

WORKING FOR "THE COMPANY":
MANAGING PHILADELPHIA MOVIE
THEATRES IN THE 1930S–1940S

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Introduction: The Studio System

In his foreword to Gregory A. Waller's book *Main Street Amusements*, film historian Charles Musser points out that in recent years, "the study of American film history has emerged from the doldrums to become a dynamic area of inquiry and a significant contributor to the broader fields of cultural history and American studies. One important strand in this renaissance has been a growing recognition of the importance of film exhibition and moviegoing itself as historical phenomena."¹ To understand how moviemaking operated in what is known as the "studio era" (approximately the 1920s through the 1950s), historians have traditionally focused on Hollywood itself—the soundstages, backlots, stars, and movie moguls. But, as Musser argues, to limit research to the filmmaking process is to miss the larger picture, for it was not merely the production of films which made companies such as Paramount and Warner Bros. profitable and powerful—it was their control of film distribution and exhibition as well. As Douglas Gomery points out in his newly revised and

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expanded *The Hollywood Studio System*, the major American film companies developed a "wholly vertically integrated model"; the success of what historians refer to as the "Big Five"—Paramount, MGM, Warner Bros., RKO, and Fox (after a 1935 merger, 20th Century Fox)—depended upon their ability not only to produce films but to distribute them internationally and to collect the admission fees at hundreds of studio-owned theatres.²

The Theatres

The studios promoted their theatres as they promoted their films. Historians frequently recount that Marcus Loew, the head of Loew's-MGM, stated, "We sell tickets to theaters, not to pictures."³ In-house newsletters, articles in trade journals, and books for the general public served not only to recruit and help train theatre personnel but promoted the film industry as a whole. They described the movie business in an invariably positive light, and emphasized that the goal of theatre staff was to ensure that the customer was treated well. A 1927 guide titled *Motion Picture Theater Management* notes that "the average householder and his wife are in quest of a good time in a place which . . . is superior to the routine to which they are accustomed."⁴ To most moviegoers, it may have seemed that a studio-affiliated theatre operated like a well-oiled machine—and that image was consciously cultivated by those in the movie business, as everyone from theatre architects to studio executives to theatre personnel reassured the public that their priorities were "dignity, honesty, and good taste."⁵ In press releases, the movie moguls promised movies "far in advance" of those made in other countries "in their conception, their finish and their acting," presented in "such pleasant and luxurious surroundings and in such perfection that there is nothing in our lives of greater and more constant delight."⁶ The ideal movie theatre, it seemed, employed only well-mannered, well-trained staff and maintained a level of cleanliness and organization that made the moviegoer's experience seem little short of heaven. Just as the industry emphasized the glamour of film production in Hollywood, it constructed an image of film exhibition everywhere which evoked sophistication, efficiency, and organization. At both stages, production and exhibition, the appearance of effort was minimized; the studios and the theatres simply "ran," without problems and without mistakes.

Inevitably, primary materials in theatre archives reveal a different and far more complex picture, and provide researchers with a glimpse of the day-to-day reality of theatre operation. Such a cache of records, documenting the

operations of the Stanley-Warner theatre chain, is housed in the Athenaeum of Philadelphia's Irvin R. Glazer collection. The importance of the Stanley theatres to Warner Bros. cannot be overestimated; as Douglas Gomery points out, it was the acquisition of the Stanley chain's over 200 houses in the late 1920s which catapulted Warner Bros. into the ranks of the "Big Five." Although Warner Bros. had been producing films for almost ten years, now the other studios "had to come to Harry Warner to book . . . [their movies] in Newark, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Baltimore, Maryland and Washington, D.C. Ownership of such a chain guaranteed Warner's near parity with Paramount," which at the time was the most successful of the major film studios.⁷

From the Philadelphia offices of the Stanley-Warner theatre chain, J. Ellis Shipman supervised the Philadelphia "zone." An employee of "the Company" for thirty years, throughout the late 1930s and the 1940s Shipman was responsible for overseeing the operations of the over one hundred theatres Warner Bros. owned in Southern Pennsylvania, Southern New Jersey, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Delaware, and parts of Virginia and West Virginia. He relied on A.S. Mason, the chief in-house investigator, to provide him with specific details of any shortages in cash receipts, any suspicious behavior on the part of an employee, any failure of a manager to comply with Company policy.⁸ One letter dated September 5, 1940 begins: "Dear Mr. Shipman: You have asked me to give you some examples of cases concerning Managers . . . involved in irregularities so they may be used in expounding the futility of trying to defraud the Company."⁹ Mason presented a summary of cases he had seen over the years, and in a follow-up memo two days later he waxed philosophical about the inherent dishonesty of humankind, liberally quoting from one Dr. W. Nisson Brenner, "criminologist and former chaplain of Philadelphia County Prison," who declared: "The principal difference between the criminal and the rest of the populace is that the criminal has gone professional; while the average person still retains his amateur standing."¹⁰

Cashiers, ushers, and janitors who worked in Stanley-Warner houses may have believed that they were responsible to the theatre managers whom they saw on a daily basis, but in truth they were responsible to the Company, in the form of the Contact Manager who supervised their zone. J. Ellis Shipman, whose name appeared in trade publications, was likely to be a total stranger to the vast majority of Stanley-Warner employees he supervised. The Company's strict hierarchy permitted the individual theatre managers little freedom in dealing with financial discrepancies and employee infractions.

The "Inspections and Irregularities" files document the methods the district office used to implement and enforce Company rules. There were significant benefits to working for the Stanley-Warner chain throughout the 1930s and 1940s: wages were at least average and business was good, so there was little danger of being laid-off. In major cities such as Philadelphia there were likely to be several theatres near an employee's home or on a trolley or bus route, so getting to work was not an issue. Some employees "rotated" among urban theatres, maximizing their working hours. For managers, there was the opportunity for advancement; paying your dues in a neighborhood or small theatre might eventually mean promotion to a larger or better-placed theatre, perhaps even one of the highly touted palaces in downtown Philadelphia or in Washington, D.C.. The price a manager paid, however, for working for Stanley-Warner, was independence; all "irregularities" were forwarded to the district office. And the risk that any rule-breaker took—manager or otherwise—was that he might be discharged, the words "Do Not Re-Employ" stamped on the zone office paperwork.

Audiences flocked to the movie houses, but probably very few considered what went on behind the scenes. What seemed a marvel of efficiency was often operated in fits and starts. Managers were sometimes overwhelmed by the pressure to keep their theatres operating for three or four shows a day, six or seven days a week, with three program changes each week—and, in some cases, for continuous showings on Saturdays, or movies accompanied by vaudeville acts. Managers often struggled to maintain staffing levels and to prevent theft, while they were constantly reminded of their responsibilities to their communities and their companies. It is unlikely that John F. Barry and Epes W. Sargent, in espousing the philosophy that the theatre manager "cannot know too much about his particular community and his potential patrons" imagined that such cultivation of the neighborhood might mean using the theatre as a venue for an off-track betting operation.¹¹ Often the *esprit de corps* "Roxy" Rothafel endorsed, "... the subordinating of personal prominence to the efficiency and welfare of the whole organization" was difficult to maintain when class differences among the staff from uniformed ushers to non-uniformed janitors and "matrons" were obvious to all.¹² Managers could be tempted to find imaginative ways to increase their income. One Philadelphia manager, for instance, took the experts' advice to cooperate with "every worthwhile civic, social and business event" to heart, renting his theatre to local organizations for a fee of five dollars and pocketing the money.¹³

Principal Investigator: A.S. Mason

In 1940, when A.S. Mason provided J. Ellis Shipman with his professional opinion that most people were corrupt, he had been working in the Philadelphia district's Investigations division for at least four years, and had seen a good deal of dishonesty. His job entailed supervising theatre inspectors who routinely purchased tickets and "acted" as customers, then reported to Mason whether they found any irregularities—which might range from dirty restrooms or lobbies to poor crowd control on the part of ushers. He questioned witnesses and suspects when a theatre's numbers didn't add up, or when theatre supplies disappeared. He followed employees to see where they went after work and with whom they associated. While the Philadelphia office had an agreement with the Pinkerton National Detective Agency as early as 1934, there is no evidence that the Company used the Pinkertons; Mason routinely carried out investigations of employees working under him.

One of Mason's primary duties was to conduct ticket chopper checkings. This involved matching a day's paperwork with the actual number of torn tickets in the ticket chopper. On every shift, each cashier maintained hourly reports of the numbers and types of tickets sold: there was generally a difference in price between orchestra seats and balcony seats, for instance, and often a different rate for children than for adults. These hourly reports were filed each day with the district office, as were hourly doormen's reports, which recorded how many tickets each doorman actually tore as customers passed through the lobby to the auditorium; half of the ticket was returned to the customer, of course, and half placed in the chopper. Mason checked every theatre in the district at least once a month to ensure that there were as many tickets in the chopper as had been reported sold and torn.

Stanley-Warner files indicate that the Company immediately investigated any ticket-chopper discrepancy. A typical incident took place at the Uptown Theatre in North Philadelphia on Thanksgiving Day, 1941. The Uptown was a "deluxe" theatre in a neighborhood several miles from the city center; playing second-run features, it was meant to draw from several neighborhoods, as it seated over 2,000 people. In 1941, records show that the Uptown averaged paid attendance of 13,582 customers per week; that year its gross box office was \$218,389, and its net profit was \$39,238.¹⁴ The Company took nothing for granted, however, and when the chopper check for Thanksgiving Day showed a discrepancy of \$11.42, an investigation began. In his report to Shipman on January 23, 1942, Mason specified that an "examination of the chopper con-

tents of this theatre for Thursday . . . disclosed a number of missing tickets, as follows: 2 @ 15 cents, 16 @ 35 cents, and 12 @ 46 cents."

Mason went on to state that "A check of the door sheet disclosed that David Parker, Rotating Doorman, was on duty when all but 4 of the missing 30 tickets were sold." The report continued:

It was learned . . . that Mr. Parker was not highly regarded insofar as ability is concerned and . . . [the Manager] felt that he was not alert and active enough to intercept and collect all incoming tickets; that the reason for this alarming number of tickets being missed was entirely Parker's fault. The doorman's post here is between two doors, one leading to balcony and the other to orchestra. Unless a man is on his toes and has good side vision, which Parker does not, people can and will get by without giving up their tickets . . .¹⁵

The interior of the Uptown, designed by the Philadelphia architecture firm of Magaziner, Eberhard and Harris, was much admired by architectural critics and by audiences, but the goals of the architect and those of theatre management were not the same. While an article in *Architectural Forum* might prescribe that in the ideal theatre the "walls and surfaces of the lobby should be as open in treatment as possible" and should encourage "a decided spirit of adventure and a desire to gain admittance to the other parts of the house," the author apparently did not anticipate that a customer inspired with such a spirit of adventure might not sit where assigned.¹⁶

The particular configuration of the Uptown doors apparently caused Mr. Parker no end of confusion as he attempted to tear tickets and keep count of the customers. This was not the first time, in fact, that Mason had found that employees considered the design of the Uptown problematic. In May 1941, Inspector B-4 reported that customers were able to move from the balcony to the orchestra without being "intercepted" by staff. Mason, upon visiting the site to size it up himself, found that "the right stairway is taped off to guide patrons . . . to the balcony but left stairway is not . . . [because] that would interfere with use of candy machine."¹⁷ Mason had suggested that the manager move the candy machine and insisted on the use of tape to guide patrons to their appropriate seats. From Mason's point of view, the design of the theatre permitted patrons to get away with choosing an orchestra seat when they had paid for the balcony, and aesthetics be damned, he wanted tape used to keep order in the theatre! Though the *Architectural Forum* might

advocate a "stairway . . . [that is] genuinely enticing, a beckoning magnet and invitation to the upper levels," moviegoers in the Uptown balcony apparently considered the staircases an invitation to descend to the orchestra level, a possibility its architects do not seem to have considered.¹⁸

Hershey Bars and Raisinettes

In the Thanksgiving case, since Mason was aware of the challenges posed by the Uptown's awkward design and Parker's less than acute side vision, Mason did not recommend that the doorman be fired; it was hoped that the reassignment to a smaller or better designed theatre would solve the problem. Other employees were not judged so kindly. Beyond the routine checks of ticket choppers, Mason investigated any report of theft in the theatres. On December 21, 1942, he composed a memo to Shipman regarding "Dishonesty of William Sams and Frederick Book, Ushers" which demonstrates that every infraction was treated with the utmost seriousness. The report states that the previous Friday night at the Fox Theatre, a carton of Hershey bars was found in the employee locker room, where it obviously did not belong. In an effort to trap the culprit, the carton was removed and replaced by a box "filled with a telephone book and lead seals . . . Saturday morning, a reliable employee was planted behind the lockers and he saw and heard enough to indicate the candy thieves were among the ushers." The plot thickened, as Mason recounted, "During the investigation it came to light that another carton (containing Raisinettes) was in circulation in the Ushers' Room in the early part of the week . . . It also developed that Sams brought a pair of dice and there has been some minor crap shooting in the locker room." The inquiry seemed to lose its momentum, as all of the ushers began to level accusations against one another—a dime had been stolen; Sams had been borrowing "small sums" and not paying them back; some of the boys knew the "trick" combination to another usher's locker. Mason wrote to Shipman: "Sams tells me he was brought up in a couple of 'Homes' in Pittsburgh . . . I gathered they were correctional institutions as he said he was subjected to mistreatment. 'They beat yuh,' he said."¹⁹

This is a far cry from the image of ushers provided in industry publications from the studio era. Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothafel decreed that the house staff "should be under strict training, of almost a military character," and that ushers in particular "should be given 'institutional' talks which instill

in them a sincere and wholesome interest in their work" and a pride in their theatre and Company.²⁰ Harold B. Franklin provided specific "Instructions to Ushers" in *Motion Picture Theater Management* which advised, "Loyalty to your work requires that you help in every way to maintain the standard of the theater," and reminded ushers that their purpose was to "be of service to the patron, the theater, and your fellow employees."²¹ There is no reason to believe that Stanley-Warner set lower standards than other studio-affiliated theatre chains. The Fox, where the candy thefts took place, was a 2,400-seat downtown Philadelphia palace which the Stanley Company leased from Fox from 1936 through 1945. In 1941, paid attendance was over one million. This was a major theatre in the Stanley Philadelphia zone, and the uniformed ushers were meant at the Fox, just as they were at other studio-owned theatres, to project "an image that most patrons associated with a fine hotel, country club, or bank."²² The fact that they were average teenagers who might be tempted to break the rules on occasion was not acknowledged in the public discourse, but found its way into the "Irregularities" files.

In reporting this case to Shipman, Mason stated that Sams and Book had made restitution of \$3 for the cost of the carton of Raisinettes. Both young men were discharged; to the report are attached their formal statements, typed, signed, and witnessed by the manager of the Fox Theatre. Book's statement notes that he was 16 years of age, lived with his mother, and had been employed for the past six weeks at the Fox Theatre, at a rate of \$14.00 per week.²³ In their statements, Book and Sams both admit some degree of guilt, but disagree on who was ultimately responsible for all of the candy thefts. Mason was not completely satisfied with their versions of events, and added a handwritten postscript to his report regarding a third usher, Eugene Polansky: "I am not sure that Polansky has been entirely truthful," and "I think Polansky should go to (sic)." Mason further editorialized that from his point of view, this was not merely a matter of teenagers acting on the spur of the moment; rather, the theft was the result of poor judgment on the part of the theatre manager, who had not properly supervised Sams, Book, and Polansky.²⁴

The candy thefts at the Fox—where a total of \$3 worth of merchandise (the carton of Raisinettes) could not be recovered—resulted in at least two people being fired. While there is no paperwork to indicate that Shipman acted on Mason's suggestion that Polansky also be discharged, it is certainly possible that Shipman would have followed that advice. That so small a matter was handled with such gravity and was resolved with three ushers sent packing

indicates the problems that the Stanley Company and other theatre chains faced. If the Company was determined to address each case this thoroughly, it would spend a great deal of time and energy investigating minor infractions such as candy theft. It would also place theatre managers in the position of being routinely understaffed; in this case, the Fox Theatre manager found himself two (or three) ushers short four days before Christmas—not exactly the propitious time to be advertising for, hiring, and training new employees. Whereas the manager of an independent theatre might have chosen to confront the boys himself, or merely change the routine of filling the candy machines in an effort to determine who had access to the candy locker, a Stanley-Warner manager was required to report the incident to the district office, and Mason was obliged to visit the theatre and begin taking statements.

The Keystone Case

Of course, not all of the infractions Mason investigated were minor, though they may have seemed so at first. The theft of candy or the re-cycling of tickets found on the floor of the theatre during cleaning might eventually lead to the discovery of some more grievous offense. Nor were all theatre employees treated equally. In most instances, the word of a theatre manager was trusted more than the word of any other employee. Several theatre managers deflected suspicion from themselves by implying that other employees were more likely suspects, often impugning not their work habits but their characters, telling Mason what was “known” of the employees—where they lived, how much debt it was rumored they had. There is no evidence in the Athenaeum records which explains Mason’s background and training.²⁵ His techniques ranged from the obvious (match the payroll sheet sent to the corporate office to the timesheets maintained at the theatre), to the far more questionable: as in the Fox candy case, he was inclined to set traps for those involved in “irregular” activities. He also visited the homes of suspects to interview family members, landlords, and neighbors.

One incident in particular raises troubling questions about Mason’s approach to investigation and the Company’s tendency to find theatre managers more credible than other employees. In 1939 and 1940, Mason encountered a series of problems at the Keystone, a second-run house of 1,800 seats in North Philadelphia. It started with an August 1939 report from manager Thomas Knoll about shortages in the ladies’ room Kotex machines (one for 95 cents and another for 15 cents). Mason approved

Knoll to set a trap for the guilty party, and marked nickels were placed in both machines. Later that day, Knoll searched several employees, but did not find the marked nickels. Mason was called in and, as he questioned the employees, found one he mistrusted: Allen Carter, a "colored" man about whom Mason had heard "reports" that he was "deep in debt." Mason added that "Mr. Knoll also advises he found several numbers slips on his person when he was looking for the marked coins."²⁶ Mason recommended that Carter be transferred to another theatre, but apparently he was not.

Mason did not solve the case that day, but in the course of his investigation he had uncovered another problem: shortages in the candy machine. The next report in the Keystone "Irregularities" file, dated December 11, 1939, deals with the discovery of a set of candy machine keys stashed in a manila pay envelope under the stage. Mason and Knoll set another trap, dusting the envelope with "Blue" powder and replacing it, hoping that whoever had hidden the keys there would retrieve them and leave incriminating fingerprints—though Mason admitted that if his prime suspect, Allen Carter, was the one using and then hiding the keys, his fingerprints might not show up: "As I told you . . . [I] have never had any experience with this powder on the hands of a colored person" In closing, Mason rather peevishly pointed out to Shipman:

If you will read my report of Aug. 25, 1939 you will see that Allen Carter was then the suspect and I recommended he be transferred . . . not because we could prove anything against him but because trouble seems to stay with him wherever he goes. Carter has always been hard pressed for money . . . ²⁷

Suddenly, in January, the Keystone case took what was for Mason an unexpected turn. Mason was sent to the theatre because of a discrepancy in the Keystone payroll paperwork. Manager Thomas Knoll soon confessed to fabricating payroll forms and timesheets, pocketing the money "paid" to two imaginary projectionists. In a lengthy report dated January 25, 1940, Mason described Knoll's account of the sad events which had led him to steal approximately \$90 from the Company: Knoll's wife had had a premature baby, had since become pregnant again against doctors' advice, and was now under the care of two physicians—whose names and addresses Knoll provided. Mason itemized the medical expenses: Knoll had " . . . paid out approximately \$75 . . . since the beginning of her present illness and there is still hospitalization to come" There were even more details: Knoll's

father needed money to pay his mortgage, so Knoll lent him \$340; Knoll pawned his wife's ring; Knoll sold a set of bedroom furniture to raise money; Knoll borrowed \$120 from his aunt.²⁸

To this report was attached Knoll's signed confession and Shipman's report, which stated that Knoll had repaid the Company. Shipman was inclined to be lenient; he and another executive recommended that, "in view of the fine work he has done in the past, and the extenuating circumstances causing him to use these funds," Knoll be retained and given "another opportunity in the same position."²⁹ Only five days later, however, Shipman wrote another, more terse memo: "Will you kindly mark the employment card of Thomas Knoll, not to be re-employed."³⁰ Despite his inclination to give Knoll the benefit of the doubt, Shipman had been forced to re-evaluate the situation in light of one more report from an astonished Mason dated January 30. He had found, to his dismay, that "Mr. Knoll is untruthful." No set of bedroom furniture had been sold. His wife was not being treated by two doctors; on the contrary, "From all reports around the theatre she is in perfect health." Furthermore, "It was learned that Knoll has been keeping steady company with a student nurse . . . [Knoll] is known as a 'good-time Charlie' and wont (sic) let anyone else pay for a thing." Knoll "has been spending quite some time away from the theatre . . . " Mason continued; a personal friend of Knoll's "told me he used to drive them around and make up a four-some with another nurse. He mentioned going to Maggies (sic) on the Boulevard . . . [This friend of Knoll's] suspects the wife is wise." Mason concluded his report with the following statements:

The subject of candy shortages is in another letter.

We have received pay receipts from New York and they will be examined for forgeries . . .

. . . [We have requested] the petty cash vouchers for the past few months so they can be examined also.

Am enclosing . . . faked payroll made up in Knoll's own handwriting, for completion of the file. It was found in the office after he left.³¹

This was the kind of case which led Mason to ponder, in that September 5, 1940 letter to Shipman, the dishonesty of men.

The Janitor and the Missing Broom

While Mason believed he had learned something about Knoll and others like him, however, he did not use the incident to learn about himself. He never mentioned in any memo or piece of correspondence that he had rushed to judgment of Allen Carter "not because anything can be proved against him, but because trouble seems to stay with him wherever he goes."³² Nor was he motivated to re-examine a previous case at the Keystone in which a janitor had been fired for stealing. That investigation had begun in December 1938, when Thomas Knoll was manager of the theatre. In light of what was later learned about Knoll, it would seem that the facts of this case should have been revisited, but they never were. It began with the disappearance of an amplifier "used in conjunction with the Santa Claus doll" in what was apparently a lobby display.³³ (The date on this letter indicates that Mason was doggedly continuing to work even though it was Christmas day—and so, apparently, was whomever he dictated his memos to!) As in many cases, once the investigation began, more information suddenly came out: ". . . I learned that electric bulbs have been going out of this house for the past three years . . . Also that brushes belonging to . . . the painter, and DuPont varnish intended for the office were stolen . . . Five sets of dresserware have been received by the theatre but . . . four have disappeared from the office."³⁴

Mason visited the theatre and began to ask questions. He immediately found "an eye-witness who saw William Foster, the janitor, walking down a back street with a brand new broom on Wednesday afternoon, Dec. 21st . . ."³⁵ Mason proceeded to interview Foster and, as he reported to Shipman, "I didn't like the way he answered questions and began building up a case against him." This is one of the most flagrant instances of his acting on a first impression, and setting out to follow leads which would implicate one particular individual. It is important to remember that Mason was called not because a broom was missing, but because an amplifier was missing. Still, he assumed that Foster was his man; he asked everyone in the theatre about the amplifier and Foster's proximity to it during its use in the lobby display. Acting only on his interviews with Keystone employees, Mason stated, "Foster's story is full of holes and so I confronted him . . . Despite pressure he disclaimed any knowledge of anything except one broom which he admitted taking." Mason took the precaution of marking the broom he found in the Keystone theatre "with my initials for identification," just in case Foster should decide, while under intense scrutiny by the Stanley Company Investigations Division, to make off with another broom!

Foster "returned the one broom to Mr. Knoll Friday night." After duly recording that, Mason added two paragraphs which indicate how strongly he believed that Foster was behind the theft of the amplifier—and what a wastrel Foster was in general:

Foster's wife used to work in the theatre but is off on account of illness . . . They have 10 children. Foster is drinking heavily and spends little time in the theatre. Usually comes in drunk on Sunday mornings. Goes out the back door and is seen frequently carrying parcels away from the theatre. Has a girl friend (sic) on the side—a blonde . . . Does his drinking in the Bend tavern on Germantown ave. (sic) below Lehigh; also at the Glenside Club and the Towando Club.

Have checked with the police and Foster has no record. Have also arranged with the police to send out a flyer on the amplifier to all pawn-shops. This fellow, I believe, holds the answer but he is not going to break without strong pressure and that may have to come from the police . . . I have given him every assurance if he will tell me the truth but he wont (sic) break so I think the best thing to do is to turn the case over to the Detective Bureau and let them put the heat on him.

Very truly yours, A.S. Mason³⁶

The records do not indicate whether "the heat" was put on Foster by the police. The only item he ever admitted taking from the Keystone was the broom. For that theft, he was fired, and his personnel card marked "Do Not Re-Employ." Now, with this paperwork on Foster in the Keystone "Inspections and Irregularities" file just pages away from the 1939–1940 memos regarding manager Thomas Knoll's thefts and lies, it seems inexplicable that Mason did not reconsider the Foster case and wonder whether, after all, he had gotten the wrong man in December 1938. Yes, Foster had admitted taking a broom; but the case was initiated by the missing amplifier—and then compounded by the missing light bulbs, paintbrushes, dresserware sets, and one broom. It is likely that Mason took Foster's case so seriously because he believed that one person was responsible for all of those thefts. In retrospect, Knoll seems to have been as likely a suspect as Foster. Perhaps, though, a year after Foster's admission about stealing the broom, Mason had forgotten all about him. Perhaps as he visited the Keystone to investigate the missing money from the

Kotex machines and the candy shortages, he truly did not recall Foster. After all, Mason was the primary investigator for this district, which covered theatres as far away as Reading and York, PA, Washington, D.C., Wilmington, DE, and the New Jersey shore communities such as Atlantic City, where Stanley-Warner operated seven theatres. How he kept straight the details of numerous ongoing inquiries is a mystery. And there is no evidence that Mason ever discussed the Foster case again, after the janitor had been fired.

J. Ellis Shipman, on the other hand, *was* asked to revisit the Foster case. He had the opportunity to look back, with that hindsight so often described as 20/20, and re-examine the events which had led to Foster's firing. He had, of course, seen the paperwork regarding the Foster investigation, and had signed the "Do Not Re-Employ" order in December 1938. He also, a year later, saw the paperwork regarding the Keystone irregularities—the Kotex machines, the candy shortages, the mysterious keys. Along with Mason, in January of 1940 he saw that Knoll's suspension was revised to termination of employment.³⁷ Shipman had passed judgment, then, on both Foster and on Knoll by June 1940, when he received a hand-written plea from William Foster's wife begging him to re-hire Foster in any capacity. There is no evidence that Mason knew of or saw this letter, but it provided Shipman with an opportunity to review the Keystone files and perhaps rectify a Company mistake. Foster had confessed to stealing a broom; Knoll had confessed to embezzling significant funds and forging Company documents and had, while he was under investigation, deliberately cast suspicion on employees who worked under him. Those things, it seems, might have occurred to Shipman as he read the 3-page letter from Mrs. Lucy Foster of Cumberland Street, Philadelphia:

Dear Mr. Shipman.

Please do not think I have a nerve or anything else, because I am writing you this letter. I am writing in regards to my husband he doesn't know I am do this but I just have to do some thing. When you have been cold most of the winter and hungry gas turned off electric turned off I just you would do anything . . . Mr. Shipman I want to know please wont you please give my husband William Foster some reference that he could go for a job or if you have something you could give him to do I don't care neither does he. He was going down to see you himself but he hasn't shoes on his feet or any kind of decent clothes to wear. I know he did wrong so does he but Mr. Shipman he has learned a les-

son. Mr. Foster hasn't worked since he got out of the Keystone going on 18 months and what times I have seen since then . . . Mr. Shipman I am not writing you this letter to take pity on me. I am writing for something for my husband. I guess maybe he would try and get something but just when they say reference what could he give for 9 or 10 years. So Mr. Shipman I again asked you for God's sake do something for him. I will close now hoping you will please try and do something.
Yours truly
Mrs. Lucy Foster³⁸

The file contains no evidence that Shipman or anyone else reviewed the Foster or Knoll materials. Shipman prepared a typed two-paragraph reply to Mrs. Foster which reads:

Acknowledging your letter of June 16th . . . I am deeply sympathetic to the conditions you are facing, but unfortunately I am in a position where I could not possibly obtain a position for Mr. Foster in our company, inasmuch as our Bonding Company would not permit it.

You may rest assured, however, that if Mr. Foster needs a reference from me in obtaining other employment, I will be glad to furnish same upon request.³⁹

There is no indication that in replying to this letter Shipman considered whether Foster had been wrongly targeted in the Keystone inquiry which began with the missing amplifier. There is no indication that Shipman discussed the case with Mason upon receipt of Mrs. Foster's letter. There is no indication of what became of Foster, his wife, and his children.

Unionization and Surveillance

Cases like these raise troubling questions about the Company's procedures. Certainly, no matter how the chain of command was structured, mistakes could be made. Indeed, in many ways the Keystone case is an argument in favor of the top-down system utilized by Stanley-Warner, since a dishonest manager such as Knoll at least had someone looking over his shoulder, and was eventually revealed as an embezzler and a liar. However, the treatment of

less senior and more vulnerable employees, such as Foster and, to a lesser degree, Carter, demonstrates a philosophy that the more menial the job, the more disposable the employee. Even the Fox Theatre candy thefts indicate that. What were three teenaged ushers to the Stanley Company, even if their loss did put the Fox manager in a bind three days before Christmas? What was a janitor to the Stanley Company, even if he had worked for the Company for nine or ten years? What were doormen and cashiers, who could be—and often were—transferred to other Stanley theatres to meet staffing needs for the Company, not to meet the scheduling or transportation needs of the employee?

Employees, particularly those in positions such as janitor, were always aware that they could be replaced if their work did not satisfy management. Ina Rae Hark points out that the constant scrutiny employees faced was couched in positive terms in industry publications such as Harold B. Franklin's *Motion Picture Theater Management*, which urged managers to ensure the cleanliness of the movie house through "inspection—and inspection—and inspection," arguing that employees would be "inspired" by conscientious managers to do better, and that staff would consider the manager not a "spy" but a "leader."⁴⁰ In reality, staff were expected to be grateful that they had a job at all, and were extremely conscious of their "place." The language of Mrs. Foster's letter, in which she anticipates that Shipman might believe she has "a nerve" to write to him, indicates the dependence of the employee on the Company. The Stanley-Warner files contain evidence that some employees, recognizing their vulnerability, were interested in joining unions. The projectionists had been represented for many years by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), but most other employees at the exhibition level and those in the Stanley-Warner district office were not unionized. The Philadelphia district office obtained several memos and flyers produced by the United Office and Professional Workers of America Local #2, which was affiliated with the C.I.O. (Committee for Industrial Organization). One of these reads:

Dear Friend: Office workers in the film industry are realizing that Unions can serve them as well as workers in Steel, Auto & Rubber Universal Film Exchange and Vitagraph (a Warner subsidiary) have joined this Union 100%.

The Union is now calling a meeting for all office workers in the Warner main office⁴¹

A follow-up flyer dated June 28, 1937 adds more specific goals:

WE CAN HAVE JOB SECURITY . . . A BRIGHTER FUTURE: promotions based on seniority and merit, nssot 'pull' and favoritism . . .
AN ADEQUATE SALARY THE WAGNER ACT PROTECTS
US IN OUR RIGHT TO ORGANIZE!⁴²

In 1936 and 1937, several people (some Stanley-Warner theatre employees and some not) were investigated because they were identified as union organizers. In December 1936, Mason reports to Shipman, "In compliance with your request, I checked up on . . . Frank De Lavery who is said to be trying to organize some of our ushers."⁴³ Mason provided a detailed account of De Lavery's activities as a member of the Building Service Employees International Local #165, including his efforts to organize kitchen workers at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel and the hotel management's "shrewd" anticipation of all of De Lavery's activities. The Ben Franklin management asked "trusted individuals" on its staff to attend organizational meetings and then report back to them what was said. When they learned that De Lavery advocated a strike during the annual Army-Navy game, a major tourist event which brought significant business to Philadelphia restaurants and hotels, they brought in "a crew in reserve from New York." Furthermore, the hotel management discovered De Lavery's attempts to encourage elevator operators to demand more money—and, in a pre-emptive move, the hotel "voluntarily gave the lift boys a \$5 increase and thus upset De Lavery's plans."⁴⁴

This was, of course, after the passage of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, better known as the Wagner Act, which did, as the Union flyer distributed to Warner office employees stated, protect all workers' right to organize. That seems to have been immaterial to the management of the Ben Franklin Hotel, and also to the Stanley-Warner Company. When they saw a union sympathizer, they saw a troublemaker. They responded with surveillance, and the ensuing reports reveal both the absurdity of Stanley-Warner feeling threatened by individual employees who might undermine them by forming a union, and the extent to which Mason was in over his head. However he may have been trained to match ticket chopper contents with cashiers' reports, or to interrogate ushers about missing candy, Mason's efforts to find anything incriminating in the behavior of John J. Gavin, doorman of

the Grange Theatre and suspected union organizer, were a failure—and, from our perspective, an entertaining one at that.

In the first attempt at surveillance, Mason acted alone. On January 19, 1937, Mason

picked him up . . . leaving the GRANGE Theatre. He stopped at the A.&P. [grocery] store . . . and made several purchases. About 15 minutes later . . . cross traffic blocked my progress and not being able to run in my present physical condition I lost him inside the [trolley] terminal . . . ⁴⁵

What "present physical condition" Mason is referring to is not explained. However, despite this physical handicap, he continued on the case; that same evening, Mason observed Gavin leaving the Grange at 10:13, and again followed him. This time Gavin "entered a tan Plymouth sedan . . . and went north on Old York Road. This would be in the direction of his home."⁴⁶ After this, Mason delegated the surveillance work to Investigators # 5 and #8. They took positions outside Gavin's home at 7:55am on January 25, 1937. They observed that the two-story brick building had "a Dry Goods Store and Barber Shop on the ground floor with Apartments above." The detailed account continued:

Shortly after 8 . . . A.M. the barber arrived and opened his shop. The Dry Goods Shop was opened by the woman who lives in the house, at 8:20 A.M. We observed a bag of rolls standing in the Hallway.

No person entered or left the Building until 12:15 P.M., A young man 21 years of age, 5'6" red hair, 150 lbs., dressed in working clothes and black overcoat, no hat accompanied by an Irish terrier entered the building. He remained there until 12:35 P.M. when he left with the dog. He returned to the building at 5:40 P.M. and did not leave again during the day

At 3:35 P.M. one of the clerks from the Drug Store made a delivery to the Apartment above store.

At 8 P.M. a young man drove up in an automobile license 3H600 entered the building and remained until 8:35 P.M.

At 8:45 P.M. Stern's Delivery Truck made a delivery of what appeared to be a mattress.

At no time was subject seen to leave or enter the building.

We made inquiries . . . at the candy and Cigar Store on the southeast corner . . . [and were] informed that they did not know and had never heard of subject.

We remained in the vicinity until 11:30 P.M. . . . Subject was not seen at any time.⁴⁷

Not only did an entire day's surveillance come to nothing, but by February 5th Mason was writing a memo to Shipman which indicated that his operatives were not sure they had even been at the correct location to observe Gavin: "Dear Mr. Shipman: In our efforts to locate this man's home address . . . I tailed him last night." Predictably, this stake-out also ended with Gavin eluding Mason, but operatives remained on the case.⁴⁸ The next day's report from Investigators #8 and 14 states that they staked out an address at Windrim Avenue and Old York Road at 7:45 A.M.; one worked until 3:15 P.M., and the other stayed an hour later. The result: no sign of the subject.⁴⁹ One final effort was made to find out what Gavin was up to: Mason observed the Grange Theatre on the evening of February 10, and took note of all of Gavin's activities. Apparently nothing unusual or suspicious occurred, and surveillance of Gavin appears to have ended on this date.⁵⁰

Conclusion

While the incidents involving surveillance on Gavin seem absurd, it is quite possible that they could have resulted in his losing his job, even if he had had no affiliation with or interest in a union. The methods of the Stanley-Warner Investigations division may seem naive and clumsy, but as many cases in the files attest, once Mason believed that an employee was a detriment or a weakness, he advised that employee's removal from the Company. Given the number of Stanley theatres in the Philadelphia zone, this made Mason an extremely powerful figure—and one never hinted at in the movie industry's discourse about exhibition. Ushers, managers, janitors all had their place in theatre-chain newsletters and guides to employment in movie theatres, but "chief investigator" was not mentioned. The public was urged to view the movie house as a "dream city . . . palatial surroundings where worry and care can never enter, where pleasure hides in every shadow."⁵¹ The reality that the staff there to provide the customer with a "magic" experience were answerable to a highly structured and generally unsympathetic corporate entity

which resisted all efforts at unionization probably did not cross the minds of many moviegoers. "Warner Bros." meant Humphrey Bogart and Bette Davis, certainly not J. Ellis Shipman and A.S. Mason. Inevitably, given their nature, the operations files are devoid of joy; they probe the more unsavory secrets of the Company business, but that the Company was engaged in the *movie* business seems incidental. Movies themselves are rarely mentioned in these files. It is only necessary, after all, to record what was playing if that helps to determine the date of a particular infraction.

Working in a Company theatre meant belonging to the Company in many ways. The more historians study the studio system, the more they understand its complexity, its impersonality, and its cruelty. We already know a great deal about studio operations at the production stage; film scholars have revealed the best and the worst of working for the major studios. Through examination of studio records and the testimony of those who worked in film production, researchers have come to understand how the studios used (and in some cases abused) the actors, directors, and writers who created the worlds into which moviegoers escaped during the 1930s and 1940s. Further research with primary sources such as these Stanley-Warner operations files will help historians to understand that for janitors, ushers, managers, maids, and projectionists the movie theatres did not represent escape at all. Ironically, the stories of these Philadelphia theatres would have been perfect raw material for a Warners script about the working man's struggle for economic survival and for respect from the callous capitalists who employed him.⁵² While Warner Bros. produced films, with actors such as John Garfield and James Cagney, which depicted the ultimate triumph of the working-class hero, the Company was, after all, in the business of making money—and every torn ticket, every broom, and every \$3 carton of candy were accounted for. The movie theatre may have represented, as Barry and Sargent claimed, "recreation and rest, imaginative release" for the "toil-worn father whose dreams have never come true,"⁵³ but only if he did not work there.

NOTES

1. Charles Musser, "Foreword," in Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements* (Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), ix.
2. Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (London, BFI Publishing, 2005), 4.
3. Ina Rae Hark, ed., *Exhibition: The Film Reader* (London, Routledge, 2002), 6.

4. Ina Rae Hark, "The 'Theater Man' and 'The Girl in the Box Office,'" in Hark, *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, 145.
5. Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothafel, "What the Public Wants in the Picture Theater," in Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America* (Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 100.
6. Jules Mastbaum, quoted in "Jules Mastbaum Sees Prosperous Year in Theater," unidentified Philadelphia, PA newspaper, December 28, 1924. Jules Mastbaum clipping file, Theatre Collection, Philadelphia Free Library.
7. Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 52.
8. My thanks to Bruce Lavery and the staff of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia for their help during my research for this paper.

Archivists at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia have requested that I not divulge the real names of individuals mentioned in the Stanley-Warner operations files. Therefore, I have substituted false names for all except those members of the Company's district office who are routinely identified with their job descriptions in trade journals of the period such as *The Exhibitor* and *Film Daily Yearbook*. Those individuals whose true names are used are: J. Ellis Shipman, Philadelphia Zone Contact Manager; Frank Gates and Joseph Feldman, Stanley-Warner executives. All other names have been changed, including the name of the chief investigator of all "Inspections and Irregularities."

In quoting from materials in the Stanley-Warner operations files, I have retained spelling, grammar, and punctuation in context.

9. Memo from A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, September 5, 1940. Stanley-Warner Operations Files, Irvin R. Glazer Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia. Hereafter Operations Files.
10. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, September 7, 1940, Operations Files.
11. John F. Barry and Epes W. Sargent, "Building Theatre Patronage," in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 111; A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, June 21, 1949, Operations Files.
12. Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothafel, "What the Public Wants in the Picture Theater," in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 101.
13. Harold B. Franklin, "Motion Picture Theater Management," in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 123.
14. These and all other details regarding theatre finances are taken from Stanley Company of America "Comparative Schedule of Theatre Income and Expense by Year," Operations Files.
15. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, January 23, 1942, Operations Files.
16. E.C.A. Bullock, "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 105.
17. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, May 16, 1941, Operations Files.
18. Bullock, "Theater Entrances and Lobbies," in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 105.
19. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 21, 1942 Operations Files.
20. Rothafel in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 100.
21. Harold B. Franklin, "Motion Picture Theater Management," in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 118.
22. Gomery in Hark, *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, 98.
23. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 21, 1942, Operations Files.
24. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 21, 1942, Operations Files.
25. The Stanley-Warner personnel records in the Irvin R. Glazer Collection at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia are not yet available to researchers.
26. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, August 25, 1939, Operations Files.

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27. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 11, 1939, Operations Files.
28. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, January 24, 1940, Operations Files.
29. J. Ellis Shipman to Frank Gates, January 25, 1940, Operations Files.
30. J. Ellis Shipman to Joseph Feldman, February 1, 1940, Operations Files.
31. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, January 30, 1940, Operations Files.
32. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 11, 1939, Operations Files.
33. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 25, 1938, Operations Files.
34. Since household items were frequently used as door-prizes and give-aways in this time period, I assume that the dresserware mentioned here is such an item.
35. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 25, 1938, Operations Files.
36. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 25, 1938, Operations Files.
37. J. Ellis Shipman to Joseph Feldman, February 1, 1940, Operations Files.
38. Mrs. Lucy Foster to J. Ellis Shipman, June 16, 1940, Operations Files.
39. J. Ellis Shipman to Mrs. Lucy Foster, June 19, 1940, Operations Files.
40. Hark in Hark, *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, 147.
41. Louis Vennett, June 21, 1937, Operations Files.
42. Louis Vennett, June 28, 1937, Operations Files.
43. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 2, 1936, Operations Files.
44. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, December 2, 1936, Operations Files.
45. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, January 19, 1937, Operations Files.
46. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, January 19, 1937, Operations Files.
47. "Case #110," Investigator #5 to A.S. Mason, January 25, 1937, Operations Files.
48. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, February 5, 1937, Operations Files.
49. "Case #110," Investigator #5 to A.S. Mason, February 5, 1937, Operations Files.
50. A.S. Mason to J. Ellis Shipman, February 10, 1937, Operations Files.
51. Barry and Sargent in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 110.
52. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer for *Cinema Journal* who pointed this out to me.
53. Barry and Sargent in Waller, *Moviegoing in America*, 110.