

One is already gone, the other is not yet

A scene from Ilf and Petrov's *The Little Golden Calf* (1931)

For those of you who have not read one of the greatest Soviet satirical novels, the hero is a conman named Ostap Bender. Ostap is known as "the great schemer" thanks to his ability to fleece various characters during the New Economic Policy, when wealth was usually illicit and hard to keep. Ostap's own native optimism left him vulnerable to swindling in turn, however. In this scene, Bender has determined to break into the film industry, and he shows up at the First Black Sea Film Studio with a screenplay in hand. With dozens of assistants, administrators, assistant directors, lighting personnel, editors, writers, and others milling about, Ostap simply joins the flow, adjusting to circumstances as always. Having adopted the proper tempo, he finds himself running head-to-head with the script manager.

"A screenplay!" cried Ostap.

"What kind?" asked the script manager, stomping his firm trotters.

"A good one!" answered Ostap, sticking out his chest.

"I'm asking you, what kind? Silent or sound?"

"Silent."

Casually extending his legs in thick stockings, the script manager skirted Ostap to one side and shouted:

"It's unnecessary!"

"How do you mean, unnecessary?" asked the greater schemer, starting to jump heavily.

"That's how it is! There aren't many movies yet. Take it up with the sound guys."

They both stopped momentarily, looked at each other dumbfoundedly and ran off in different directions. In five minutes Ostap, waving a screenplay, ran up to the congenial crew, between two trotting consultants.

"Screenplay!" announced Ostap, breathing heavily.

The consultants, amicably fiddling the levers on the equipment, turned to Ostap:

"What kind of screenplay?"

"Sound."

"It's unnecessary," answered the consultants, setting in motion.

"What do you mean, unnecessary?"

“There’s just no need. There is no sound film yet.”

Within half an hour of conscientious trotting around, Bender realized the delicate state of affairs at the First Black Sea Film Studio. The whole delicateness was that silent film no longer worked in view of the impending era of sound film, and sound film did not work yet due to organizational problems associated with the elimination of the era of silent films.

At the height of the working day, when the racing of assistants, consultants, experts, administrators, directors, adjutants, lighting personnel, screenwriters, and keepers of the large cast-iron seal reached the agility of the once famous “Strongman,” a rumor spread that somewhere in some room there was a man who was assembling sound films in short order. Ostap leaped as fast as he could into the large office and stopped, struck by the silence. A small man with a Bedouin beard and a gold pince-nez with a cord was sitting sideways at the desk. Bending down, he pulled off his boots with effort.

“Greetings, comrade!” the great schemer cried loudly.

But the man did not answer. He took off his boots and started to shake the sand out of them.

“Greetings!” repeated Ostap. “I’ve brought the screenplay!”

“The man with the Bedouin beard unhurriedly donned his boots and silently began lacing them up. Once finished, he turned to his papers and, closing one eye, started to draw bubbly doodles.

“Why are you silent?” roared Ostap with such force that the telephone on the movie producer’s desk jingled.

Only then did the movie producer raise his head, looked at Ostap, and said:

“Please speak louder. I can’t hear.”

“Write notes to him,” advised the man floating alongside the consultant in a striped vest, “he is deaf.”

Ostap sat down at the desk and wrote on a scrap of paper:

“Are you a sound man?”

“Yes,” answered the deaf man.

“I’ve brought a sound film screenplay. It’s called “The Neck,” a people’s tragedy in six acts,” Ostap quickly wrote.

The deaf man looked at the note through his golden pince-nez and said:

“Marvelous! We’ll draw you into the work right away. We need fresh forces.”

“I’m happy to cooperate. What are you thinking regarding an advance?” wrote Bender.

“‘The Neck,’ that’s just what we need!” said the deaf man. “Keep your seat here, I’ll be right back. Just don’t go anywhere. I’ll be just a minute.”

The deaf man grabbed the screenplay of the film ‘The Neck’ and skipped out of the room.

“We’ll draw you into the sound group,” he cried, disappearing behind the door. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

After this Ostap sat for half an hour in the office, but the deaf man did not return. Only once he stepped out into the stairway and got caught up in the tempo did Ostap realize that the deaf man had already left long ago in the car and would not return that day. And he generally would never return here, because he had suddenly been transferred to Uman to manage cultural work among the cartmen. But worst of all was that the deaf man had carried away the screenplay of the film ‘The Neck.’ The great schemer withdrew from the circle of runners, whose movement was ever accelerating, and sank down in a daze on a bench, leaning against the shoulder of a doorman who was sitting there.

“What about me!” said the doorman suddenly, developing a thought that had evidently long been bothering him. “The director’s assistant Terentiev told me to grow out my beard. If you do, he says, you’ll play Nebuchadnezzar or Balthazar in a film, I don’t remember the name. And I grew it out, you see, what a beard, patriarchal! But what do I do with it now? The director’s assistant says: there won’t be any more silent films, and he says that in sound films you won’t be able to get a part, your voice is unpleasant. So here I sit with a beard, ugh, like a jackass! It would be a shame to shave it, but it’s embarrassing to keep. That’s my life.”

“Are they shooting anything here?” asked Bender, gradually coming to his senses.

“What kind of shooting could there be?” the bearded doorman answered importantly. “In the summer they shot a silent film from Roman life [i.e., perhaps too decadent]. To this day they can’t get out of lawsuits in case of criminality.”

“Why do they all run around like that?” inquired the great schemer, gesturing at the staircase.

“Not everyone runs here,” remarked the doorman, “comrade Spouseman there doesn’t run. A business-like man. I’m thinking about stopping by regarding the beard, to find out how they’ll pay for the beard: by declaration or separate order...”

Having heard the word “order” [a neologism in this form], Ostap went to Spouseman. The doorman had not lied. Spouseman did not jump about from

floor to floor, he did not wear an alpine beret, he didn't even wear golf spats. Ostap's gaze rested pleasantly on him.

He met the great schemer with great chilliness.

"I'm busy," he said in a screechy voice. "I can only give you two minutes."

"That will do quite nicely," began Ostap. "My screenplay, 'The Neck'..."

"Shorter," said Spouseman.

"The screenplay 'The Neck'..."

"Can you say clearly what you need?"

"'The Neck'..."

"Shorter. How much?"

"I was at this deaf fellow..."

"Comrade! If you don't tell me now how much it costs, I'll have to ask you to leave. I haven't the time."

"Nine hundred rubles," muttered the great schemer.

"Three hundred!" Spouseman declared categorically. "You'll take it and be on your way. And keep in mind you stole an extra minute and a half from me."

With a sweeping signature Spouseman dashed off a note to the bookkeeper, gave it to Ostap, and grabbed the telephone.

Emerging from the bookkeeper, Ostap put the money in his pocket and said:

"Nebuchadnezzar was right. There's only one man worth doing business with here, and that's Spouseman."

[[source](#)]