Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Louis B. Mayer biography from The Canadians series. Mayer presided over the most successful of all the American dream factories during the "Golden Age" of cinematography, creating a legacy of classic films and American movie icons.

Aims

Although Mayer lived among the rich and famous, he faced many difficult professional and personal challenges. These activities are designed to explore Mayer's contribution to cinema, his family struggles, and his national identity.

Background

Louis B. Mayer was probably the most feared and powerful of the Hollywood producers. Louis was born Eliezer (Lazar) Mayer on July 4, 1885 in Minsk, Russia. Three years later he immigrated with his parents to Saint John, New Brunswick. His father, Jacob Mayer, was grasping and tyrannical. Jacob started a junk and marine salvage business and his wife sold chickens door-to-door in Saint John. Louis joined the family
business when he was only twelve years old and he preferred his education through the school of hard knocks. He was tough, smart, ambitious, and gave as good as he got.

When he was 20 years old, Mayer moved to Boston, married the daughter of a local kosher butcher and set up his own scrap metal business. Louis had more ambition in him than scrap metal could satisfy. He took a gamble and bought a rundown burlesque theater in Boston for peanuts. His renovations turned the shabby building into a beautiful one. To complement the transformation, he decided to present only high-quality films. These two elements were the first stepping stones to his success in the movie industry.

He made a huge profit exhibiting a monumental hit, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which formed the basis of his true rise to power in Hollywood. In 1916, he moved to Los Angeles and formed his own production company, which, after a series of mergers, became known as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. A ruthless, quick-tempered, paternalistically tyrannical executive, Mayer ruled MGM as one big family – rewarding obedience, punishing insubordination, and regarding opposition as personal betrayal. In the 30s and 40s, Mayer was the most powerful magnate in Hollywood.

The sign of a clever auteur is to achieve the illusion that there is a sole individual responsible for magnificent creations that require thousands of people to accomplish. Mayer was a very visible patriarch to his "studio children" and to the public at large. A thoroughbred stable of stars and directors were discovered by the MGM enterprise, many whom were certainly manipulated by this crafty master. A chosen few had their careers substantially uplifted by the touch of Mayer's hand.

Mayer eventually became a victim of his own ruthlessness. A younger
and hungrier generation of ambitious executives was invading the ranks. Past successes could not guarantee holding on to the seat of power. Mayer's attentions were also wandering and his power of judgement was starting to fail him. He had invested too much of himself as main overseer of the MGM plantation to delegate responsibility at this late date. In 1951, he was ousted from MGM and Louis the Conqueror was vanquished.

Mayer died from complications of leukemia in 1957. His glamour factory influenced world leaders and their vast minions. Louis B. Mayer has been gone for 40 years but his name still creates a sensation – he would have liked that. In his life, which was his studio, he was attended by his faithful lieutenants, who rose to power along with this mogul. Where he rests, in the mausoleum at Home of Peace in Los Angeles, many of those same faithful lieutenants rest in adjacent crypts. Who says you can't take it with you?

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

Just the facts

1. Eliezer (Lazar) Mayer, the Jewish son of an immigrant peddler became probably the most powerful and feared of the Hollywood producers. At the height of his career, "L.B." controlled the lives and fortunes of movie stars and moved among a worldly circle of elites. What events transpired in Mayer's life that delivered him from his humble beginnings in Saint John, New Brunswick to his grandeur in Hollywood, California? And, what
were the choices presented to Mayer and the consequences of his decisions? Instruct each student to create a timeline of Louis Mayer's life from his birth in 1885 to his death in 1957, including at least 10 key events or developments with corresponding visual aids (e.g., pictures, drawings, cartoons).

Pose questions that ask students why they think these events are important to include. Discuss the choices presented to Mayer throughout his life and the consequences of his decisions. Emphasize that there is more than one answer and that all answers need to be supported with facts and well constructed arguments.

2 On a map of North America label (e.g., period of residence, name of community, reason for move...) and trace Mayer's geographic journey from Saint John, New Brunswick to Hollywood, California.

3. Write an obituary column for Louis B. Mayer. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to The Globe and Mail)

The Golden Age

4. The twentieth century gave rise to many new art forms to express the human condition. Cinematography had a profound effect on mass audiences as they watched movies that told of our stories and feelings. The 1930s and 1940s are remembered as the "Golden Age" of cinema in North America. The era is cherished for its classic movies and bigger than life stars (e.g., Judy Garland, Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn, Lana Turner, the Marx Brothers, Ava Gardner, and Micky Rooney). As manager of MGM studios, Mayer was a crafty and manipulative patriarch that took credit for the magnificent creations of the age and ruled over the lives of the stars.
Rent and watch an MGM movie from the "Golden Age" (e.g., *Ben-Hur*, *The Big Parade*, *Anna Christie*, *Grand Hotel*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *the Wizard of Oz*) and write a movie review for a newspaper.

5. Imagine you are the manager of MGM in the 1930s or 1940s. You have screened a new actor/actress (pick a friend) as the lead for a movie. Your job is to promote the actor/actress (your friend) as a rising star that audiences just have to see. To promote the actor/actress, you should write a press release for newspapers and create a poster for the movie that features your star.

6. Write an essay or a short story on a topic relating to an aspect of the Mayer biography. Possible topics include:

- Jewish immigration to Canada in the 1880's-1890's
- Jewish influence on the history of cinematography
- History of MGM (emphasis on the "Golden Age")
- McCarthy hearings and the movie industry
- Canadian impact on American cinematography

Family life

7. Many questions should come to mind about Mayer's family life as presented in the video. Was Mayer a "family man"? Did he love his family? If so, how do we know? What were the societal norms of marriage in the 1930s and 1940s? How did the norms affect Mayer? Powerful men are repeatedly found in the media to have difficulty balancing their careers and family. Do you think these men experience more family problems than other men? If so or if not, why?
Challenge students to develop and perform a script of three or four tableaux that explore the issues "Mr. Mayer" faced at home, his response to those issues, and the consequences of his actions. Organize students in groups of 4-6 and ask each group to list situations mentioned in the video when Louis had to choose between his family and his career. Tableaux is a dramatic form where the actors freeze like statues for a moment in time. It is similar to a photograph. Here are some guidelines for staging a tableaux:

a) Everyone should be in the picture, and visible from the same camera angle and from the audience. They should not be "clumped together." The picture should have depth.

b) Each person should create an interesting pose! Some exaggeration of expression is required in order to convey the point. Every feature is important, for example, wide open eyes, reaching hands, a tilted head, and so forth.

c) Allow each actor (participant) at least one prop, for example a hat, apron, badge, or letter.

d) When the picture freezes, the narrator steps out of the tableau and describes the scene. The narration should be short and dramatic (two or three sentences). It is a good idea to have a different narrator for each scene, or tableau. The narrator could be the key person in each tableau.

e) During rehearsal, the actors should take turns stepping out of the tableau to create some variations in the picture. The variations could be photographed and used as a basis for making changes or improvements. Photographs of the tableaux are an excellent idea. You can use these for assessment as well as motivation during rehearsal.
f) The written script for the tableaux should include a brief description of each scene and a two or three sentence narration for each scene.

g) Remind the students that in a tableau, each actor is aware not only of his or her individual role, but also of the relationship of all of the roles to each other. Use a flash from a camera or clap to initiate each new tableau or scene. Applaud at the end of the tableaux to indicate the performance is over and, of course, to recognize the performance.

National Identity

8. Much is made of national identity in Canada. The old debate continues between the various stakeholders in our country. Canadian identity can be seen as the product of merging and diverging regional, provincial, and federal loyalties layered upon ethnic, religious, corporate and global allegiances. Canadians have repeatedly asked the question – who and what is a Canadian?

Louis B. Mayer was born in Minsk, Russia, raised as a Jewish immigrant in Canada, but he made his fame and fortune as a citizen of America. Discuss with students Mayer's sense of identity. Possible questions for discussion are:

- How did Mayer's Jewish heritage fit with his national identity?
- Why do you think Mayer decided upon July 4th as his birthday?
- Why did Mayer support Senator McCarthy and his "witch hunt" for communists in Hollywood?
- Should Mayer be remembered and honoured as a Canadian?

9. Many Canadians recognized internationally made their fame and/or
fortune in the United States. "America's sweetheart" Mary Pickford, "Captain Kirk" William Shatner, singer/song writer Joni Mitchell, director James Cameron, inventor Alexander Graham Bell, and economist John Kenneth Galbraith are just a few examples of Canadians who lived and built their careers in America. Direct students to write an editorial on the question of whether or not they believe individual Canadians can attract international fame or fortune from within Canada.

Resources

Louis Mayer Worksheet

Louis B. Mayer - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Louis B. Mayer - Time Magazine


