# LATINOLAND REMEMBERED

## By Peter Besas

## Madrid, June 5, 2025

The following are my reminiscences of how the first *Variety* Latin-American section evolved in 1975 -1976. The story may be of some interest to those who want to cast a nostalgic glance back at how some aspects of the paper worked at that time and the people, now defunct, who played a part in the old Silverman era.

Normally, Simesite is a place for short items, remembrances, obituaries, news concerning the activities of surviving muggs, as the scribes of the paper were jocularly called. However, given the capacity of our webpage, I felt that the following fifty plus pages, which it seems to me would not be of sufficient interest in a printed format, might easily find an appreciative audience on Simesite.

I have named the sections as follows:



*Should anyone wish to make any comments or observations on the following, please send them to:*


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# The Hotel Suisse in Cannes, May 1975

The film festival in Cannes was in full swing. The Azure Coast glimmered in all its Gallic glamour and elegance, tricolor flags flapping in the Midi sun. The *Variety* crew were comfortably lodged in a venerable and slightly dilapidated family-run late 19th century villa called the Hotel Suisse which might have done the honors to the likes of Marcel Proust. The chalet was fronted by a large garden whose scent wafted through the open windows of the dining room, with its decorous sideboard and refined cutlery and table linen. There was an old metal-grilled elevator, with a clanging outer door and a pair of inner doors that opened to the cabin, which was provided with a small seat. At the rear of the spacious high-ceilinged lobby nestled a small reception counter behind which stood the telephone switchboard through which all incoming and outgoing calls had to be made once you connected with the operator. In each guest room a dial-less telephone was attached to one of the walls. Upon picking up the receiver, the persona at the switchboard then rang the number you gave him.

The Hotel Suisse was our home away from home during the two weeks that the festival lasted and where on clement mornings one could take one's coffee and croissants at a cloth-covered table in the garden. The hotel was located a stone's throw away from the ocean-front Croisette, the sweeping seaside promenade, upon which stood the venerable Hotel Carlton and the original Palais des Festivals, built in 1949, which constituted the nucleus of the festival.

In the 2005 *Variety's* Centennial Souvenir Album, printed on the occasion of the paper's 100th anniversary party in Sardi's restaurant in New York, our Berlin correspondent, **Ron Holloway**, reminisced about the Hotel Suisse as follows:

"It was a place of legends, some say of miracles. Certainly, a haunted hotel of memories for all who recall with an aching heart and maybe a tear on the cheek, what the old Festival International du Film was really like...

"Built around the turn of the century, the old Suisse was run by an elderly Mistral couple who saw no reason to make any improvements at all. The plumbing made frightful noises, the beds sagged and creaked, the wallpaper had telephone numbers scribbled all over it and you could hear the guy yelling *Ne quittez pas!* at the switchboard down the hall better than the scratchy cacophony emanating from the receiver.

"But the Suisse had a garden and a spreading chestnut tree that is still standing just inside the gate. Some film directors, like Wim Wenders, still go back to that garden out of nostalgia to conduct their Cannes interviews with the outside world. The hotel, the garden and tree were located across the street from the garage in back of the Hotel Carlton. And it was a two minute walk from there to the old Palais des Festivals. Both the Palais and the Suisse are gone now, torn down to make the Noga Hilton and a plastic hostelry -- god-awful monuments to progress..."

# The Croisette and the Origins of the Film Festival

That year, as was customary, the Croisette was lined with deck chairs that could be rented per hour for a few francs (an elderly *madame* came around occasionally and gave you a paper slip when you paid her). Sitting there, you had a magnificent sweeping view of the Old Port with its outdoor restaurants and yachts and in the distance appeared the occasional ship, perhaps heading to nearby Nice. Lining the Croisette, opposite the luxury hotels, were fashionable beach restaurants shaded by colorful awnings that served Gallic delicacies, a few kiosks that sold newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Herald Tribune* and other foreign press, a string of palm trees, and large panels attached to the lampposts each of which promoted some new film that was in preparation or was being screened at the festival.

The Croisette was the pulsating heart of the two-week film festival which had begun to first be held in 1938, winning out as a venue over the competing city of Biarritz in the French Basque region. The festival's beginnings could not have been more dramatic. The previous year, at the international film festival held in Venice, founded in 1932 by **Benito Mussolini,** instead of the American film favored by the festival jury, due to pressures exerted by Mussolini and **Adolf Hitler,** the Best Film award went to an Italian entry, *Luciana Serra, Pilot,* produced by Mussolini's son, and the Best Foreign Film chosen was *Olympia,* a long documentary directed by the prodigious German filmmaker, **Leni Riefenstahl,** an innovative masterpiece chronicling the summer 1936 Olympic games held in Berlin, even though the Venice Festival's rules did not permit documentaries to vie for the awards.

In protest, the French, American and British jury members walked out of the festival. The injury was added to the previous year's insult when Mussolini meddled with the jury to ensure that the French contender, **René Clair's** pacifist *La Grande Illusion,* toplining **Jean Gabin,** did not win the Best Film award.

The French authorities thereupon decided to create their own *democratic* film festival in Cannes. However, they could not have picked a less auspicious day for an event that was to have run 20 days. The date chosen was May 31, 1939. The festival was to have been a star-studded Allied answer to the Fascist one held simultaneously in Venice. Chosen as honorary president was **Louis Lumière.** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer chartered an ocean liner and loaded on it a bevy of some of its most famous stars, among them **Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Tyrone Power, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Norma Shearer, Paul Muni, James Cagney, Spencer Tracy** and **Charles Boyer.**

On the night before the scheduled opening of the festival, in the Cannes Municipal Casino, a private screening of the opening film, **William Dieterle's** *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* starring **Maureen O'Hara** and **Charles Laughton** as Quasimodo was screened. The Casino, built in 1907, was accommodated with a thousand seats for the main competing section and another salle with 500 for projecting short films. Oher films, such as *The Wizard of Oz, Only Angels Have Wings, Union Pacific* and *Four Feathers* never unspooled.

The following day, September 1, 1939, the day the festival was set to have been inaugurated, the German army invaded Poland, marking the start of the Second World War. The festival authorities first postponed the opening of the event for ten days, but when France and England shortly thereafter declared war on Germany, the festival was cancelled *sine die.*

It was not to be until the war was over that in 1946 the Cannes film festival would resuscitate, with a time slot of September 20 to October 5. The opening reception was held in the gardens of the Grand Hotel and the film screenings were in the Municipal Casino, Curiously, the 18-person jury selected no fewer than twelve films of the 44 competing pictures for the Golden Palm "best film" awards. Among them were **David Lean's** *Brief Encounter. The Lost Weekend,* and *Roma, Open City.* **Ray Milland** won the prize for best actor for *The Lost Weekend.*

After some initial hiccups – the fest was not held in 1948 and 1950, it evolved into a competing showplace not only for the world's most prestigious films but also, starting in 1959, became the major market for buying and selling independent films from around the world. In 1949 the Palais des Festivals started to be built, a block away on the Croisette from the Carlton Hotel, and in 1951 the dates of the event were moved to May so as to avoid clashing with the Mostra held in Venice. The number of sidebar events steadily increased, with the addition of a sidebar sections such as the Critics' Week, a Directors' Fortnight.

By the time of my first visit to Cannes in 1972, the festival, its many sidebar events and the film market with screenings in a half dozen of Cannes' commercial cinemas, had grown to gargantuan proportions, though it was to expand even more in the coming decades, building a huge new Palais des Festivals et des Congrès that opened in 1982 near the port and flooding the Croisette with tents that housed film companies, delegations. Among these would be one occupied by *Variety*. But that still lay in the distant future.

In May 1975 the main venue for official screenings, press conferences, and sidebar events was still the old Palais, garlanded with the flags of all competing countries.

The cluster of international thespians, vedettes, and filmmakers, ranged from Hollywood iconic celebrities to neophyte cineastes toting cans of 35 millimeter experimental films under their arms. A legion of independent wheeler-dealer cinema distributors from Argentina to Malta, looking to pick up the rights for films, descended on the Festival. Hotel space had to be booked almost a year ahead of time.

## *Variety* in Cannes

For *Variety* and other trade papers from England, Italy and France, this was one of the high points of the year. Some of these trade papers printed daily editions that were chock full of advertising announcing films and screening times at the film market as well as projects of films being prepared. It was the market, not the main competing festival and its ancillary sidebar sections, that were mostly the focus of the trade sheets on display in the posh hotels, suites rented by film sales companies, and lobbies. The new titles vied for attention in the press as well as on posters plastered in hotel lobbies and hotel façades and up and down the length of the Croisette. 20,000 journalists, photographers, film and television professionals crowded into the small Mediterranean city for the ten days the event lasted, with films screened each day – the main, competing pictures in the Palais but also, from nine in the morning until midnight, in a half dozen commercial cinemas around the small city, many located on the Rue d'Antibes, the street that runs parallel to the Croisette, featuring commercial fare from around the world, mostly with English soundtracks, attended by buyers and distributers. The screenings might be packed tight with potential buyers when a film had been lavishly publicized, but at other times there would be only five or six in the seats.

That year, the girth of the International Film Annual, as the *Variety* special Cannes edition was monickered, ran to a gigantic 352 pages., still published on newsprint and unbound. A year later, when the issue had swelled further, it was at length bound and cardboard wrappers added, until finally the cover, spine and back cover were printed in full color. Perhaps the most spectacular Cannes cover was published in 1984. It showed the spectacular view of **Anita Ekberg** wading into the Fontana di Trevi, imitating a famous scene from **Fellini's** 1960 *La Dolce Vita,* with the added touch that she was seen holding a copy of the Italian trade magazine *TV Sorrisi e Canzoni* in her hand. The issue ran an astounding 562 newsprint pages, of which 200 came from companies outside the United States, most of them carrying advertising, a few of the ad pages tinted with "publisher's red".

Already in 1975 it required a huge truck to deliver the issues to the *Variety* stand in the lobby of the Carlton Hotel, located a few steps away from the crowded bar. The stand was serviced by a tanned, slim French lady called **Evelyn** who distributed the issues gratis and took down the names and contacts of new subscribers. Evelyn seemed to us the epitome of Gallic chic. In the winter months she worked as a ski instructor, and her French accent oozed charm.

That year was my second at the Festival. In 1973, just as I had been ready to make the trip from Madrid to Cannes, the sortie was cancelled when on May 12 *Variety's* iconic editor, **Abel Green,** died in New York. Then, a year later, I was finally able to make the trip to the Croisette in my Volkswagen Beetle, a tiring two-day journey. Now, in 1975, I had learned my lesson and flew directly to the airport in Nice, from where a half hour taxi ride took me the Hotel Suisse in Cannes. The festival opened with **Fellini's** *Amarcord,* out of competition. Heading the jury was iconic French director **René Clair** and the Grand Prix would go to **Coppola's** *The Conversation* which beat out other entries such as **Steven Spielberg's** *Sugarland Express,* **Hal Ashby's** *The Last Detail* and **Ken Russell's** *Mahler.*

The previous year I had learned the *Variety modus operandi* at the festival. On the day of my arrival, as a neophyte attendee among the foreign veteran bureau chiefs and correspondents, I was astounded when, a day before the official opening of the festival, the staffers congregated with Syd in an apartment that had been rented by **Harold Myers,** who formerly ran the London office, and the Paris bureau chief, **Gene Moskowitz,** started handing out rolls of French francs to some of those present. After the meeting broke up, I asked **Bob Hawkins** who had visited me in Madrid when I was first hired and who at that time was the bureau chief in London, to explain how the "money situation" worked in view of the cash that had been liberally distributed to some of the muggs from Moskowitz.

"Just hold on to all the receipts for expenses you make," he said.

I then learned that the wads of francs that were being distributed were money that had been received by the Paris office for advertising, so rather than transmit the funds to New York they were being used to defray expenses in Cannes.

Unlike what was the custom in most newspapers, there was never a morning editorial conclave of the reporters to decide what breaking news or events should be covered that day, though occasionally there would be a meeting in Syd's suite in the Carlton to discuss gripes and suggestions to improve the paper. Instead, the daily routine consisted of each scribe gathering news at any place or time from sources in his own "territory" attending the festival. In my case this was Spain and in later years Latin America. Thus, I would drop in on the offices of Spanish producers and distributors, most of whose top executives I knew from Madrid and Barcelona, and see what developments and deals had been made. Sometimes I would "cruise the Croisette" and catch them walking along the boulevard, or sitting in a café or hotel lobby. Or I might buttonhole them at some cocktail party, of which a dozen were held each day in the hotels and restaurants, ready for a spur-of-the-moment chat to cull snippets of information or leads that might be turned into copy. Such scouring might be undertaken in the morning hours after breakfast or late at night after the final official screening had been held in the Palais. Working in parallel, the *Variety* film critics would be hurrying off to catch the films in the official sections. Many of the competing films had already been seen and reviewed in their respective countries by *Variety* staff and stringers in Paris, London and New York. However, films screened in the market were off limits.

Then the scribes would hie back to the Hotel Suisse or wherever they were lodged and write up their reviews and stories on their portable typewriters. Thin colored paper was used to type the articles and reviews on, double spaced, with a carbon copy underneath,. A different colored paper was used from each overseas bureau, so as to be instantly recognizable upon arrival at the desk on 46th Street. Mine was canary yellow. Reviews were signed by each critic with a four-letter "signature" chosen by the reviewer upon starting to work for the paper. Indeed, the muggs often referred to each other by their "sigs" rather than their names. Hence, one might say, "Go and speak to the *Hawk*" or "Give the copy to the *Werb*" or "*Myro* is arranging the dinner details" (for **Bob Hawkins, Hank Werba** and **Harold Myers**)

Once the reviews and articles were ready they were placed in a prepared brown envelope addressed in large letters to *Variety* (using its logo, with

the flying "V", marked "Rush News") to the New York office. Then, since this was the era before the fax and the Internet, a trusted hand-carrier would be found in Cannes, usually an executive from some American film sales company, who was planning to fly back to New York the following day and who would drop the envelopes off at 46th Street or have then picked up at Kennedy Airport by a messenger sent by *Variety* in time to get into next Wednesday's paper. In fact, the same procedure of hand-carriers was famously followed by **Hank Werba** in Rome when sending copy or advertising to Gotham. (See section on the Rome office in my book *Inside Variety*)

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That sunny, halcyon morning as the tricolor banners were wafted by a gentle breeze over the Croisette and the elegant restaurants along the beach prepared their gastronomic delicacies for the festival attendees who would descend to the *plage* for a gourmet luncheon, I entered the Carlton lobby and went to "our" stand where usually I could find some of the *Variety* muggs milling about. But only **Evelyn** was in sight.

*"Bonjour, messieur Besas,"* she greeted me.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

She said that she had seen no trace of the correspondents that morning. As I waited near the stand, a few minutes later the London bureau chief, **Roger Watkins,** appeared. He was his usual cheerful, chipper self and approached me with a bouncy step.

"Where has everyone been?" I queried.

"Oh, we've been having a writer's meeting," he answered.

"No one informed me there would be a meeting," I said, annoyed that I had not been advised and thus had missed out on the editorial pow-wow. "What was discussed?"

"Upcoming special issues. Latin America."

*"Latin America!"* I gasped. "But that is one that I had proposed! What was decided concerning it?"

"Syd said you should go ahead and do it," Roger offhandedly informed me, leaving me speechless but basking in satisfaction.

A short while later, the whole *Variety* contingent, about a dozen of them led by Syd, gathered at a nearby beach restaurant. It seems **Harold Myers,** who had succeeded in organizing a very successful Far East special section, had been urged by the Rome bureau chief, **Hank Werba,** to undertake the Latinoland challenge. But the notion had been rejected by him and the choice fell upon me. The decision that I was to do the section was presently confirmed to me by Syd as we dug into a pleasant *al fresco* luncheon. No mention was ever made of how I would do the section, when it would be published, where I should travel to, what my budget for the whole project was to be. In effect, I was being given a complete *carte blanche* to launch into the undertaking with no guidelines, limits, restrictions or second-guessing by anyone.

# *Variety's* International Expansion

*Variety* had been founded in New York in 1905 by **Sime Silverman,** Syd's grandfather. A year later, in 1906, a London office had been established and freelance correspondents in Paris and other European cities followed in the following decades, making *Variety* a truly international show biz trade paper, the only one of its kind covering vaudeville and live performances. The first ever recorded reviews of two short one-reel films appeared in the January 19, 1907 issue. In later decades, sections on radio and television were added, as these new media came into existence. Later, a short section on the legitimate theatre ran at the back of the paper, as well as night club reviews, a "chatter" catch-all column and – importantly – obits of those in the entertainment field.

In the course of the post-war decades, *Variety's* operations had expanded prodigiously outside the United States. By the 1960's, in addition to a six-person office in London, full-time correspondents were busy in Paris and Rome, working out of their own apartments. Both of these individuals were "hybrids", which is to say they handled both editorial and advertising, as was also the case with the bureau chief in London. Moreover, a slew of Special Sections were published, many of them written in conjunction with European bureau chiefs. One focussing on New England was put together by Rome's **Hank Werba,** who also came up with a section focussed on the "Maghreb", a term many staffers were puzzled to understand until it was explained that it referred to a region comprising northwest Africa, including Morocco, Libya and Algeria. Far East sections as well as others zeroing in on Australia and New Zealand were blazed by former London bureau chief **Harold Myers,** which brought in a bountiful volume of advertising dollars and prompting the opening of an office in Sydney where **Don Groves** eventually became bureau chief. Myers also blazed a new trail in the Far East, mounting special sections, a task later undertaken by Chicago-based **Frank Segers.** Out of London, sales for a section zeroing in on the Scandinavian countries and even Iceland was done by salesman **John Willis** and largely written by Copenhagen scribe and film critic **Keith Keller.** Sections on Germany and the Benelux coun-

tries were undertaken by **Roger Watkins,** based in the 49 St. James's Street office in London.

All these lucrative efforts brought in new advertisers not only for the special sections but often also in the major film and television market issues – Cannes, Mifed, NATPE, MIP, MPCOM, and later the American Film Market in Los Angeles.

It was thus a propitious time to launch a foray into Latinoland, though Syd had initially expressed some doubts about what business could be garnered there and whether payments in dollars would be forthcoming from countries whose economies and currencies were notoriously shaky, at the best. Heretofore only minimal attempts to canvass advertising from Mexico had been made by **Mort Bryer,** the sales manager in New York, who spoke no Spanish but who had made a foray south of the border. The outcome was that Mexico's mammoth television company, Televisa, thereafter yearly ran an ad in the Anniversary issue that was published at the beginning of each year (*Variety's* first issue had in fact been published on December 16, 1905) which simply consisted of the Televisa logo spread over two pages. The yearly Anniversary issue, which for many years featured an ad for the Ringing Brothers Circus on a hard color cover, was always well filled with congratulatory ads wishing the paper well for its "birthday". Other than Televisa, the remainder of the Latin-American world, including the Hispanic companies in the United States, remained virtually unexplored from an advertising standpoint, though the paper did have "stringers" in Mexico, Buenos Aires, Santiago and Rio who occasionally filed news items.

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A slight digression may here be allowed on where the term "stringer" came from. At the end of each month, correspondents who were not on a retainer would cut out the articles written by them that had been published and tape them together in a long "string". This was mailed to the New York office where an amiable lady in the accounting department by the name of Silvia Kaplan would measure the length of the "string" with a ruler and instruct payment to be made to the correspondent on the basis of so and so many dollars per *inch* (around $12 in my case). A check for the corresponding amount – mine might come to $83.10 one month – would then be sent in the mail.

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After the beachside luncheon, when staffers broke up each to pursue his quest for breaking news on and off the Croisette and in the film offices that had been set up in the suites and lobbies of the major hotels (the key ones were the Carlton, the Majestic, the Martinez, the Grand), I set out to start gathering what information I could on who was who in Latin America in the entertainment sector. Five or six days remained for me to contact as many Latin Americans in Cannes as I possibly could before the Palme d'Or was awarded at the closing night ceremony.

It was **Hank Werba** who first pointed me in the right direction. He told me to speak to a woman who handled the Latin market in a Rome-based sales company headed by **Eduard Sarlui.** I soon tracked down Sarlui's savvy assistant, **Beatrice Kowatschew,** on the terrace of the Carlton hotel. After introductions were made and I had explained my Latinoland quest to her, sitting in the Midi sun, she graciously pulled out her agenda and started to run down the names and contacts of her company's associates in Lima, Bogotá, Sao Paulo, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Buenos Aires. These were golden leads, the key movers and shakers throughout the vast territory I was now to plunge into.

By the close of the festival, I had managed to cull a sizeable list of contacts in the major Latin American markets, among them the names of the heads of film companies ("CEO" was a term not used yet) and who was important and who not to waste my time upon.

Upon returning to Madrid my initial list was then greatly expanded after a four-hour session with a charming Argentine sales representative, or "middle man", **Isidro Gabriel,** who came to my house and unstintingly provided me with an exhaustive rundown on the dramatis personae in the Buenos Aires film industry, pointing out who were the "serious" producers and who were the *chantas,* the fly-by-nights and swindlers who might take ads and never pay for them. Isidro was to become a close friend in the years to come.

In the ensuing months after May, I lost no opportunity to research my Latin project and latched on to any Latin American tradsters I encountered at the San Sebastian Film Festival and the Milan film market that year.

Moreover, I started to pin down which were the major television companies in each country. I was knowledgeable about how the film industry worked – producers, distributors, exhibitors. But understanding the in's and out's of the television sector was unfamiliar to me. In Spain, only two black and white government channels emitted broadcasting until midnight each day. But in Latin America each country had its own structure, public and private. The television market was far more potent commercially than that of theatrical cinema. I started my learning curve by contacting the head of Latin sales at Television Española, a jolly Madrileño named Javier de Paul. Soon the names of Latin television companies such as Tupi, RTI, Caracol, Telemundo, Univision, the SIN, Radio Caracas, Telefé, Bandeirantes and a host of channels throughout the Latin world

became known to me, each of them potential advertisers that produced Latin programming and bought popular series and films from the leading American TV giants.

Unlike in the independent film sector where the producers and distributors tended to be entrepreneurs of all stripes, ranging from bohemian iconoclasts to wealthy, sometimes idiosyncratic businessmen, often-free-wheeling mavericks, all of them proprietors of their companies and thus the ultimate arbiters on whether to take an ad or not, the TV people tended to be button-down executives on salary, or lower level salespeople who did not make the final decisions. The bulk of programming on sale tended to be telenovelas, soap operas that targeted mass markets in Latin lands and in the United States Hispanic market. On the whole, I would find the film people more congenial and culturally akin to my own predilections.

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That summer I had written to Syd asking to be put on a retainer basis. Until then I had been paid by column-inch for articles that were published, though I was reimbursed for certain expenses in Madrid such as transport, meals with clients, etc. and also received a commission for ads sold. After due delay, Syd replied by mail (direct phone calls were almost never used in those pre-fax, pre-Internet days) agreeing to pay me a monthly retainer which was somewhat less than I had proposed, since I argued I could hardly be expected to undertake my ambitious Latin American project on a mere "stringer" basis. Moreover, I said I would need to have some sort of a title, rather than just the "correspondent from Madrid". He replied that I should pick any title I wanted. I opted for "Director of Latin American Operations", which sounded grand enough, and had business cards printed with that monicker.

By October, provided with a fairly clear notion of who was who in Latin America and how to proceed with my trip to the equinoctial areas of the world, I sent out typewritten letters to close to a hundred company heads announcing the dates of my arrival in their cities. All were typed, one by one, on my sturdy Facit typewriter in those pre-word processor days.

# Off to Latinoland

This first trip to Latin American would be taken in November – December, before the Christmas holidays. January and February were the summer months in the southern hemisphere when many of those that needed to be contacted would be away, thus the issue would have to be published in late March, with a nominal deadline for advertising and editorial copy to be in New York by March 1, 1976, which would give me time to put the final touches on the issue and update information I had culled during my swing through Latin lands. As a truly generous gesture, Syd agreed to let my wife, Lucy, accompany me on the trip, including her air fare. She would join me in Rio and remain with me as far as Lima. She could be a kind of secretary, phoning key companies from the hotels we were lodged in to set up appointments for me.

Hence, I was ready to fly off from Madrid on Sunday, November 2nd. My itinerary read: Rio de Janeiro – Sao Paulo – Buenos Aires – Lima – Bogotá - Caracas – Mexico City. I would then fly to New York to spend the Yuletide holidays there, being joined by my wife and young son, lodging in the rather creaky Excelsior Hotel on West 81st Street, before it was refurbished and converted into a luxury hostelry.

The booking of flights and hotels for the trip were handled by a travel agency in Madrid. I don't recall the details of how I picked out the hotels along my route, other than that the one for Buenos Aires was the old-fashioned stately Hotel Plaza, built in 1909, that I selected in the mistaken notion that my Argentine contacts would appreciate a Yank lodging in one of the city's traditional local hostelries, rather than in the nearby Sheraton. However, after having stayed in the Plaza one night in a dumpy dark room, we shifted to the nearby bright, modern Sheraton and were given a room with a splendid view of the city. The Plaza, having long since plummeted from its former glory, shuttered in 2017. In Bogotá and Caracas I booked into the leading hotels, the Tequendama and the Tamanaco, respectively, though on later trips I would choose the Hilton in Caracas, as I had in Sao Paulo. In Rio, on that first trip I stayed in a modern hotel in Copacabana, the Leme Palace, but in later years opted for the more convenient Othon Palace, the National, somewhat out of town where in later years the Rio Film Festival was being held, and finally in the traditional Copacabana Palace with its swimming pool, excellent al fresco restaurant, prime location and spacious, airy bedrooms --one year I fled to there in the middle of the night from the nearby posh Meridien where the inability to open the bedroom windows provoked in me a fit of claustrophobia.

On January 4, I then undertook the second part of my Latin tour, visiting Miami and Puerto Rico. In subsequent trips, I would also include Los Angeles in my itinerary. Once or twice I substituted Santiago for Lima, and even popped into Chicago on

one occasion to survey the Hispano sector there.

In those days, when only top executives used credit cards, I departed with a substantial billfold of American Express travellers checks as well as a healthy wad of Yankee dollars. I believe my total expenses for the whole first Latin trip amounted to roughly $5,000. Much of this was balanced against payments for advertising I had received in Madrid. My passport bore the required visas from Brazil, Peru and Venezuela, obtained in the corresponding consulates in Madrid.

# Rio and Buenos Aires

We landed in Rio on Sunday, November 2, and checked into the Leme Palace. The next morning I started calling some of the contacts on my list to make appointments. My knowledge of Portuguese was of the most rudimentary sort, but in the course of the week in Brazil I managed to get along in Spanish when my contacts did not know English. However, setting up appointments from the phone in our hotel room proved to be a major chore. One of the puzzlements was when I was given a phone number for a client and was told, for example,: *um, sete dois, meia, sete, oito, um.* I looked through my pocket dictionary but could find no number listed at *"meia".* It took a while before I realized that in Brazil it was the word used for *six,* deriving from "media" or "half".

One morning I phoned a company at four o'clock and asked to speak to the contact I had been given. "No, he's coming at two o'clock," the polite secretary told me.

"At two o'clock?" I asked, perplexed. "In the morning?"

"Oh, no," the secretary hastened to reply. "I'm sorry, our clock has stopped. I mean, he will be here at three!"

At that time there was a great shortage of telephone lines in Brazil and communications were touch and go. The wealthier executives, however, found a solution. They hired a secretary whose main duty was to wait to get a dial tone and then pass the receiver on to their boss.

The next day I sallied off in my suit and tie to my first appointment. The dress code in Rio for businessmen was decidedly more lax than in Europe or other parts of Latin America, especially in the film sector where sports shirts and slacks were common. I carried with me an elegant tan-colored attaché case which I had bought in Madrid for the trip – I had never owned such outward signs of belonging to the world of business executives before – in which were stored two copies of a *Variety* back issue, a half dozen rate cards, a notebook and a supply of pens and pencils. The weather was warm with blue skies and a good scattering of people were sunning themselves on the Copacabana beach.

My appointment was with an art film distributor called **Tony Mann** in the downtown area where most of the office buildings were located. The address was Praça Mahatma Gandhi, 2.

Outside the hotel, I hailed one of the many Volkswagen Beetles that served as cabs. These usually had the front seat next to the driver removed so the passengers could get into the car more easily, and a rope was attached to the handle inside the door enabling the driver to pull close the door after the passenger entered or left the vehicle. I got into the Beetle and gave the driver the address.

The ride from Leme to downtown Rio, through tunnels and along sweeps of beaches in Botafogo, took about a half hour, with the taxi meter popping up new figures in cruzeiros, a pittance in terms of U.S. dollars.

It was not until a good while later, when we reached the business district of the city, that I realized the driver did not know the square in question. He stopped to ask another cabbie where the address was located. No one seemed to know. On the second or third try, after driving about various streets for a quarter of an hour, the location was at last found and I was deposited in front of an office building.

The Tony Manne interview went well, since Tony was American, and he clued me in on various facets of the film industry in Brazil. But, more importantly, I was introduced to Tony's secretary, **Hanni Rocha,** who spoke excellent English. Upon my telling her of the difficulties of finding the Praça Mahatma Gandhi, she exclaimed, "Oh, no one knows the square by that name. It is called *Cinelandia* because it is near where all the cinemas are located!"

Hanni was to become an invaluable contact whenever I got to Rio. She was a huge admirer of *Variety,* which Tony subscribed to, and offered to help me set up some of the appointments with film industry leaders. She was a great fan of Frank Sinatra, but I know little else of her personal life.

For the next four days I made the rounds visiting close to two dozen film and television executives in Rio and Sao Paulo, taking notes during the interviews, soliciting ads for my Latin American issue, among them the leading film lab, after which I had a fairly good notion of who was who in the Brazilian film industry, the role of the government film agency, Embrafilme, some of the in's and out's

of censorship (always of great interest to *Variety* readers) and the supremacy in the television sector of TV Globo, which I had never heard of before.

One of the key executives of that of TV network was a soft-spoken, congenial ex-New Yorker named **Joe Wallach** who received me in his office near the Botanical Garden. During my interview he enlightened me that TV Globo was the largest commercial television company in all of Latin America, larger than Mexico's Televisa.

Walach had come to Rio in 1965 representing Time-Life which had provided some of the start-up capital, programming and technical know-how when mogul **Roberto Marinho** started the network in 1965, a year after the military dictatorship began to rule Brazil. Walllach would in later years co-found the American Hispanic network, Telemundo, after buying a number of Hispanic TV stations around the United States. By the time of my interview with Wallach, Globo had a virtual monopoly on the Brazilian TV market, with all its political implications. Wallach detailed the network's new projects to me, ranging from popular soap operas and plans for the buoyant music sector, its expansion into the then-new home video market, and even into feature film production.

In future years, I would always be sure to look in on Globo's offices near the Botanical Garden, where a slick young Brazilian executive who handled the company's advertising received me. But though many Globo ads would run in the pages of *Variety,* I did miss the one-on-one schmoozing with Joe Wallach.

In the evenings I would stroll down the sweep of the Avenida Atlántica that runs along the beach at Copacabana. The avenue was lined with hotels and restaurants, most of them with outdoor seating. It was there that I developed a predilection for one of my favorite Brazilian dishes, *camarão bahiana,* shrimp in a tangy sauce with rice. I may also have dipped into the local *feijoada* and downed many a beer at the outdoor tables on each of which a small canapé always stood to get your juices flowing. The only difficulty was getting a coffee with milk at the end of the meal. Black coffee was in the order of the day only excepting at breakfast time. I couldn't believe that the restaurants did not have milk for the remainder of the day. And it was black coffee that was always offered to me whenever I entered into any office to see someone I had an appointment with.

On a few occasions I dipped into one of the splendid Rodizio restaurants where the beef was carved at your table and a sweep of buffet goodies waited for customers to dig into. And I remember being pleased at finding a restaurant on the Avenida Atlántica that specialized in German fare, where I could indulge in a Wiener Schnitzel or a pork joint accompanied by sauerkraut and potatoes. And then there were the lovely fruit juices that were dispensed everywhere in the city and the stands near the beach where they sliced open cocoanuts and served you the milk.

While in Rio I managed to pick up a few of the Carioca expressions, such as *porno chanchada,* softcore pornography films, and I got into the habit of pronouncing the Portuguese "c" as "che", hence "Redje" for "Rede" (network) or "Setje" for "Sete" (seven).

Happily, one day in the offices of Embrafilme, the government film organization, I made the acquaintance of the man who was its agent for foreign sales of the films produced and financed by them. His name was **Fabiano Canosa.** After having struggled to talk to Embraflme's chief, who insisted upon speaking only Portuguese and did not seem to look favorably upon Yanks, it was a relief to speak with Canosa, who was living on the Upper West Side in New York and who clued me in on many of the nitty gritty facets concerning the Brazilian film industry, its problems, quotas, restrictions, government interference and censorship, providing me a thumbnail overview of who was who in it.

In later years, I was to make some good friends in Rio, one of whom, **Nelson Hoineff,** I appointed to be the local stringer for *Variety.* Nelson was the dean of the film critics in Rio. He also was in charge of producing a film program for a local television channel. He was one of the few people I came across who was knowledgeable in both the film and TV sectors. Another contact who became a friend was,a film buff and critic, **Jorge Kuraiem.** Having two locals to shepherd me around Rio and introduce me to the city and some of its key film producers and distributors made the week I would spend there each year not only profitable but also a pleasurable experience.

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Buenos Aires was always my favorite stop-over during my swings through Latin America. I arrived at Eceiza Airport with Lucy on Sunday, November 9, 1975, and checked into the Plaza Hotel. This was an old-fashioned place, built in 1909. We strolled up the nearby pedestrian Calle Florida with its elegant shops and the Calle Lavalle (pronounced La Vaje) with its restaurants and cinemas and felt we were in an environment akin to being in Europe.

On Saturday nights there were special sessions called *trasnoches* where the last show starts at 1 a.m. These were very popular with the Porteños, many of whom were *aves nocturnos* (night owls) and some cinemas even offered a late-late show starting at 3 a.m. All pictures ran with their original soundtracks and Spanish subtitles, as is the case throughout Latin America and unlike most European countries where the theatrical films are dubbed into the local lingos.

There were restaurants specializing in Italian and German culinary fare. The animation and the buzz of people in the streets and restaurants reminded me of the area around Times Square in New York or the Puerta del Sol in Madrid.

That year the price of a ticket in one of the first-run movie houses was 32 pesos, or about a quarter of a dollar, though an ice cream purchased from one of the ambulant vendors in the cinema cost 20 pesos. (The average ticket pricet in the U.S. was $2 at that time.)

In my notebook I wrote: "In few cities of the world have we seen such a vibrant night scene. The core of the entertainment sector of Buenos Aires is a narrow, tidy street off the Avenida 9 de Julio. The latter is a huge esplanade-lined avenue that the Porteños claim is wider than the Champs-Élysées. It is lined with cafés and handsome stately buildings. The former, the Calle Lavalle (pronounced Cahje Lavahje) is kind of 42nd Street, but only in respect to it being dotted by 15 cinemas, for otherwise the comparison would be an offense to Lavalle. The Calle Lavalle is closed to traffic and is crowded with Porteños. These are well-dressed and orderly, They strike me as European in appearance. Some of the restaurants are still open at midnight for dinner and the cafés don't close until the wee hours.

"I never counted them, but Buenos Aires must lead the world in the number of record stores. Streets such as the Calle Lavalle, Calle Corrientes and Calle Florida are lined with them, and half are still playing tangos. Incredible as it may seem, after fifty years, the tango still holds sway over the city, not just in a few tourist night spots, but all over the city, ranging from the classic Carlos Gardel songs – he has long since been converted into a quasi-religious cult figure –to modern tango masters such a Piazzola and Troilo. And it was not only in the dozens of record shops that the strains of the tango could constantly be heard, but also on the radio, where the sound of the concertina (*bandonion*), violin, flute, double bass and piano throbbed out old and new tangos night and day. These, reminiscent of the 1920's, the heyday of the tango, seem to harmonize perfectly with a cosmopolitan, elegant city that is still lined with tea shops, old time cafés, historic monuments, rickety cabs and bustling all-night restaurants."

It was not until subsequent years that I was introduced to "Pippo", a no-frills restaurant off the Avenida Corrientes that dated back to 1936. A huge, sprawling establishment with paper tablecloths, dozens of tables, bustling waiters and rock bottom prices it specialized in Italian fare. Or the Zum Edelweiss, also off the Calle Corrientes, a favorite place for the after-dinner crowd serving all the classical German dishes, that bowed in 1933. (I am happy to see that both are still open). Or the fancier restaurants adjacent to the Recoletos Cemetery, with outdoor dining.

In and around the Calle Corrientes were dozens of legitimate theatres, playing everything from *A Taste of Honey* to slapstick boulevard comedies with local funnyman **Jorge Porcel** to small intimate café concertantes where you could hear the heresies of **Piazzola's** version of modernized tangos. The entrance price for one of the season's smash legitimate hits playing in the capital's most luxurious theatre was Dürrenmatt's *The Visit of the Lady.* The best seats cost a mere 30 pesos. Or you could go to the sumptuous Teatro Colón, modelled on the Opera Garnier in Paris.

However, despite the cultural ferment, there were constant reminders that one was in a Third World country. The taxis were vintage Mercedes, the buses were old and contaminating and did not always come to a full stop when getting off them; one had to be careful when walking on the sidewalks since there were often sections in ill repair. As for the lingo spoken, I soon learned that a *mina* was a girl, and never to use the common word in Spain for "take" (*coger*) which in Argentina meant to fornicate and to use instead *agarrar* (to seize).

I had changed some American Express travelers checks in the Plaza Hotel reception where the exchange rate was favorable vis à vis the official peso-dollar rate, obtaining 130 pesos for the greenback. All the currency that circulated in the counry was in bills, with no coins in sight. The galloping inflation made specie useless. Such had also been the case in Brazil though in Peru and Mexico there were still *soles* and *peso* coins circulating. These, along with other virtually useless coins from different parts of the world, upon returning to Madrid, I chucked into large pots. Two of these, now filled to the brims with useless coins of old, stand on a shelf in my living room. In Buenos Aires, one large local bank was advertising an interest rate of 53% on half year deposits!

Our correspondent in Buenos Aires, **Domingo di Nubila,** had previously found a secretary named Gloria who collaborated with the local film magazine, *La Gaceta de los Espectáculos,* which had a small office on the Calle Sarmiento, to set up my appointments for me. These included a contact at the National Film Institute, lunch with the local manager of an American major film company, the head of a film lab, an executive of a leading TV channel and two film distributors.

The first appointment in the morning of my second day in Buenos Aires was with a small arthouse distributor, Artkino, who had a modest office on the Calle Riobamba in what was known in the trade as the "film quarter" since many of the film producers and distributors had their offices within the radius of a few blocks of each other. The owner of the company was an elderly curmudgeon with a shock of white hair called **Argentino Lamas.** Jewish and leftwing, he was known in the film community for his

outspokenness. The company premises were more like a shop that one entered directly from the street. Lamas sat behind a desk and bade me sit down in front of him for my interview. In fact he asked as many question of me as I of him, mostly about the political situation in the United States and Spain. He was accompanied by his middle-aged son, **Hugo Vainikoff,** leisurely attired, less intense than his pater. It was Hugo who I became increasingly friendly with in the course of the ensuing 23 years that I visited Buenos Aires.

Hugo had a sardonic disposition. Like Rafael Sabatini's *Scaramouche*, "He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad." He saw the world as a collection of dunces, though on occasions his smile turned into vocal anger. The following year, 1976, Hugo and his father came into mortal danger when a military dictatorship seized power, initiating the "Dirty War" during which more than 20,000 were killed by death squads or went "missing". On a later occasion Hugo confided to me how he had avoided being arrested for being a "subversive" and perhaps "disappearing" thanks to the intervention – of all people -- the main government film censor who pleaded his case with the authorities and told them that Artkino was merely a harmless operation, though it did distribute some Soviet films in a theatre the company owned, the Cosmos.

Hugo and I had in common that we were both collectors. He took me around to some of the antiquarian bookshops in the city, regaled me with a package of vintage New York post cards, and took a certain pleasure in cueing me in on the examples of corruption and malfeasance that was and doubtless still is endemic to the country. "See this highway that leads into the city from the airport," he sardonically pointed out to me a year or two later, after meeting me at Ezeiza upon my yearly arrival, "it stops about a mile before it reaches the center of the city. That is because the construction company building it, or the politicians involved, absconded with the funds, so they were unable to complete the job. It has been stopped for over a year now."

Or on a Sunday, strolling through what was mooted to be a picturesque tourist area, La Boca, but in fact consisted at that time of rundown old buildings, some decorated with street-art murals, and shuttered shops, he would quip, "Do you really think this is what foreign tourists yearn to visit after having perhaps travelled to Venice, London or Paris?"

Hugo and his wife Tita lived in a spacious apartment on the Calle Callao, a few blocks away from where he had his office. A large unused living room was crammed with antique furniture, much of which he had bought in auctions. Rather than dwelling there, he spent most of the day in a kind of foyer near the entrance to the large apartment, where he and his wife took their meals. In the adjacent kitchen he kept a number of birds in cages. Down a long corridor, you came to a small, cramped workroom filled with books where he did his writing – long typewritten letters, memoirs, monographs. The letters he often wrote to me were full of details of the latest scandals and misdeeds of the local politicians, sometimes accompanied by a newspaper clippings.

In the streets in and around where many of the film offices were located there was a corner café (*boliche*) where the distributors and others of the film industry congregated during the morning house, sipping a coffee and munching on a croissant at small stone-topped tables. You would then see a person with a stack of sheets enter the café, handing some of them out to select film people. The sheets contained a list of the box office receipts from the previous day of the capital's cinemas, and were thus avidly read by the tradsters, anxious to see how many tickets had been sold of a given film of theirs. The messenger knew the distributor could be found in the café rather than in his nearby office.

One of the companies that I visited was a television sales outfit headed by a soft-spoken man named **Pedro Leda,** who had all the allure and charm of a Viennese aristocrat. After a friendly interview, I glanced out of the window of his office and commented on what a pleasant view he had, overlooking a handsome church tower.

Whereupon Leda, who was not shy of conceding some of the shortcomings of his country, commented:

"Ah, that church was the cause of all our troubles."

"Why is that?" I queried, thinking that perhaps his sympathies were anti-clerical.

"Well, way back in 1806 when Argentina was still a colony of Spain and was allied to the French under Napoleon, the British launched several invasions to seize the city. They met with popular resistance, and from the top of that church, that was being attacked, they filled cooking pots with burning oil and flung it down on the attacking British soldiers and helped to defeat the British attempt to seize the region. If the British had won that battle with the Spaniards and taken over Buenos Aires, we would now be as prosperous and developed as Canada or Australia!"

By the end of my fourth day in Buenos Aires I had met close to 20 leaders in the entertainment sector: film producers, distributors, exhibitors, television executives and thus could form a pretty good idea of the lay of the land and who were the key movers and shakers.

At the conclusion of my short sojourn I had managed to cull enough information to fill a notebook. From this and other sources I would subsequently be able write up a series of articles for my Latin American issue.

# Heading Northwards to New York

My swing through Latin America then continued with stops in Lima, Bogotá, Caracas and finally Mexico City, after which I headed to New York to spend Christmas with my family.

In Peru I was introduced to the *pisco sour,* but the pickings for *Variety* were few though we were entertained in the homes of two of the country's leading producers. It was while I was in Lima, on November 20, that in far-off Madrid **General Franco** died, aged 82, ending his decades-long dictatorship. Already before I left Madrid he had been ailing and was in and out of hospitals for three separate operations. Since I would not return to Madrid until January, I missed out on the impressive funeral held in the Palacio de Oriente where up to a half million mourners passed the Caudillo's coffin to pay their respects. and **Juan Carlos** was pronounced King.

In Bogotá, due to the high altitude, I had to rest in the lobby of the Tequendama hotel to catch my breath. In my room, next to the telephone, I found a card listing the medical services available 24 hours a day, complete with the rates for taking blood pressure, intravenous shots, nursing services in the hotel and oxygen.

In Caracas I spent a long boring weekend sitting around the Tamanaco hotel swimming pool, waiting for Monday to arrive; and in Mexico I booked into a hotel called the Fiesta Palace and came down with a terrible cold. All I remember is that for some reason there was a pervasive odor of gasoline in the bedroom. On subsequent trips I learned to lodge in the Hotel Presidente, located in the pseudo-European Zona Rosa. Near the hotel was a street lined with *al fresco* restaurants as well as a New York style delicatessen where I could help kill the Sundays reading a Victorian novel and munching on a pastrami sandwich. I toured some of the tourist sights including the Chapultepec Palace where Carlota and Maximilian once romped. *Variety* did have a correspondent in Mexico, named **Sam Abarbanel,** a crusty, haggard expatriate who was only minimally helpful and forthcoming. In later years I was able to appoint a lively, ingratiating stringer named **Paul Lenti** who filed excellent copy from the Aztec capital.

In the "Distrito Federal" I soon learned not to rely on the Beetle taxis to get around the city, since they were almost impossible to find free during rush hours, being so cheap. Instead I hired a chauffeur-driven limo outside the hotel, paid for by the hour, that took me the considerable distances to visit the film and television offices scattered around the sprawling metropolis. These included the Churubusco film studios, the Televisa and the government TV channel and a dubbing studio. Despite the eternally mild, polluted atmosphere, it was clear that the Yuletide season was upon us, for the supermarkets and malls were already decked out with Christmas decorations, which seemed rather jarring given the mild temperature.

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Then, after having spent the holidays in New York, in early January I embarked on a separate week-long trip to visit Miami and Puerto Rico, realizing that the coverage of the Hispanic scene must also include those two centers of Latino film and television, mostly the latter.

# Preparations in Madrid

Once back in Madrid, most of January and February were spent converting the ample notes taken during my trips into articles and typing follow-up letters to the many contacts I had made during my trips. I composed a house ad that ran in *Variety* announcing the date of the upcoming Latin issue, announcing that it would have a special "bonus" distribution at the MIP television market in April and at the film festival in May, both held in Cannes. I also contacted film and television companies in Spain, using my twin editorial and advertising hats. At the same time, I urged other European *Variety* offices, especially London, to contact companies that had dealings with Latin America.

# In Sime's Lair

On Sunday, February 29, 1976, I flew back to New York on Trans-World Airlines and checked into the Hotel Excelsior on West 79th Street. In the following years I would hang my hat at the far more pleasant Olcott Hotel on West 72nd Street, which became my "home away from home" in Gotham. The Olcott was an old-fashioned hostelry probably dating back to the 1920s, a little on the "worn" side, but it provided spacious suites with kitchenettes that enabled comfortable living in a part of town removed from the usual tourist crush. Its prices were modest, around $1,000 a week in the 1980'a, Within a few blocks of the hotel were dozens of convenient restaurants, several of them Chinese (the best was one on Columbus Avenue which had framed celebrities decorating its entrance, including one of Mayor Koch), a coffee shop on the corner of Columbus, several luncheonettes, a Greek diner on Amsterdam Avenue and 72nd Street where, sitting in booths you could dip into pea or chicken noodle soups with crackers on the side, roast turkey dinner with mashed potatoes and cranberry jelly, and for dessert apple or blueberry pie and coffee. On the corner, across 72nd Street, oppoiste the Sherman Square subway station was the time-honored Gray's Papaya stand, famous for its hot dogs (50 cents at that time).Nearby were shops that rented home video (Blockbuster and Tower), a large Barnes & Noble on Mitchel Square at the intersection of Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, two Loew's theatres within walking distance and Central Park, a half block away from the hotel, where the Boat House restaurant, with outdoor seating, beckoned. On special occasions, the Tavern on the Green in the park, with its delightful Crystal Room that in later years became a favorite venue to celebrate Christmas Eve.

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I had instructed potential advertisers in Latin America to have their copy in the New York office by March 1st, since the issue was scheduled to be out on March 31st. Previously I had mailed the bulk of the articles that were to run in the issue to New York to be processed. Some contributions had also been submitted by the correspondents in Latin America. I would thus have ample time in New York to put the finishing touches on the issue and see it through the press.

When I arrived at the familiar brownstone on West 46th Street Syd asked me what I would be needing during the time I was preparing the issue in the New York office. I told him a desk to work at, a typewriter and a telephone. He offered to hire a temporary secretary, but I told him that it was unnecessary, since by the time I explained what had to be done, I could do it myself.

Syd then suggested that I could use a room on the top floor, part of which was occupied by the telephone switchboard operators, but otherwise was unused. This room, I later learned, had once been *Variety's* founder, **Sime Silverman's,** personal den. The story ran that here he had entertained celebrities, ranging from the city's flamboyant mayor, **Jimmy Walker,** to a long string of female companions. At one time it was referred to by some of the staff as Chateau de Layem. That was back in the 1920's.

After climbing up the flights of steep stairs to the top floor, I entered a large room on the left side of which stood the switchboard, staffed by the two operators, **Peggy Michitsch** and **Joan Crowley,** who dutifully spent the hours plugging in and pulling out the wires that connected the in- and outgoing telephone calls to those in other parts of the building. This was their "domain" and included a hot pad for making coffee, a refrigerator where some basic food was stored, and a bathroom. There was also a cat that made its home there.

On the right side, upon entering, stood a huge table covered with books and dusty files and next to the windows looking down on 46th Street there was a good-sized desk, a chair and a telephone, which I took possession of and from where I would conduct my business in the coming weeks. An old manual typewriter was brought up to me by the office boy, along with company stationery and the required accessories. Not much light streamed through the window, since the building across the street rose high above the one I was in, and the grime on the window looked like it hadn't been cleaned since the time Sime occupied these quarters. From one floor in the building across the street I could sometimes hear the sound of musical instruments, presumably from some academy. Further down 46th Street was the High School of Performing Arts, of *Fame* renown.

Having settled in, I descended to the advertising department on what was called the "ground floor" but in fact was located four steps below street level. Two rows of desks occupied by the sales staff stretched to the back of the room from the storefront window on which appeared a large *Variety* logo in green, underneath which stood a blow-up of the front page of the current issue. Each of the sales staff, among which was one elderly lady, was provided with a dial phone.

I was presently introduced to a portly salesman in his 60s who I was told would follow up advertising leads in the New York Hispanic sector. I handed him a list of companies that I thought might be interested

and asked him to start contacting them. He nodded assent.

Further back in the room I then approached the man in charge of coordinating the art work and advertising and who laid out each week's paper, **Abie Torres.**

After introducing myself, I asked him, "Could I see what ads have come in so far for the Latin issue?"

Whereupon he checked through some folders and came up with the answer, "There aren't any."

No ads for my Latin issue had come in, though I had given March 1st as the deadline! And it was now Monday, March 1st! I remembered all the meetings in offices in Latin America, the luncheons with executives and sales chiefs, the promises, my tallies of how many ads I could count on obtaining that would justify the efforts and the company expense of months of travel.

I again mounted the five flights of stairs to my dusty eyrie and opened my card file which had all my contacts in Latin America. This was in March of 1976 and the facsimile machine, not to mention the desktop word processor, the computer and the Internet, had not come upon the world stage yet. It was still to be several more years before one or two of the reporters on the ground editorial floor started to use newfangled desktop computers and that *Variety* started to receive editorial copy via fax machines.

Some fifty companies in Latin America had *in principle* promised to take ads in the issue, ranging from a modest quarter page to the front and the back covers. In addition, space was expected to be taken from companies in Europe and the States.

I seized the receiver of the phone on my table and after flipping through my card file I picked one out. I then told Peggy, one of the telephone operators, that I wanted to put through a call to Brazil. The time for written letters and even for the telex or telegrams was past. A one on one live conversation with by contacts was now imperative.

The first on my list was the Brazilian government film agency Embrafilme in Rio which was handling a film made by one of the country's major internationally-minded, producers, **Luiz Carlos Barreto.** When I had been in Rio, after being given something of a runaround, I had managed to meet Barreto and his high-powered English-speaking wife, Lucy, who was amenable to promoting a feature he had recently made, *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands,* starring a sexy actress called **Sonia Braga,** a huge hit in Brazil.

Having given the phone number in Rio to Peggy, i took about twenty minutes before she called over to me that she had the Rio operator on the line, who was saying something in Portuguese. I picked up my phone and in my broken Portuguese told the Rio operator to ring Embrafilme. A short while later the Embrafilme operator got on the line, while I feared that at any moment we might be disconnected. I asked to speak to O Senhor **Farias,** the head of the company. After a short pause, Farias got on the line. "Yes, I remember you," he said to me. "Vareeyeté". I had left the rate card and technical specifications with him. He said his secretary might still have them. I reminded him that he had promised to take an ad for the Latin issue and once again explained what the issue was about, how important it was, that O Senhor Barreto had promised to take an ad for *Dona Flor.* He asked when the issue would be out and when the ad copy needed to be in New York. Within two weeks, I told him. He did know if he could have the ad ready by then, but he would try to send it with Varig Airlines to me by then. I thanked him, repeated the address in New York to where he had to send the ad. He confirmed that he would send one page, in black and white, for *Dona Flor* plus a two-page spread for other Embrafilme pictures.. I was in clover.

The process was then repeated hour after hour in the following days. Phone calls to Buenos Aires, Caracas, Lima, Bogotá, Mexico City, San Juan. When the connections got through I could at least communicate with those I called in Spanish, which I was fluent in, "Peter, I have the Argentine operator on the phone," Joan or Peggy would call and the connection to Mexico was made and I could talk to **Amaury Daumas,** the head of the OTI (Organización de la Television Iberoamericana) who I had interviewed in his office on the Calle Varsovia, and who had explained that "the OTI, *c'est moi*" (paraphrasing the famous words uttered by King Louis XIV, *L'état, c'est moi* -- The State is Me) which, when it appeared in my article caused him something of a critical backlash. The dapper Daumas confirmed he would send me a page ad posthaste.

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Across from the *Variety* office on 46th Street there was a luncheonette that had a steam table with a good assortment of Italo-American-style dishes, meatballs and spaghetti, lasagna, a fine assortment of cold cuts and salads to make sandwiches with, a coffee machine, soft drinks and half a dozen mica tables and chairs where you could munch your meal and be out in 20 minutes.

Nearby on Times Square at 46th street was one of the ubiquitous Howard Johnson's restaurants, famous for its 28 flavors of ice cream, that had a good salad bar and served hamburgers, sandwiches and cheese cake, though the latter failed to achieve the renown of the famed one at Lindy's, which by then had shuttered as had the more genteel-minded Shrafft's with its apron-clad waitresses and whiff of gentility. There were still a few Nedick's and Chock-Full-O-

Nuts lunch counters around in 1976, but they were in sharp decline and would soon yield to the burger chains and fast-food eateries.

Sometimes I would join one of the staffers and opt for a slightly higher-priced lunch at the Gaiety delicatessen on West 47th Street, opposite the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. There some of the muggs could spoon their matzo ball soups and dig into the corned beef sandwiches while sitting in one of the booths or at tables where waiters served them. On one occasion I spotted the popular playwright **Neil Simon,** an icon of Broadway hit comedies, paying his check at the cash register near the door, opposite the counter where a row of salamis dangled. Doubtless, many others of the show biz crowd around Times Square had luncheon at the Gaiety. In a way it was the successor to such famous turn-of-the-century gastronomical icons as Rector's and Shanley's on Times Square. It seems *Variety's* founder, **Sime Silverman,** preferred having his luncheons at the Astor Hotel, a landmark on the Square until it was torn down in 1967.

Alas, most of the New York delicatessens which in my youth were ubiquitous in the city have now passed into oblivion, mere memories in the culinary history of Gotham. But in 1976 in midtown Manhattan there were still the Carnegie, the Stage, Wolf's on the corner of 57th Street and Seventh Avenue, Kaplan's on 58th Street off Lexington, where the waiters wore red suspenders, and a half dozen other delicatessens. The last time I checked, the only old time delis left were Katz's on East Houston Street and Sarge's on Third Avenue and 37th St. charging what now seem astronomical prices for the standard pastrami on rye plus a "suggested" 20% tip and the city sales tax.

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While I continued to make phone calls to potential advertisers in Latin America, I also started to edit the contributions received from our correspondents in Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Mexico and updated the articles and information I had culled during my swing through Latinoland months earlier.

I then turned my attention to a sector of show business that had heretofore remained totally ignored by *Variety.* It was the rapidly-expanding Hispanic television market, largely headquartered only a few blocks from our New York office. I had never seen the slightest editorial coverage of that sector in any of the pages of the sheet. The Hispanic world lived side by side with the Anglo one but the two never interacted. There were Spanish-language newspapers in New York, and millions of Latinos listened to Spanish-language radio programs and watched television *novelas* and game shows each day hosted by Latino celebrities. There were Hispanic TV stations in a dozen American cities, including Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago. And almost none of their activities were reported by the Anglo media.

At that time two major Spanish-language outlets vied for dominance in the United States. I called the heads of both, requesting an interview with their "toppers" to be published in the forthcoming Latin American Entertainment Survey. The largest was the Spanish International Network, or SIN, owned by Mexico's giant Televisa, which prided itself as being "the Fourth TV Network (after ABC, CBS and NBC) with 17 stations across the country." In charge of US operations was a dapper Bostonian, **René Anselmo,** who had worked for Televisa for eight years in Mexico. Anselmo owned Hispanic TV stations in Phoenix and San Francisco. His office in 1976 was on Park Avenue, but later, as SIN expanded, he would move into spectacular offices on West 42nd Street. Upon entering these you found yourself in a huge atrium on one side of which stood a grand piano. Some of the staff quipped that it was known by many as "Anselmo's Folly" given the cost of the facility and its grandiose pretensions. At that time Anselmo's keenest interest was setting up PanAmSat, the first private television satellite connection, which he succeeded in launching later that year. Anselmo was amiable, suave, delighted to be interviewed by *Variety* and promised to take an ad in the Latin issue.

Then there was the picturesque ex-Cuban showman **Carlos Barba,** VP and General Manager (the "CEO" monicker had not become popular yet!) who ran a Hispanic TV station in New York, WNJU, Channel 47, "The Spanish-Speaking Station with the Bigger Reach and the Lower Rate Card", his ad would proclaim. Barba had the appearance of a playboy. He met me with a big smile, rattled off his station's accomplishments and reach. He had been an anchor on a local radio show, knew how to turn on the charm, and fully realized the clout *Variety* had. On a later occasion, when taking me out for lunch at a Cuban restaurant, when the proprietor joined our table, Carlos pressured him into also taking a full-page ad for his restaurant in an upcoming Latin issue, though non-show biz ads were a rarity in *Variety.* Needless to say, both Hispanic TV outlets were well reported by me in the forthcoming columns of my issue.

After several days of contacting my clients in Latinoland, I went to check what progress, if any, had been made by the salesman on the ground floor. He informed me that so far the leads had borne no fruit yet. I suspected that he had not made the slightest effort to follow them up. He was content to lay back on his laurels, as he had done in the many years he had been selling ads to the group of television clients that were his "territory" and which included some of the major companies in America. Moreover, I subsequently learned that the sales staff *did not work on commission* but on a fixed salary basis. Perhaps,

*Variety* being the leading, definitive hard news publication in the country, the thinking was that the ads were to an extent guaranteed, the clients' commitments ironclad, not requiring any sales pitches and urgings from the sales staff. After all, *Variety* was often referred to as the "Bible of Show Business" and there was no need to herald its clout in the entertainment sector. Those sitting at the desks on the ground floor, it seemed to me, were not the innovative entrepreneurs found in the overseas bureaus, many of them bi-lingual "hybrids", who were as adept in filing editorial copy as in coraling advertisers.

Given the salesman's lethargy, I then proceeded to contact some of the major American television companies such as Worldvision and Viacom myself, setting up a lunch with the latter's head of Latin American operations.

Little by little the ads started to flow in to 46th Street. A page from Time-Life Television simply saying "Muchas Gracias a nuestros amigos in Central and South Ameica"; from London came a double page for ITC Films saluting Latin American distributors; from Italy, Titanus, Eurolat (distributors of Rizzoli product in the States), MIFED, the yearly Milan film market; five pages for Mexican films from Conacine, the government film sales organization; and three pages advertising films from Spain; five pages from film producers and distributors from Brazil and even several pages of smaller ads from Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile and Honduras and Panama.

Included in my sales pitch was that the issue would receive a bonus distribution at the upcoming MIP-TV (Marché International de Programmes de Communication) television market held in Cannes in April and at the Cannes Film Festival in early May.

# Valley Stream

On Tuesday, March 30, early in the morning, I took the commuter train from Grand Central Station to Valley Stream, Long Island. The station was abustle, as it was every working day, with what one writer termed the "wage slaves" arriving from throughout the Metropolitan area to put in their eight hours of labor in the offices and skyscrapers of the great city. As the eternal outsider, I observed how most of the men were well-dressed, with suits and ties, leather shoes, the femmes in skirts and high-heels. The snack bars and newsstands were doing a lively business and there were always one or two people hovering around the Information booth in the center of the vast ground floor, as well as lines in front of the row of counters selling tickets to the outlying stations. There was a pleasant hum of purposeful, businesslike bustle, a tiny sliver of the daily weekday routine that embraced the working years and lives of millions who had not escaped from what some considered to be the "rat race", the eternal striving for wealth and security. The scene at Grand Central brought to mind several old films in which the Station was used as a key scenario, such as *The Clock* with **Judy Garland** and **Robert Walker,** *The House on Carroll Street* and by extension, even the 1953 Italian classic, **Vittorio de Sica's** *Stazione Termini* with **Jennifer Jones** and **Montgomery Cliff.** There was even for me a distant filmic whiff of that great British classic, *Brief Encounter,* most of which is set in a provincial station in England.

However, for my part, I was no longer part of that New York scene anymore. I could contemplate it as an expatriate, seeing the spectacle with detachment, knowing I would soon be returning to my routine in Madrid, working out of my comfortable apartment, making my own hours, calling my own shots, doing it "my way".

The commuter train took close to an hour to get to the Valley Stream station, with few people in the compartment, since the crush of commuters were travelling in the opposite direction. Outside the train window the Long Island suburban communities slid by, two-family houses, parking lots, shopping centers.

At the Valley Stream station I walked down a flight of stairs to the street level. There were a few food stalls and a taxi stand. Shortly I arrived at the Balan Graphics facility where the paper was laid out each Tuesday. It was a large, flat one-story building inside which a dozen or so young women, with the help of the *Variety* section heads, pasted down strips of articles on large adhesive panels placed on spacious wooden, slightly tilted, desks. Neon lights overhead, no windows in the large room. Occasionally a telephone on the side of the room rang, giving last-minute orders concerning the contents of the issue being laid out. At a separate table sat three or four of the reporters. Every now and then a page proof would be handed to them, and one would stop reading his newspaper or interrupt a game of low-stakes poker he was engaged in with the others to start checking the page.

One of the half dozen ladies that pasted up the editions, **Marge Prezioso,** in an article in the *Variety Souvenir Album,* recalled:

"The type had to be developed; it came out on long rolls of film. Each story was numbered for identification on the front in black. On the back of the film, in non-reproducing blue ink, a number was also put in case the stories got mixed up, which they sometimes did. Wax was our best friend and our worst enemy. It was easy to

move stories around, but if things weren't burnished enough they could fall off. Stories were xeroxed and sent off to Manhattan for proof reading by messenger. Stories from *Variety* arrived at Valley Stream by teletype, fax or messenger. Sometimes the messengers fell asleep on the train, missed their stop and wound up out in Babylon, a Long Island suburb. Ads had to be type-"spec"ed, which meant that each and every word had to be labelled as to size, typeface, width and leading. The typesetters would input this information using codes. We only had two screens that could actually show what the finished ads looked like. Needless to say this led to some tension between typesetting and paste-up when the type didn't fit. What a difference from today when all you do is highlight something, and it can be changed. At the beginning our typesetting equipment was old. It would break down for hours at a time. We made the best of this and went out to dinner at the Steak Loft until it was fixed. To work at Balan you had to know how to knit, crochet, play cards, or be an avid reader."

**Syd Silverman** was already on hand at Balan when I arrived that morning, and he led me over to the desks where the pages of "my" Latin issue were to be laid out. The broken-page advertisements had already been pasted down with wax on each page. One of the girls, toting an x-acto knife, brought over strips of printed text containing the articles written by me and others on our typewriters and with Syd's guidance and my occasional input regarding the importance or not of a given item, affixed them to the board, until the page was full. If an article was too long to fit in a given space, it was "jumped" to a catch-all page further back in the Latin section. Such "jumping" was frowned upon by many publications, but was standard practice in *Variety.*

Promptly at noon all activity at the plant ceased and the reporters and Syd put on their coats and sallied forth to have lunch at the Valbrook diner, a ten-minute walk past suburban houses. I was told that Syd sometimes would stop on the way to a local bar for a shot of Dewar's, his favorite whisky.

The diner was a classical, upscale specimen in the shape of a railroad car, with booths and tables and aproned waitresses serving the tables. Syd's favorite was a chicken salad sandwich, but American delicacies such as Yankee pot roast with mashed potatoes and peas, roast turkey dinner, meatloaf, blueberry pie and other local delicacies were on the menu. After about an hour the crew returned to Balan Graphics and when the last page proof had been checked the muggs filed off to the train station that took them to Grand Central.

The issue was completed. The "weekly miracle" had again been achieved. The Latin American entertainment section of the 128-page issue ran a whopping 59 pages of which 37 pages were advertising, plus the back cover, taken by the British conglomerate EMI. A rousing success! It comprised 130 short and long news articles.

The following morning, as I passed through Times Square, I could see the issue on one of the newsstands. The front page proclaimed "Hispano Show Biz: Young Cyclone". Underneath appeared my by-line! I had risen from being a local scribbler and editor for expatriates in Madrid to being visible on the kiosks in the heart of the world of entertainment, also visible throughout the world in the 50,000 copies of the paper that circulated. It was my moment of glory and achievement.

Syd greeted me when I came into the office and later we had lunch together in a small Italian restaurant down the block called La Strada. Sitting in a booth, after cocktails and a light lunch, I suggested that perhaps in the future I could do another Latin section in two years. To which Syd replied that it should be done on a yearly basis. And so it was.

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For the following 25 years, until 1999, each November I would take my swing through Latin America and the U.S. Hispanic centers, winding up at the old building on 46th Street, until the paper was sold in 1987 and the venerable brownstone was demolished. After that I would hang my hat each March in the new digs on Park Avenue South and finally in an office on West 17th Street.

The Latin sections were profitable ventures for both *Variety* and for myself. Moreover, they enabled me see old college friends and visit my mother for a month each year. As for Latinoland, I have never returned there since then. But the memories of the places I visited and the many people I met linger on in my memory.