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He made MS a film star



FEW REMEMBER Ellis R. Dungan (not Duncan) in Tamil Nadu today, not even in the film world. But I wonder whether there are enough of them around to organise a memorial meeting to recall the film-maker who, between 1936 and 1950, made a string of Tamil hits without knowing a word of Tamil. Dungan, an Irish-American who passed away a few weeks ago in his native U.S.A., had, before he left India, contributed several classics to the Tamil Film. He was 92.

M. S. Subbulakshmi starred in four of his films, *Seva Sadanam*, *Sakunthalai*, *Savithri* and *Meera*, and the two that Dungan directed turned out to be Indian film classics. MS's brilliant portrayal of Meera Bai, the Rajput queen, who renounced the world and dedicated her

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life to Lord Krishna, had producers queuing at her door pleading with her to act in their films. But with *Meera*, MS bid adieu to the screen. That a black and white film could be made "visually opulent" was entirely due to the technical brilliance of Dungan (an excellent cameraman in his own right) and his cinematographer, Jiten Banerjee. Using a mould of MS's face, they shot it from various angles over and over again, using a variety of lighting techniques. After watching these shots for hours, Dungan and Banerjee chose the best to use in the film to create what has been described as Meera's "ethereal, angelic beauty".

Dungan, who stumbled into Tamil films by sheer chance, was Ohio-born and California-educated. He, Michael Ormalov and Mani Lal Tandon were classmates and friends at the University of Southern California, studying the then new medium, Film. Tandon, whose family was thinking of establishing a studio and producing films in Bombay, persuaded his friends to return with him to work in India. The Tandon family's plans, however, fell through and Ormalov went back, but Dungan stayed on to watch Tandon direct a Tamil film in Calcutta. When Tandon was invited to do another Tamil film, this time in Coimbatore, he said he was busy, but recommended his friend "from Hollywood". And Dungan found himself making *Sathi Leelavathi* (in 1936). MGR played a small role in it, the first time he was seen on screen.

During most of his stay in India, Dungan stayed at the Spencer Hotel that was to become the Ambassador. The Spencer was housed in *Ameer Bagh*, one of the palaces of the Nawab of Arcot that passed through several hands before it became the Elphinstone Hotel. Eugene Oakshott, who took over Spencer & Co in 1882, began expanding and diversifying its operations in 1891 by buying the Connemara Hotel and in 1909, added the Elphinstone to his growing empire, changing its name to the Spencer. Many a story is told of this residential hotel — that eventually became part of the Indian Overseas Bank property and was pulled down in 1987 — and one of them is of its almost permanent resident, Dungan.

A stroll-on part in *Sakunthalai* was played by a lion cub that Dungan took a fancy to and decided to adopt. He'd keep his pet in a cage in his room at night, but tether it to a tree in the hotel garden during the day, not far from that beautiful colonnade of Royal Palms that lined the driveway. But when a Leo that had grown fast on a healthy diet, one day snapped his strap and bounded after the guests, the police turned up and threatened to shoot him, holding their fire only when they heard he belonged to the "great Dungan". They however had Dungan find a new home for Leo, and quiet returned to Spencer's. As for Dungan, he returned to reading in verbatim translation in English every instruction and every word written and

spoken and sung in Tamil, for whatever film he was making, in order to keep firm control of what finally emerged. He even vetted the brilliant script Mu. Karunanidhi wrote for *Manthri Kumari* in 1949/50. Having watched its success, Dungan returned to the U.S. for personal reasons, keeping himself busy thereafter advising film-makers shooting films in India and making historical documentaries himself almost into his last days.

George Deliagnis, who was with the USIS in Madras not so long ago, settled in Madras to write a book on Dungan, working with Randor Guy. Unfortunately, Deliagnis suddenly died, but Randor Guy continues the work. It should be a fitting memorial to one who helped make Tamil cinema more professional and more widely noticed.

S.MUTHAIH

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