

Plan

Synopsis of Lord (LEW Grade) interview. 10th. August 1993. File 290.

Came to England in 1912 aged five and a half from a town on the Crimea near the Black Sea, in Russia. Could't speak English - had to learn to speak Yiddish first, because he lived in the East End. Went to school when he was 8 years of age. Hopeless at every subject except arithmetic. In his own words, a genius, winning 5 scholarships, which he was unable to obtain because he was not a British subject. But he went in for another one when he was fourteen and a half called a Trade scholarship, supported by his school, which he also won. His mother wanted him to train as a doctor, an ideal which was hopeless for him. He wanted to go in for business training and was advised by a friend of the family to learn about it the hard way by taking up a position with a firm, where he was able to progress through the various departments. He then started an embroidery manufacturing business with his father. For recreation, he took up ballroom dancing, but was only an average dancer until the Charleston appeared when he found that he was an expert at it. He went in for Charleston competitions non-stop and won them all. Eventually there was a competition at the Royal Albert Hall on December 15th. 1926 - The World's Charleston Championship - he went in for it, won it, and the prize was a 4-week engagement, starting at Christmas at the Piccadilly Hotel, London, (now the Meridian). He was paid fifty pounds a week. After that, he turned professional and went on tour - some details of the act. When on tour on the Continent he saw many acts which he recommended to Joe Collins who was his agent at the time. These were duly booked purely on Lew's recommendation, and Collins wanted more and more. By 1932 his limbs were taking too much punishment. So he decided to set up his own agency. Eventually he conquered the European market in terms of speciality, circus and novelty acts. Collins made him a partner. He then volunteered for the Army, staying there until his marriage in 1942 - details. He then took care of his brother Lesly's business who was serving in the RAF - Lew & Lesly Grade. His brother came out of the RAF in 1946 and the agency was now becoming very prominent. Lew says it was the leading agency in Europe. In 1947 he went to America and represented MCA in Europe. By this time he had an agency in America and was booking talent such as Alma Cogan, Richard Hearn, Norman Wisdom, etc. etc. At this time he used to commute regularly to the States. He had formed a consortium called ITC and applied for an ITV franchise in 1954. He was unsuccessful and was told that as he controlled all the talent and all the theatres - Val Parnell, Prince Littler, etc. etc., ITC should therefore only supply programmes to the other Contractors. There follows some interesting details of how the franchises were awarded and how the IBA invited Val to become MD and Lew to become the deputy MD.

(Editor's note: Lew mentions LWT, but this is obviously an error because LWT was not formed until the late sixties: he probably means Associated Rediffusion). It was at this time that the "ROBIN HOOD" series was started which became Lew's first TV sale in America. It was very successful and they made approximately 163 episodes which made a great deal of money.

The first name of the Company was ABC - quickly changed to ATV to avoid a conflict of interest. In 1962, Lew became the MD and decided to make good use of British talent in the creative area. Eventually, ITC was to have nine thousand, eight hundred hours of TV programming that Lew was responsible for, which they still have. He was also involved in the RAI production of "MOSES" with Burt Lancaster which was a huge success. This led to a suggestion by Pope Paul that one day he might do a story about Jesus. Two weeks later, Lew announced that he would produce "JESUS of NAZARETH" d. F. Zeffirelli, 1977. It became probably the most wonderful series that has ever been produced.

Everybody wanted to appear in it and he had about 20 stars. He cast Robert Powell personally as Jesus. Lew now realised that he had achieved everything that was possible in TV and turned his attention to movies.

He lists the big movies he made, some of which were not so successful.

"THE MUPPETS" was the greatest financial success. It was made after American networks had turned it down - he made it without a sale. It ran for 5 years. This was followed by 2 Muppet movies. He talks about the less successful movies, mentioning a Charles Bronson film. It was a busy period when he was unable to personally supervise. Now, when he makes a film, he's at it all day long, personally producing - details. He lists his top directors. "RAISE THE TITANIC", d. Jerry Jameson, 1980, was shot in Malta but Lew was too busy to go there - has never been there. Unfairly criticised: too much hype about cost etc.

He left ATV with 3 years to run on his contract. Could't stand the environment. All they cared about was money, whereas he cared about people. He joined Embassy in 1982 until the Company was sold to Columbia, and was made vice chairman of a large theatrical group in America. (Lowe's Theatres).

He then started up on his own - the Grade Company. He made a film called "THE CHAMPIONS", d. John Irvin, 1983 which did well. One of the few films that made money for Embassy. John Hough suggested making a series based on Barbara Cartland's books. So when he heard how many she'd sold, he said, "Let's make 'em". He made four - details. Hough - a popular man to work with. He then did "THE BIKO INQUEST" with Albert Finney. Ever since then he's been developing projects because he loves the business. He uses his own money for development and has four or five important projects in mind at present. Does't like nudity or bad language.

Believes good pictures can be made without them and cites the old movies as an example. He mentions, "SLEEPLESS in SEATTLE" - a new picture - no bad language, and beautifully made and taking big money at the box office.

He cares about three things in life. First, the family, second, health, and third, relationships with friends. With friends, he reckons he's the richest man in the world. Speaks very highly of British technicians - details. Hopes to start a new picture in February, shooting abroad, but using British crews. Music and post production will be done here. He tells a humorous story, not told before, about how he dealt with a particular problem concerning quota, with the entertainment unions - including his dealings with George Elvin, Tom O'Brien, the General Secretaries of the MU and ETU etc. He also tells of a brush with the unions over a transmission problem at Birmingham and how he managed to overcome their objections by asking them to do the job for him, personally.

Returning to British film production, he thinks we are making too many films about local subjects instead of making them for the international market. A good picture can be made for five to seven million pounds. Talks enthusiastically about Alan Parker's latest film. When only one or two million pounds are spent on a film, there's no hope. He says that's why he won't make TV films these days - "You're fighting to get out". It's better to make a major movie for between eight to ten million pounds. "It all depends on the words and what the director does". A lot of good material is discarded in the front office before it is seen by people with the imagination and understanding of the visual concept. Lew gives an example. He is asked about his ennoblement: He received a call from Wilson's Private Secretary to the effect that the PM would like to see him at 11 o'clock the next day. Lew was too busy at that time and so he had the appointment changed to 3 o'clock. The PM offered him a Peerage for all he'd done for exports. He was taken aback and said that if he had known about that, he would have cancelled his other commitments! More chat about it.

He talks about how he dealt with the six-month Equity strike.

Side 2.

He gives advice to newcomers: If the money can't be raised, the project is not good enough - details and advice. He thinks there will be terrible trouble in the future for ITV due to the increasing number of satellites and cable channels, and if the BBC take advertising, he forecasts disaster. He wonders how four breakfast programmes can exist. He thinks it needs a Michael Grade to put it all right.

He talks about the sale of ATV. If Michael Grade had not been his nephew, he would have been his natural successor, but he was a Grade and Lew does not believe in nepotism.

The EC provides no financial resource, but he can raise all the European money he needs, but he must have American sales. At present he is working on a very expensive project, but he says, "I'll keep at it. I'm not going to give up". END.

Editor's note:- A fascinating insight: I wish we had a few more like him.

I make the usual disclaimer about the correct spelling of some names which need to be verified.

David M. Robson.

DK.