

## **Forgotten Movie Theater Pioneer: Alexander Pantages and Immigrant Hollywood**

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Alexander Pantages was an unlikely motion picture theater pioneer and mogul. Born on the Greek island of Andros sometime between 1867 and 1875, Pantages's meteoric rise in the motion picture exhibition business beginning in 1902 seems like a fairy-tale. Then suddenly in 1929 it all crashed down when he was accused of sexually assaulting a seventeen-year-old dancer. In between Pantages established his business with a keen focus on customer satisfaction, attention to detail, and building grand, ornate theaters. He was, by all accounts, one of the greatest film theater owners in the country at the time, a true film theater pioneer, yet today, he is hardly remembered by most Americans, including Greek Americans.

Pantages as an historical figure presents many difficulties. As a functioning illiterate, he left few papers behind which were likely written by others. Records of the great theatrical company he built singlehandedly were not kept. He appears to have had little interest in documenting his career, or any sense of history to warrant saving his papers. Facts become a matter of conjecture in his world; he was once a master of publicity and a grand mythologizer. Despite these challenges, enough material exists to put together a rather hazy but significant account of his extraordinary contribution to the motion picture theater business.

Contrary to Pantages's own mythologizing, he was not born as a showman, yet his hard-scrabble, peripatetic life may have contributed to his nose for the entertainment business. His early life is enigmatic; the exact year of his birth, whether he was born on the Greek island of Andros, and if at birth he was really christened Alexander (and not Pericles) are all in dispute.

During his sensational sexual assault trial in 1929 he gave his age as 54, thus establishing his birth-year as 1875. Yet his mausoleum in Forest Hills near Glendale, California, indicates 1867. Some historical accounts have him born in Athens while most biographers indicate his birthplace was Andros. As regards his name, it took Pantages's own son, Rodney, to rubbish the idea that he was born Pericles but that he changed his name to Alexander when he heard about Alexander the Great.<sup>1</sup> One thing is not in dispute: he was born *Pantazis* and later altered it to the more elegant and timeless-sounding *Pantages*.<sup>2</sup>

Pantages's family life is equally nebulous and contradictory. His father was said to be a constable and owner of a general shop owner. But in a 1920 interview, Pantages claimed that his dad ran a circus on the island and thus showmanship was in his blood. "I was born that way," he crowed.<sup>3</sup> According to Greek-America historian Theodore Saloutos, Pantages was an "unhappy boy without any emotional attachment to the mother country and her traditions."<sup>4</sup> Despite living on a relatively small Aegean island, the Pantages family had connections to Cairo. There are at least three versions of these ties. In one story, Alexander's father was a "constable, mayor, and harbor master on Andros and thought strongly in terms of a business career for his son."<sup>5</sup> The father also owned a general store on the island, and it was in this capacity that he often travelled to the Egyptian capital to buy goods for his shop. In another version, young Alexander joined his father in Cairo, not to buy goods for the family general store, but as a two-man team of busboy and waiter in a restaurant. In this second more pedestrian version, the father was a "menial storekeeper and the family lived in bitter poverty, something that Alexander never forgot and that spurred his feverish drive to extreme wealth."<sup>6</sup> In a third version, he is apprenticed to his older brother John, at a tobacconist shop in Cairo.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the circumstances that brought him to Cairo, one thing is certain: at the age of nine, young Alexander boldly, abruptly and rather cruelly left his father, boarded a cargo boat on the docks of the city and never saw his family again.

For the next two years Pantages plied the seas of the world and many ports.<sup>8</sup> He was a deck hand, but he apparently found enough free time to study human nature. One thing he learned in his travels, at least as he later claimed to interviewers, was that human beings were drawn to entertainment and would pay dearly to be "happy." He claimed the idea of becoming a theater owner came to him during this period. It was a formative two years on the high seas; the

schooling he missed was made up by the tougher school of hard knocks. He picked up a smattering of other tongues. When an opportunity came to earn more money, he jumped ship and landed in Panama where a French concern was desperately trying to build a canal on the isthmus. Joining the frenzy of workers hacking away at the savage jungle in Panama almost cost him his life.

The Panama Canal dug under the French in the 1880s was a qualified full-employment act, but a disastrous building project. For the tens of thousands who toiled and for the many thousands who died in the midst of what could be described as “slavery” conditions in an unyielding jungle, it was a nightmare. The final death count reached well over 20,000. “Many times I met death at the door,” recalled one laborer.<sup>9</sup> Pantages himself contracted malaria and was bluntly told to find more hospitable grounds. He boarded a steamer headed for North America, where he settled first in San Francisco. It was the 1890s and California was growing rapidly.

San Francisco provided Pantages with the first measure of stability in his life. He remained there for several years, working as a dishwasher and waiter, and, if one account is true, eventually operating his own restaurant. He was even arrested for attempting to smuggle opium with a confederate, for which he was acquitted in a trial. Perhaps the trial was a natural outcome of Pantages’s hardscrabble life after leaving home. He “had trained in a tough school. Many of his friends were mugs and pimps; the most legitimate people he knew were gamblers.”<sup>10</sup> In the late 1890s, as the country came under the spell of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush, Pantages packed his possessions and headed to the cold north inspired by the stories of sudden wealth. “I have been mining in the West for the last thirty years,” one lucky miner who struck it rich claimed, “but I never saw any country so rich in gold as Alaska.”<sup>11</sup>

The human stampede that followed news of gold discoveries reached a climax in 1898; a year later it fell to a trickle.<sup>12</sup> By 1902, it was a memory. It was during those four years in the Yukon that Pantages experienced his first serious foray into theater management. At the time he was still in his twenties. What helped usher his turn into theatrical exhibition was a famous dancer, Kathleen “Klondike Kate” Rockwell, a wandering soul like himself, and likely a prostitute. Rockwell and Pantages became lovers as well as business partners, operating the Orpheum vaudeville theater in Dawson City, Yukon. They were not above cheating miners out

of their gold and plying them with watered-down champagne, a common practice in the Yukon. They were a team – waiter and dancer – “relieving drunks of their gold dust in private boxes after the show.”<sup>13</sup> Despite leading a charlatan existence, the partnership did succeed in giving Pantages a taste of show business. “It wasn’t that I was bad,’ Rockwell once spoke of her childhood, but also reflecting her career, ‘I was just imaginative and full of life and the excitement of living.’”<sup>14</sup>

In 1902 opened his first theater, the Crystal in Seattle. By then his relationship to Rockwell was nearing its end. At the time Pantages started the Crystal, he was just a struggling entrepreneur living by his wits. He kept in contact with Rockwell and may have even been partially funded by her, but he was in the venture completely on his own. What he had in the Crystal was an 18-by-75-foot space (“little more than a shelf” one historian noted) that he packed with benches, a projector and a flimsy screen.<sup>15</sup> Then he rented some films and added vaudeville acts. “He was his own manager, booking agent, ticket taker, and janitor.”<sup>16</sup> It was also the “first 10-20-30 cent vaudeville house in America.”<sup>17</sup> Pantages saw from his first theater that his profits depended on turnover, so he squeezed as many shows as he could, often between fifteen and twenty per day. He also kept costs low, putting himself in multiple roles in the theater.

Pantages was not unique as a cutthroat business operator, but the manner in which he cheated his actors out of their due or outwitted his competition showed that his itinerant years as a laborer, ditch digger, waiter and finally theater owner in the frozen north had left their hardened marks on his steely soul. He was not a man to trifle with. He was also determined to succeed. “The Crystal did well from the start, and Pantages milked every penny from it.”<sup>18</sup> Often there was no actual performance schedule, just what he determined his customers would watch. A stage act could be chopped in half while a film was sped up, at a time when hand-cranked projectors offered no mechanism to regulate speed. Film scenes consequently were hard to recognize. Audience “[t]urnover was all that mattered.”<sup>19</sup>

Few at the time could have foreseen Pantages’s explosive rise as a theater owner, fewer still that movies would become so culturally dominant. What was heralded as a novel new form of entertainment in April 1896 after Thomas Edison’s film exhibition at the Koster & Bial’s theater in Manhattan had by 1900 become “chasers” at the end of vaudeville acts signaling it was time for the audiences to clear the theaters. Some saloons also showcased films (an earlier

version of the sports bar) as novelties to attract drinking customers, but darkness and spilled drinks brought more problems than it was worth. It was up to theater owners like Pantages to rescue movies from cultural oblivion, which they did beginning in 1902.

By 1905 film's growing popularity, thanks to new releases like *The Great Train Robbery*, one of the first movies with a clearly delineated story, led to a major explosion of audience interest in the medium. No longer chasers at the end of vaudeville acts meant to tell the audiences the show was over, or featured in saloons to sell more drinks, films were coming into their own as a legitimate, national entertainment. In 1908 there were 8,000 movie theaters in the country; three years later the number swelled to 11,500 and by 1914 it reached 18,000 "with seven million daily admissions."<sup>20</sup>

For the industry to succeed, however, it needed stable, orderly production and clear methods of distribution. Despite Pantages's insistence that vaudeville and film share billing in his theaters ("vaude-film"), vaudeville acts were better organized as an industry than movies in the early 1900s. Thomas Edison, who placed his name on the projector despite it being patented by others, was a monopolist who regarded film less for its cultural attributes and more of its commercial exploitation. All those film exhibitors who bought his equipment (unless purchasing equipment illegally from overseas sources such as France and Russia) were also forced to buy the movies made at his Black Maria studios in New Jersey. While Edison streamlined the assembly line of movie production and attracted talented vaudevillians, at least in the early years of the industry, for many artists films were a sideline to their legitimate theater careers that generally paid higher salaries. Edison refused to identify the names of his talent for fear they would seek higher wages.

Pantages tied himself to vaudeville and did not relinquish its hold on his operations until well into the 1920s by which time films had long left vaudeville behind as the preferred entertainment choice by mainstream American audiences. He had greater control over his vaudeville acts than with the films he exhibited. Unlike movies, rented from distributors for a set fee, with little room to maneuver or negotiate fees, Pantages contracted with vaudeville acts directly, and could – and often did – reduce their agreed fee. It would become standard practice in his operations: performers signed an agreement for a specific fee only to see it reduced by 25% after the act had started its theatrical tour. The actors could either continue at the reduced

rate or halt their performances and be left stranded. “Most of the performers faced with this situation took the pay cut to keep from becoming destitute in a strange and unfamiliar area.”<sup>21</sup> Few actors took the matter to court, where Pantages most often than not settled before a full-blown trial ensued.

While he may have dreamt of a great theatrical empire, it is not clear that he had a strategic plan to expand his operations into a chain. At the time he opened the Crystal in 1902, he was perhaps in his early thirties. By 1905 he would marry (a young eighteen-year-old violinist from Oakland, California) and start a family. Perhaps used to the swanky lifestyle acquired in his time with Rockwell, or recalling his poverty in Greece and Egypt, he burned for wealth and status. Not content with a middle-class lifestyle, he pursued riches as a matter of personal pride. To do so meant he had to have more than one theater. With each new theater, he also gained leverage over the vaudeville actors who contracted with him. At some point, it must have dawned on him that the more theaters he owned or managed the greater the pull of vaudeville acts into his operations. It is likely that he watched other vaudeville theater owners do the same and simply copied the practice. It was no more work to contract with a vaudeville act to book into one theater than it was to book an act into several theaters. Thus the economies of theatrical production favored multiple operations. It was also the preferred choice of vaudeville talent who could be employed for longer periods with a theater chain than with a single operation.

Much of his success was undoubtedly due to his ethic of hard work. There was also an element of luck involved. The country was industrializing and with the increasing spread of factories across the nation’s landscape came a more regulated work-week. Calls for ten or eight-hour workdays brought into focus increased leisure time, something not always available to farmers who have irregular hours. Industrialization also was a magnet for immigration, which between 1880 and 1925 brought over 22.5 million foreigners into the country. In 1910, 14.7% of the population was foreign born, the highest percentage in the country’s history. These immigrants primarily settled in urban areas, and it was here that both vaudeville and eventually film received a strong reception.

The Crystal did well enough so that in 1904 Pantages opened the Pantages Theater in downtown Seattle. It was bigger than the Crystal (700 seats versus 400) and by 1907 featured “an orchestra area and a balcony.”<sup>22</sup> Admission, however, still remained 10 cents. While that was

twice what many “nickelodeon” movie theaters charged at the time, a dime admission was considered a good entertainment value for seeing “live” performances. The Crystal was both an experiment and a testing ground for its owner. The Pantages, on the other hand, was a fully operational theater from the start and was designed to entertain Seattle’s burgeoning audiences. It was also built to last, which it did until it was demolished in 1965.

Like the Crystal, the Pantages theater was profitable. There were other prominent theater impresarios to contend with, but Pantages held his own. In 1906, he opened the Lois Theater (named after his wife). The later featured 1,200 seats and included stock theater, which was common at the time. Pantages offered year-round plays, but with films gradually gaining in popularity, the concept failed. It was an important lesson for Pantages who never ventured into entertainment territory outside of his comfort zone again.

Pantages reveled in his attention and focus on the customer, long before it became a business religion in our digital age. While other owners relied on the word of booking agents or those apparently in the know as to which acts to hire, Pantages insisted on watching a potential act in front of a real audience to determine how they well were received. He had little time for reputations or fame; if his customers were not moved, or laughed, or enjoyed the show, a star’s following meant nothing to him.

Pantages vaudeville became a brand associated with high quality and popularity. Even as he divided his theatrical exhibition between live acts and film, he was at heart a vaudevillian. The switch to film in the third decade of the century was another example of his remarkable focus on what customers wanted. Despite his obvious predilection for vaudeville, he followed his customers’ demands and made film the center focus of his empire. At its height, the Pantages theater circuit owned and operated 72 theaters spread across the country. He dominated the West Coast, but he also made important inroads in the Midwest and got as east as Memphis, Tennessee. He even had operations in Canada.

Image was an all-important element in the building of his empire. He intuitively understood that the impressions he made on the public were critical in how audiences would accept him, a dictum of his leadership style that he practiced all throughout his career.

Significantly, he also knew that he and he alone had to be in charge of cultivating his brand. He did not allow others to do it for him. After all, his name was on the marquee of his theaters.

It was not just the knack of attuning himself to his customers' tastes that brought him astounding success; he was also a business visionary. While there were other Greek film exhibitors in the country at the time, most notably the Skouras brothers in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Kerasotes family in Chicago, Pantages's chain was the most geographically expansive, the largest and the most nationally well-known of all Greek-American exhibitors. Pantages went further than other theater owners. He heightened the experience of attending a movie or vaudeville show by not only attracting top talent but also creating sumptuously-designed theaters that could themselves be draws. He sought to make his theaters as inviting as the acts that played in them. As his empire grew, Pantages recognized that audiences could be interested in the entertainment but also in a theater's interior. Thus began a move towards ever more elegant and sophisticated theaters. It began around 1910 and it soon sped up as one theater owner tried to outdo the next. In time "theater buildings became the temples of the twentieth-century American city."<sup>23</sup> Movie cathedrals replaced, in both architectural grandeur and cultural impact, the dominance of churches and temples.

A key figure in furthering this movement was the brilliant architect, B. Marcus Priteca. The Scottish-born Priteca learned his trade as an apprentice at a prestigious architectural firm in Scotland while also attending Edinburgh University. But he yearned to see the world. "I was feeling pretty smart and I got into an office discussion about a city in the United States called 'Seattle.'" Soon enough he had landed there.<sup>24</sup> Eventually he met Pantages and the result was a long two-decades long collaboration and a style that eventually became known as "Pantages Greek." Using classical or medieval motifs, Priteca fashioned theaters into urban temples, with interior spaces that resembled palatial estates and exterior features that attracted the eye as well as the imagination.

Many Pantages theaters dominated the city blocks in which they were built, purposefully, not only to make a cultural and business statement, but in the same way that churches dominated the urban landscape in Europe and some parts of the United States, but also to send a strong message of the growing power and attraction of film to the region. From a marketing standpoint, it was brilliant thinking, but not a little uncontroversial. Many traditionalists, particularly church



leaders, chaffed under the onslaught, and the result was a brewing culture war between conservatives and progressives that has yet to be settled. Pantages knew that in growing and expanding leisure choices available to audiences, film theaters had to stand out to compete with other activities. Particularly for working class families, two hours in a Pantages theater meant being in an ornate royal palace. For those struggling to make ends meet and raise families, this was a seductive form of escapism and fantasy. For many members of the audience, often the acts or films playing in a Pantages theater was secondary to simply being in the theater itself.

Unlike other theater operators, Pantages and Priteca focused on details. Pantages insisted his operations always being clean and well maintained, and he selected ushers for their neatness and strong professionalism. Priteca's skillful, exterior use of terra cotta offered architectural flexibility but also a certain sunny, vibrant style and it took patrons into walled gardens of relaxation and pomp. It placed them in a better mood, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the shows or movies being presented. As few other exhibitors had done in his time, Pantages and Priteca turned theater going into social and cultural addiction. Priteca designed thirty theaters for Pantages. Just a "vaudeville architect," he called himself. The cigar-smoking Priteca combined exterior pomp and interior elegance with "gracefully curving balconies, sloping floors, and good sight lines to the stage from every seat in the house."<sup>25</sup> "Seeing is hearing," he proclaimed.<sup>26</sup>

Priteca turned Pantages's visions into reality and in the process the later amassed a great fortune, despite the fact that he could not read or write English. If his inability to read or write stuns the observer, so does the fortune that he acquired. He is said to have been worth between twenty-four and thirty-two million dollars, or several hundred million dollars today.

As Pantages rose up the economic ladder, so did his lifestyle, from a well-appointed house in Seattle to an elegant and expansive mansion in Los Angeles. For someone who likely grew up poor and without major social connections to assist him (save for his association with Kate Rockwell), Pantages was truly the self-made type who enjoyed the perks of his success. Despite being said to have suffered an emotional break-down in 1922, he loved the theatrical world and being around beautiful, physically attractive people. He had a particular fondness for young, sexy, athletic female acts in his theaters. If this led to assignations is not entirely clear. But allegations in the 1920s of car trips to Mexico with comely, underage women raised disturbing questions. The model ethnic was not being a good role model to his audiences.

## **The Pringle Affair**

By the 1920s, Pantages had gained a reputation as an “old goat,” but whatever bad publicity this garnered, it did not impact his business. Rumors of a troubled marriage, with his wife, Lois Pantages, considering a divorce, reveal signs of an unstable private life. If he was careless in his personal matters, perhaps it was an antidote to the many business challenges he faced. Whatever the source of his personal issues, on a balmy Friday afternoon on August 9, 1929, he let a seventeen-year-old dancer upend his life.

The facts are still murky, but around three o’clock that afternoon seventeen-year-old Eunice Irene Pringle came to seek a private audience with Pantages regarding her act which she wanted to book into his theaters. It was not the first time they had encountered each other. Previous attempts to book her act had not been successful, but Pringle refused to let rejection stop her efforts to change his mind. Why did he make the mistake of being alone with her in a small room variously described as a broom closet or side office may never be known. He knew how desperate actors could be for a shot at fame, yet he still accorded her a private audience when common sense dictated a more cautious approach.

Half an hour after going inside the room, Pringle ran out in a ripped dress and hair askew shrieking that she had been raped. This set into motion a whirlwind of events that resulted in the total destruction of Pantages’ chain, either by being sold or taken over by others. His arrest and conviction at his first trial that autumn in Los Angeles was major news, not only domestically but internationally.

Some months prior to his arrest, Pantages had made moves to sell his operation or turn over some of his theaters to his two sons, Lloyd and Rodney. The trial sped up those efforts, destroying his reputation in the process. At his arrest, he claimed he was being framed but he did not cite any names. Later, Hollywood gossip filled the blank by declaring Joseph P. Kennedy, the patriarch and future father of an American president, was behind the effort. Soon a narrative emerged that Kennedy had paid Pringle \$10,000 to accuse Pantages of sexual assault so he could take over the Pantages circuit, then the largest remaining independent chain in the country. When Pringle later decided to clear her conscious and relate the circumstances to the press, she was reported to have suddenly died of poisoning. Popular accounts of this narrative became the chief

memory of the events, despite the fact that Pringle never died, nor is it likely that Kennedy attempted to frame Pantages. (I have previously written a detailed account of the trial and the attacks on him by xenophobic newspapers.)<sup>27</sup>

In his second trial in 1931, Pantages was found innocent but by then the country was in the midst of the Great Depression and had more important issues with which to contend. He took to horse racing at Santa Anita and lived the life of a carefree former businessman, despite the fact that the bonds and shares he received for his operations were effectively worthless. The former multi-millionaire was said to be worth only \$10,000 on his death on February 17, 1936. He died quietly in his sleep. The normal tributes followed, but the industry was a different one than what he known in the early part of the century. The attacks against the supposed Jewish domination of Hollywood of previous decades had subsided. The culture wars that pitted traditionalist against modernist in which Jews were seen trying to “de-Christianize” American had waned. The industry imposed self-censorship and moral clauses in actors’ contracts. Industry scandals that had so titillated the 1920s had been brought under control.

Pantages’ illiteracy certainly shielded him from fuller knowledge of the widespread social opprobrium against Hollywood in the 1920s, but it did not help his case that he showed a remarkable blindness or disregard to the social winds swirling around him. The man who made customer care his number one business priority apparently gave little thought for the cultural threats blowing against Hollywood. This could be a case of a business owner who paid attention only to his work, remaining completely blind to the popular perception of Hollywood as the center of sin and moral filth.

### **Pantages and Greek America**

In historical and biographical accounts of those who knew him, Pantages has been described as aloof, a lone wolf, a man who rarely smiled, and one for whom conversations had value only if they profited him. Photographs during his first assault trial show him unmoved by the tragic trial unfolding before his eyes. Often he is shown lost in his own thought but surrounded by lawyers and attendants. This contrasts sharply with Pringle, who was shown surrounded by her parents or with sympathetic state-appointed officials. Pantages was not allowed to speak to the press during the trial by his lawyers, a stricture not faced by Pringle.

Thus she gained the public's sympathy. The standoffish nature of his personality extended to his relationship (or lack thereof) with other members of the Greek-American diaspora. If any segment of society was positioned to keep his memory alive it was Greek Americans, but only in the last few years of his life did he make any serious attempts to reach out to other diasporans.

Despite helping to eventually bring two members of his immediate family to the United States, it seems that Pantages had little interest in joining or participating in the affairs of his diaspora community. For instance, there are no records that he donated any funds to the building of the Greek Orthodox Church in Seattle, even though with his wealth he was in a favorable position to do so. He married a non-Greek and adopted his host country's lifestyle, christening his children – Lloyd, Rodney and Carmen – in non-Greek names. He may have assiduously avoided any contact with other Greek Americans or simply turned his back on his ethnic culture. Greek-American publications at the time noticeably had little to say about his sexual assault trials. Only after he was exonerated and with his empire a memory did he have significant contacts with fellow Greek Americans. Had he done so earlier in his career the community might have defended him during his trials, and afterwards better kept his memory alive. It is not known if he reached out to them or them to him, but the result was a return to his roots that in some ways is a touching conclusion to an extraordinary life

Alexander Pantages could be held up as an example of the "Horatio Alger" story of American success, or the ability of America to reward its hard-working entrepreneurs, while also standing outside of the normal bounds of white ethnicity as a successful Hollywood mogul. He was an exemplary ethnic until his arrest, but afterwards became a symbol for many Americans of not only the unsavory immigrant but also the predatory lothario associated with the excesses and vices of the motion picture industry. The rise of Pantages in exhibition presented a dilemma for other Greek Americans: to honor him meant acknowledging the influence of motion pictures on a society that antagonized a certain portion of it who regarded the industry as corrupt and vile, while at the same time in doing so emphasizing more of the Greek part of Greek America. They could seem less than patriotic.

Pantages spoke to the press of plans to start another theatrical empire in the early 1930s but nothing came of them. Despite being exonerated in his second trial, his reputation was beyond repair and in time he came to accept that his career had vanished when his theaters were

sold. In the early 1900s most middle-class American entrepreneurs stayed away from movies because movies were considered “low-brow” entertainment. This opened the door for immigrants like Pantages and even women to become involved in the industry, particularly in theatrical exhibition. Since many customers of movies were themselves immigrants (no language required to enjoy watching silent films), it was a natural outgrowth. “If movies had been born talking,” one film historian noted, “they might not have been so enormously popular right away.”<sup>28</sup>

With the arrival of feature-length (i.e., two hours) films and the movie palaces to see them, going to the movies became a cultural phenomenon. Despite the elegant surroundings, a movie ticket price was comparable in cost to other forms of popular entertainment. As movies grew in stature and audiences, the immigrants who helped build the industry came under attack. Greeks learned to keep their heads down and focused on their work. The mistake that Pantages made was to exercise risky behavior at a time when Hollywood was already on the defensive regarding its morals and conduct.

. Pantages was a unique example in the theater industry, a person who rose to great heights only to see his fortunes wrecked in scandal and negative publicity. Other Greek-American theater owners had far happier endings to their careers. The most obvious example is that of Spiro Skouras and his family, who ended up heading 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox

### **Hollywood and Assimilation of Its Immigrants**

Not emphasized enough in discussions of Hollywood and its pioneering immigrants is the assimilatory role movies played in bringing the marginalized into mainstream society. If Pantages was an accidental theater mogul, so were many other immigrants who came to the industry as it was one of the few occupations open to them. As noted earlier, film’s seedy reputation discouraged mainstream investors participating in the industry, leaving the door wide open to a motley collection of cast-offs from other professions to make a go of movies. They worked hard and learned as they went along. When he opened his first movie theater, Pantages ran the entire operation himself. “He was his own manager, booking agent, ticket taker, and janitor.”<sup>29</sup> Immigrant and working class families flocked to his operation, where the main feature was the show and not the ethnic background of its operator. That came much later, when films

attracted tens of millions of audience members each week and concern arose of movies' undue influence on the minds of audiences, particularly the young.

As the social attraction of films grew from their low-brow beginnings, so did the cultural standing of those involved in their enterprise. It is instructive to note the difference between the malaria-ridden thirteen-year-old Pantages entering the United States and the mogul living a lavish life in Los Angeles in the 1920s. Hollywood is said to be many things, including real estate, but also “a state of mind.”<sup>30</sup> Like few industries of the time, it included a diverse variety of backgrounds and in one sense fashioned them all into uniquely American personalities. Wealth and social prestige followed. How this took place is still a matter of study. Whether voluntary or involuntary, the change was profound. Perhaps there is no better example of this shift than Pantages.

With his business empire growing, Pantages could forget his background, or language barriers and concentrate on growing his business. This he did skillfully and with aplomb. In the bruising, cutthroat world of business, particularly the highly competitive field of entertainment, Pantages stood on his own two feet, immigrant or not. It brought him into contact with those that wanted to steal his business and he had to fight back with his wits and panache. When competing exhibitors brought in popular acts, Pantages either snatched them under their noses or found comparable acts to compete with them directly. In one interesting episode, a famous violinist was due to play at a rival theater. Pantages sent a truck to pick up the violinist's Stradivarius, then called him on the phone at his hotel room and threatened to destroy the violin unless he switched to a Pantages theater. The man promptly did. In time, acts expected this behavior and worked for Pantages and his competition for the highest pay.

Was this an example of the inner workings of the movie industry, or simply an expression of business competition? A different way of posing this question is to ask whether Pantages's behavior in the violinist case could have been repeated, for example, in the insurance industry or medical profession? That Pantages made such a threat and that it seemingly only heightened and embellished his competitive reputation in exhibition reveals the extent to which Hollywood was not an ordinary industry. Unique perhaps in the entertainment field, the movie industry operated at once as a factory system, but one that relied heavily on public relations and publicity. It had to please its customers yet also stand out in a leisure industry that ruthlessly fought for the

attention, dollars and time of its audiences. Standards of behavior of its practitioners did not always apply because Hollywood actors, for instance, lived in the rarified world of fantasy and imagination. Actors, as the public face of the industry, endeared themselves to audiences in a manner matched by few other professions. They got under the skin as well as in their audiences' very dreams at night. This was a powerful and influential force, which further raised the hackles of conservatives in the culture wars and why there were so many calls in the late 1910s and 20s to clean up the industry.

Stories about famous film stars advanced this relationship between audience and industry while also promoting Hollywood's main product: movies. This force extended to directors, writers, producers and even exhibitors. The Pantages brand was a powerful one, and placed him front and center. In the minds of audiences, he was a purveyor of escapism and entertainment, while also engaging their emotions. This orientation powerful forces of assimilation unique to filmmaking for immigrants like Pantages. His cultural and financial success brought him a measure of stature in the field and in the general public, which helped in his adoption into American society. But what cemented this adoption was that he was an instrument behind the nation's dreams. As such, he held a special place in the loyalties of his customers that aided his integration into mainstream society.

The very nature of the work involved also contributed to assimilation. The industry was not simply the stars and production crew who regularly worked long hours to produce films, but also exhibitors who spent many hours tending to business. For a theater owner like Pantages, there was never really any time off; managing dozens of theaters was round-the-clock work that required constant attention. Under such circumstances, when the focus was on insuring financial stability and profit, the immigrant had to let go of the past to focus on the present. Pantages had a reputation for hard work and long hours; it is impossible for him to operate otherwise, particularly given his illiteracy. As his children grew into adults they assisted his father, but he still ran the operation more or less on his own. It is also a telling fact that his children did not grow up speaking Greek, which further distanced Pantages from his former homeland.

That the movie industry was famous for its many immigrants (almost all the major studios were founded, run or involved immigrants) is another telling example that there was something inherent in Hollywood that encouraged assimilation. In Neal Gabler's influential *An*

*Empire of Their Own*, he noted that many immigrant Jews responded to their new status as movie producers by seeking to become less “Jewish,” by marrying Gentiles, adopting mainstream American customs and reaching for a more generic appearance to their business interactions. The fact that they could become captains of their industry, in the same way that Pantages became a leading movie theater owner and exhibitor at the time, certainly encouraged their assimilation.

## **The End**

As a businessman, Alexander Pantages’s talents seem very modern. His tireless pursuit of satisfying his customers, an obsession in some regard, could easily be recognized in today’s digital marketplace and certainly was one key to his success. Another was his haphazard career that toughened his outlook on life and fed his enormous competitive spirit to outfox more well-financed and well-connected theatrical operators. Certainly his immigrant background significantly contributed to gaining access to movie exhibition at a time when non-immigrants regarded films as a degenerate art form. Had he remained on the Greek island of Andros or worked in Cairo, he would never have had the same opportunities to rise into mogulhood as he had in the United States. It is easy to assume he was simply a product of a growing American economy and the success of one of the country’s greatest inventions, but it is worth asking if the movie industry would have grown along the lines it did without foreigners like Pantages to push it along?

Pantages had a vision of entering the theater business some time before opening his first movie theater. By 1902, when this became a reality with his first solo-owned Crystal, he could not have foreseen the growth of movies, but without the hard work and commitment he brought to the enterprise, he could not have grown his empire. Hard work is not unique to immigrants, but in Pantages’s case, it became an emblem of his life. He could not compete with other exhibitors on the basis of his business connections, or financial backing, or social standing. He spoke in broken, accented English and did not read or write English. What he lacked in sophistication he made up in sheer doggedness and determination.

Without immigrants like Pantages to lead the way, Hollywood might have resembled the oil industry in the late 1880s dominated by one individual, John D. Rockefeller. Rather than a



single domineering light, movies after the mid-1910s and certainly after Edison's vise grip on the industry was broken, it was composed of thousands of small lights that collectively turned a struggling art form into a major American industry. Pantages stood at the center of this development.

Despite his pioneering role in the creation and growth of movie palaces, Pantages is not remembered today by many Greek Americans. His trial for sexually assaulting a teenager no doubt contributed to this amnesia. His reputation destroyed, he remained a pariah for a time before he was exonerated only to fade into irrelevance and finally perhaps premature death. A second and yet perhaps more compelling reason is that film exhibitors like Pantages did not get the public acclaim they deserved. Publicity was lavished on the creative talents who made the movies – the actors, directors, even writers – rather than exhibitors and producers. The magazines devoted to film exhibition existing at the time—focused on movie stars. Largely ignored were tens of thousands of people spread around the country who showcased the films on the nation's screens.

If Pantages's contribution to film exhibition is now forgotten by most, there is another side to his career that is not. His rape trial reveals something of the complex relationship between immigrants and Hollywood. The myth that Joseph P. Kennedy framed Pantages gained social currency after the trials. Kennedy may have suffered his own discrimination for being a Catholic in a Protestant nation, but by the time he arrived in Hollywood in the early 1920s he came as a “white savior” to a chaotic, sin-stained, morally-loose industry. In the end, he saved nothing but his enormous bank account that swelled during his time in the industry. Nevertheless, by 1928 Kennedy knew that a successful film studio (in his case, Radio-Keith-Orpheum, or RKO, that he more or less created) needed theaters to guarantee exhibition of the movies it produced. The only major film theater chain not owned by a Hollywood studio at the time was Pantages's. In the early days of 1929 Kennedy made overtures to buy the Pantages theaters. Pantages was open to the idea, but he was also coy and uncommitted. One day the film trades announced an imminent sale of parts of the Pantages chain, only some days later to be replaced with notices that he had changed his mind. This went on for some months and in frustration, Kennedy supposedly hatched a scheme with the teenaged Pringle to end this grimy form of gamesmanship. This rumor soon-became a legend and the basis on which the rape trials were remembered.<sup>31</sup>

A more positive consequence of the false rumor was the length to which Hollywood went to protect one of its own. Pantages was not a jolly, back-slapping personality and he seems to have had few friends outside of his business associates and family. Despite lacking personal charm, the industry that he helped to build stood behind him. Perhaps this support provided him some solace when the theatrical empire he built so doggedly and led so effectively was divided and ignominiously sold off.

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Arthur Tarrach. "Alexander Pantages: The Seattle Pantages and His Vaudeville Circuit." (Seattle: University of Washington, unpublished Master's Thesis, 1973), See also Theodore Saloutos, *The Greeks in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 273-274.

<sup>2</sup> When this name change took place is uncertain, but it seems likely it may have happened in the 1890s when he was living in California. Changing names for immigrants was hardly unusual, yet in the case of Pantages it was for business and promotional purposes. He understood public relations at a time when it was gaining traction in American society.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Schallert. "Boy's Dream Now Reality," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1920, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Saloutos. "Alexander Pantages, Theater Magnate of the West," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, October, 1966, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> Saloutos, *The Greeks in the United States*, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis Lucia. *Klondike Kate: The Life and Legend of Kitty Rockwell* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1962), p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> "Pantages Career Launched Here," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 18, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> "Career Marked by Dramatic Events," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 28, 1929.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Parker. *Panama Fever: The Epic Story of One of the Greatest Human Achievements of All Time – Building of the Panama Canal* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Murray Morgan. *Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), pp.153-54.

<sup>11</sup> "What the Miners Say," Alexander Orr, *San Francisco Examiner*, July 16, 1897, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> David B Wharton. *The Alaska Gold Rush* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Lael Morgan. *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush* (Fairbanks, AL: Epicenter Press, 1998), p. 148.

<sup>14</sup> Ellis Lucia. *Klondike Kate: The Life and Legend of Kitty Rockwell* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1962), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Eugene Clinton Elliott. *A History of Variety-Vaudeville in Seattle: From the Beginning to 1914* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1944), p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, *Skid Road*, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> Don Duncan. "Meet Mr. Architect," *Seattle Times*, January 24, 1971, *Charmed Land Magazine*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott, *Variety-Vaudeville*, p.58.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Czitrom. "Early Motion Pictures," from *Communication in History*, edited by David Crowley and David Heyer (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2007), p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> Tarrach, "Alexander Pantages," pp.22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Kreisman. "Curtain Up," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 6, 1990, *Pacific Magazine*, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> John Reddin. "'Benny' Priteca About to Lose Happy Home," *Seattle Times*, September 27, 1964, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Duncan, *Seattle Times*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Taso G. Lagos. "Poor Greek to 'Scandalous' Hollywood Mogul: Alexander Pantages and the Anti-Immigrant Narratives of William Randolph Hearst's *Los Angeles Examiner*," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, kV. 30, No. 1 (May2012), pp.15-74

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Walker. *Sex in the Movies: The Celluloid Sacrifice* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, *Skid Road*, p. 154.

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<sup>30</sup> Walker, *Sex in the Movies*, p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Most prominently is Kenneth Anger, *Kenneth Anger's Hollywood Babylon II* (New York: Dutton, 1984).