with a reported total world revenue of \$407,923.23. Although Fejos was already basking in the critical success of *The Last Moment* (which had opened in the spring of 1928), this box office success would have validated Junior's decision to hire the director, and encouraged him to try Fejos on better things.

During the summer of 1928 Fejos worked on *The Last Performance* (sometimes known as *Erik the Great* or *Illusion*), a melodramatic romantic triangle



Fig. 1. Paul Fejos, with megaphone, directing Conrad Veidt in *The Last Performance* (1928/29). Hal Mohr at the camera. All illustrations from author's collection.

starring Conrad Veidt and Mary Philbin. This was an original story and screenplay by James Ashmore Creelman, who wrote several drafts during June and July. Fejos made this picture as a silent film, but it was not widely seen until it, too, was enhanced by dialogue sequences (written by a team of writers, including Edward Lowe, in January 1929). Today the film can be seen only in a rather choppy silent version descended from the 16mm home movie release.⁸ Although it is possible that modern prints do not show it at its best, *The Last Performance* would still appear to have been one of Fejos's least interesting projects. Perhaps he simply wanted to take advantage of the opportunity of working with Veidt. Or maybe Junior thought he needed more practice directing major stars in conventional dramatic episodes – something he had been able to avoid with his previous films.

The Last Performance cost twice as much as *Lonesome* (\$306,042.70) but grossed far less (\$249,447.24). Because the studio needed to see a return of approximately 150 per cent of negative cost in order to cover prints, advertising and other overhead charges, this loss was even worse than it appears at first glance. But *The Last Performance* was held off the market so long (nearly a year in some territories) that its commercial failure would have had no effect on Fejos's next assignment. Indeed, Universal did not open it in New York (and then in the silent version), until November 1929, on an art house bill with the now-lost avant-garde short, *The Story of a Nobody*.⁹

The *Universal Weekly* announced on 9 September 1928 that Fejos had just completed *The Last Performance*, and would now direct Mary Philbin again in a fantasy written by Ilona Fulop, *Spring Shower*. Such announcements were often printed merely to fill space, but in this case, despite the fact that Fejos never made this film at Universal, we do learn a bit more than the studio publicity department probably intended.

On the one hand, the notice provides a starting date for Fejos's work with Ilona Fulop on this project, which he would film in Hungary in 1932 as *Tavaszi Zapor* (better known today in the simultaneously produced French language version titled *Marie, Légende Hongroise*). But it also tells us that Fejos had not yet been attached to *Broadway*, an assignment which seems to have happened only in the wake of *Lonesome*'s relative commercial success. Almost immediately, the smaller *Spring Shower* project disappeared from the pages of the *Universal Weekly*, and Edward T. Lowe began work on the script of *Broadway*. Lowe, of course, was Fejos's man, not only the screenwriter of *Lonesome*, but one who would later work with Fejos for many months on his abortive attempt at *King of Jazz*. Lowe submitted his first draft on 23 October 1928, and subsequent drafts followed in November and January. The film was shot that winter, and it proved to be a very costly proposition for all involved.

Fejos complained that he was ordered to inflate the budget of *Broadway* because of the high purchase price of the original.¹⁰ This may or may not have been the case, but it is clear in retrospect that the high production cost of this film is what spelled financial doom for *Broadway* when it was released in the summer of 1929, and that this failure clearly affected Fejos's standing at Universal.

According to Laemmle's ledger, *Broadway* cost \$1,188,001.76, and its total world revenue was \$1,346,725.66, or 113 per cent of negative cost. But once overhead charges were added in, the film actually showed a substantial paper loss of several hundred thousand dollars. Despite the fact that *Broadway* attracted the public (this was a great deal of revenue for a Universal release) and was not badly reviewed, a loss on this scale was very significant. But Fejos had already been assigned to his next film, *King of Jazz*, before the scope of this fiasco was fully apparent. Universal had signed the popular band leader Paul Whiteman to a contract in October 1928, but had been having even more trouble developing

a workable script than they had with *Broadway*. Could Whiteman act? And even if he could, would movie audiences pay to see a performance by the rotund orchestra leader when they knew him and his work mainly through radio broadcasts and phonograph recordings?

Universal acquired an original story idea from Paul Schofield on 15 November 1928, and for the next several months Schofield worked on a script with Wesley Ruggles, who had been announced as the director. Schofield's last draft was submitted on 16 March 1929, and was a biographical account of Whiteman's rise to fame as he switches his allegiance from 'staid classics' to 'American music – JAZZ'. A fictionalized love interest was supplied through the relationship of the band's singer and violinist. This version was rejected by Whiteman, who began urging Universal to purchase rights to George Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue', whose premiere performance Whiteman felt (with some justification) was central to any account of his own career. By this time, Fejos and Lowe had finished with *Broadway* and were assigned by Junior to develop a new approach to *King of Jazz* from scratch. Now 21 years old, Junior had recently been appointed head of production at Universal.

Fejos took Lowe with him to New York at the beginning of April to confer with Whiteman, and the writer delivered his first 18-page synopsis on 18 April 1929. According to the *Universal Weekly*, Fejos had rejected the idea of a straightforward biography (with romantic interest thrown in) in favor of something far more oblique. 'The script we are working on', he told the press in New York, 'goes into Mr. Whiteman's life as if he were a total stranger. That is what we want. You people know all about him. So you take a great deal for granted. We want to fill in the background.'

Just what did he mean by this? During June and July, Lowe produced a great many drafts (one of them co-credited to the author of *Spring Shower*, Ilona Fulop). The synopsis of another, written by Lowe from an original story by Frank Dazey, was included in the *Catalog of Library Properties*:

Story written expressly for and action built around PAUL WHITEMAN and his orchestra.

An agent is trying to get WHITEMAN to sign a contract with a motion picture producer, and at the same time show him the value of WHITEMAN in pictures. Inasmuch as the producer cannot see any picture material in WHITE-

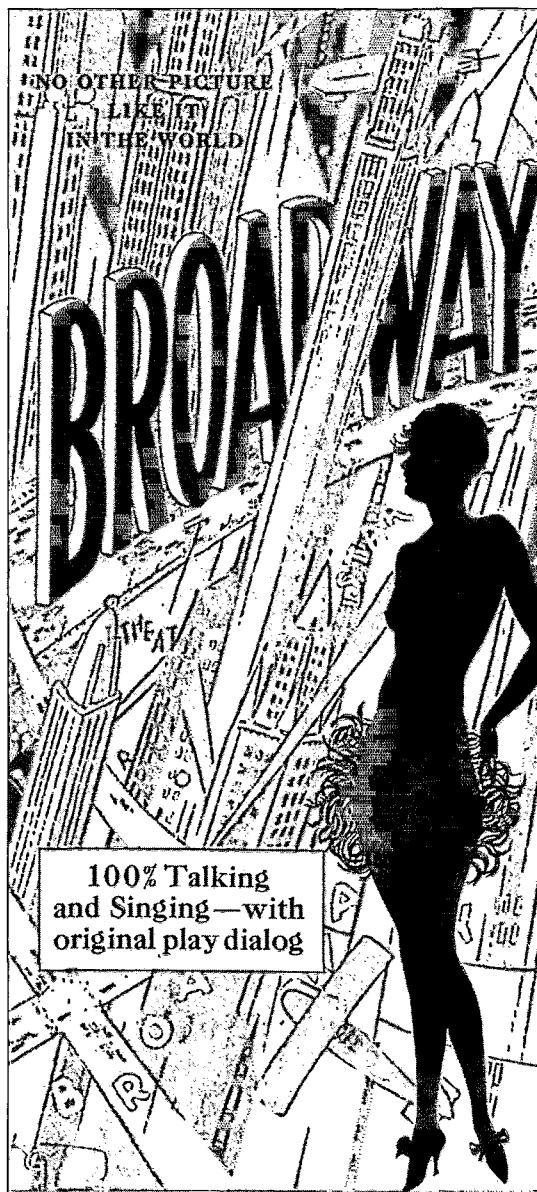


Fig. 2. Advertising herald for *Broadway* (1929).

MAN'S life the agent connives to show him the excitement in a single day in the life of the 'King of Jazz'. Scenes in the rehearsal room with different kinds of 'cracked' musicians; the night club reviews; a fake hold-up by crooks, etc. In the course of the club show many musical specialties are used to build up a great musical picture. The love interest is a faked romance between a song writer and the daughter of a strict, rich father. After the contract is signed the deceptions are revealed.

During the course of this work Fejos traveled to New York twice to consult with Whiteman, and by

August of 1929 Whiteman and his band had themselves arrived at Universal City, where the studio was contractually obligated to feed and house them. Universal had also agreed to Whiteman's demand to purchase rights to 'Rhapsody in Blue', which cost them another \$50,000.

Lowe's last pages had been submitted on 18 July. Sets had already been constructed, including one 'modernistic mansion of melody in which Paul Whiteman will hold sway', shown in the 1 June issue of the *Universal Weekly*. This was a gigantic cabaret modeled on the 'cubistic' Paradise night club featured in *Broadway* – only bigger. But Whiteman rejected the script and Junior agreed. In a 29 July telegram to Universal's New York office Junior said it would be 'suicidal' to proceed with the script as it now stood. The film, set to go before the cameras in a few weeks, was postponed until November.¹¹

An extension of Whiteman's very costly contract was negotiated, and a decision was made to change *King of Jazz* from a behind-the-scenes musical biography to a filmed Broadway revue. On 7 September 1929, the studio signed John Murray Anderson, a noted director of Broadway revues, to take over the picture. Although Junior indicated in a subsequent message to the New York office that 'naturally Fejos will be marvelous to help entire picture angle' if Anderson failed to measure up as a motion picture director, it would appear that Fejos dropped the project entirely at this point.

'After two months we evolved a big revue which I directed under the title *King of Jazz*', Fejos told one biographer. While it is true that he worked on the project for at least five months, supervising many script drafts and the creation of sets and costumes, Fejos never directed any footage for this film. Indeed, it was the change in format to a 'big revue' that eventually drove him off the picture. But the publicity issued during the months Fejos had been preparing the film (as well as his own later claims) convinced a number of historians that Fejos was, indeed, the director of the picture. Lewis Jacobs, for example, even described it as his 'best' film.¹²

Fejos may have backed out of the project gracefully after all concerned agreed that the story idea was not working. He certainly had no interest in directing a musical revue, and would have been an inappropriate selection, in any case. But after spending most of 1929 on the film, what would he do now? Fejos also claimed that he was the one who had

convinced Universal to purchase Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and that he had been promised the directing assignment.¹³ There is no way of corroborating this. Universal did buy the rights to *All Quiet* on 5 July 1929, but Fejos was then deeply involved in pre-production on *King of Jazz*, a project which could be expected to keep him busy through the end of the year. *All Quiet* was not going to wait for him. In any case, this is not the place to examine how Universal came to make that film, or who brought it to Laemmle's attention in the first place. (Paul Kohner told me that *he* was the one, and his plan was to make the film on location in Germany!)

So while *King of Jazz* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (under Lewis Milestone, who was signed to direct on 3 September) proceeded without him elsewhere on the lot, Paul Fejos was assigned the direction of another film, *La Marseillaise*. Eventually released as *The Captain of the Guard* (1930), this was a musical costume epic in which Laura La Plante inspires John Boles (playing Rouget de Lisle) to compose the stirring French anthem. The script had been developed in July and August by a writer named Houston Branch, and Fejos appears to have had no connection with the project before being assigned to direct it on 14 September, just one week after Anderson was signed to take over *King of Jazz*. On 12 October, the *Universal Weekly* announced that Fejos had signed a new long term contract. If so, his assignment to *La Marseillaise* was not a good omen. When he was first hired by Universal less than two years earlier, his complete control over the projects he would direct had been widely trumpeted. Things were very different now. Both of his 1929 releases, *Broadway* and *The Last Performance*, had lost significant amounts of money. He had failed to 'lick' the costly *King of Jazz* problem. And now, instead of *King of Jazz* or *All Quiet* or even *Spring Shower*, he had been assigned to this preposterous costume epic.

On 26 October, after several days work filming thousands of extras storming the old *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) sets, the crew discovered Fejos lying at the foot of a great staircase, apparently in considerable pain. Hal Mohr, the film's cinematographer (who had worked with Fejos on his last two films), was extremely suspicious. He noticed no blood, no broken limbs. 'But apparently his back was thrown completely out of joint. You could never know if this was true or not, but that's when they put him in the hospital ...'¹⁴ The event did, however, serve to

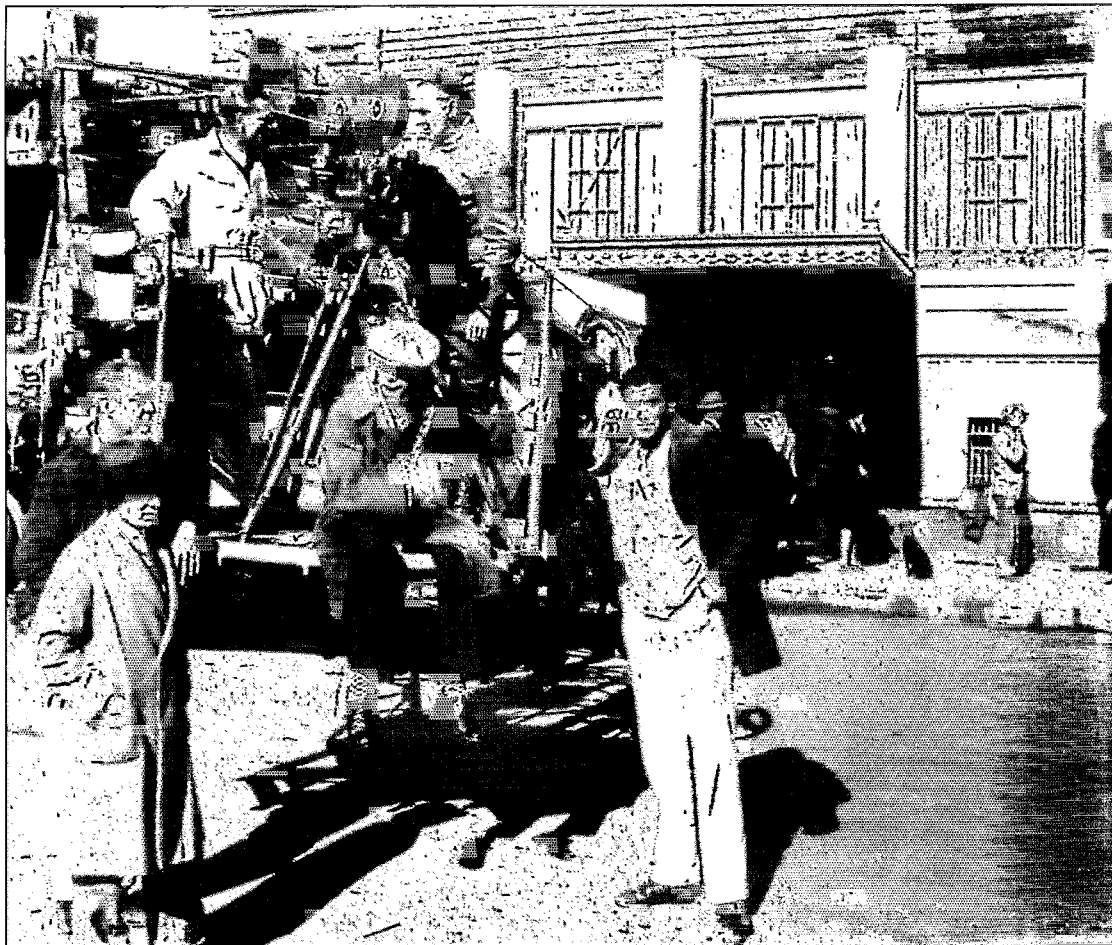


Fig. 3. Gathered around the great *Broadway* camera crane: Junior Laemmle (lower left), Paul Fejos (seated on platform), assistant cameraman Stanley Cortez (right) and director of photography Hal Mohr ((to right of camera).

remove Paul Fejos from the picture, which was completed by John S. Robertson (the spectacular scenes of the revolutionary insurrection, shot from the enormous camera crane Fejos and Mohr had designed for *Broadway*, are clearly the work of a master – something which cannot be said for the rest of the film).¹⁵

For a time, Fejos's recovery was monitored in the pages of the *Universal Weekly*. On 9 November, Junior Laemmle reported that his injury was 'much less serious than was at first believed', and on 23 November it was announced that Fejos would next direct Joseph Schildkraut in Molnar's *The Devil*. But Fejos never worked for Universal again. He seems to have simply walked away, a gesture which, for a few months at least, brought Junior's wrath down on his head. With *King of Jazz* finally going before the cameras on 15 November, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* following on 21 November, the Laemmlers had more important things to worry about.

Fejos left Universal for many reasons, some

involving perceived personal slights, others stemming from the economic realities of major studio production (complicated by Universal's own uncertain claim to the status of a major studio in the first place). Fejos felt that the spirit of his contract had been violated by the *King of Jazz* assignment, especially when the script he and Edward Lowe had prepared was so gracelessly rejected. That fiasco, coupled with the abandonment of *Spring Shower* and the abrupt assignment to *La Marseillaise*, had transformed his tenure at Universal from a challenge to a chore. He moved to MGM, where he directed the German and French versions of *The Big House* (1930), then returned to Europe. By the mid-1930s he had turned again to scientific research, this time as a director of anthropological documentaries. When he died in 1963, Fejos was remembered mainly for his lengthy tenure as head of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and hailed as 'a visionary figure in anthropology' who feared the results of academic specialization as

much as the encroachment of 'civilization' on previously isolated cultures.¹⁶

In 1973 the Wenner-Gren Foundation published an authorized account of Fejos's career which, to put it mildly, lacks the expected degree of scientific objectivity. But one incident reported in this biography does seem dramatically on target in the way it captures the *ad hominem* nature of life at the top at Universal. When Fejos announces that he is walking

out on his contract, Junior screams at him, 'You can't quit. We'll put you on the blacklist!' But Uncle Carl, the sage of Universal City, just looks at his son and sighs. 'Look, if the doctor is unhappy, let him go. It's no use to have an unhappy man.'¹⁷

An earlier version of this essay appeared in Elisabeth Buttner, ed., *Paul Fejos. Die Welt macht Film* (Vienna: Verlag Filmarchiv Austria, 2004).

Notes

1. John W. Dodds, *The Several Lives of Paul Fejos* (NY: Wenner-Gren Foundation, 1973), 27.
2. In an interview with Charles Higham, Shamroy claimed that he was the one who promoted most of the production funding, but was then 'double-crossed' by Fejos, who froze him out after the film became a great critical success. *Hollywood Cameramen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 19.
3. 'Exceptional Photoplays: *The Last Moment*', *National Board of Review Magazine* (February 1928): 5.
4. Dodds, 33–37.
5. I do not have the date of Fejos's first contract, so I cannot tell if *Lonesome* was purchased before or after he signed with Universal – but the \$500 price tag does seem consonant with the budget of his previous film.
6. 'A Director From "Poverty Row"', *New York Times* (25 March 1928): 25.
7. 'We Still Will Have Our Silent Productions', *The Film Spectator* (23 June 1928): 7.
8. For example, cameraman Hal Mohr remembered one spectacular shot, in which he hurtled across the stage on a trapeze while cradling the camera, that is not present in existing prints. Richard Koszarski, 'Moving Pictures: Hal Mohr's Cinematography', *Film Comment* (September–October 1974): 49–50.
9. The film's peculiar visual style was already out of date. 'It is a picture that looks older than it really is', said the *New York Times*, 'especially in the tinted portions where we go from an amber interior to an azure blue night in the open'. 'The Screen: A Sinister Magician', *New York Times* (4 November 1929): 25. *The Story of a Nobody*, of which the *Times* said nothing, was produced by Jo Gercon and Hershell Louis, and described by Lewis Jacobs as a subjectively filmed romance illustrated 'solely by objects' and structured 'on the sonata form in music'. See 'Avant-Garde Production in America', in Roger Manvell, *Experiment in the Film* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1948), 125.
10. 'The nightclub was so big that when I worked on the full set the rest of the studio couldn't work because it had no electricity ... I was not happy about it and I was not proud.' Dodds, 42.
11. I was able to consult contracts, telegrams and other materials pertaining to *King of Jazz* as held in Universal legal department files in 1975.
12. The Fejos quote is from Catherine Wunschler, 'Paul Fejos', *Films in Review* (March 1954): 126, but Dodds cites even more specific claims made by Fejos in his biography (45). See also Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), 383.
13. Dodds, 44.
14. Quoted in Koszarski, 'Moving Pictures', 53.
15. All of Fejos's films for Universal were released in both silent and sound versions. *Broadway* still exists in both a silent and full-dialog English-speaking version (the talkie lacking the final reel). Studio records indicate that a German version and an unspecified 'Sound-Foreign' version were also released. *Lonesome* is generally seen in the part-talking version (apparently descended from a French original), although silent versions issued by the Universal Show-at-Home Library also exist. While *The Last Performance*, as noted, is currently available only as a silent film, it was also released in English, German and Hungarian part-talkie versions. Information from Universal's *Catalog of Library Properties*.
16. Bruce Frankel, 'Double Vision: The Film Career of Paul Fejos', *Natural History* (November 1996): 93–95.
17. Dodds, 45–46.

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