

*Geniuses are like thunderstorms.
They go against the wind,
terrify people, cleanse the air.*

Søren Kierkegaard

Charles G. Bluhdorn:

The emotional, eccentric, and *sui generis* visionary changed the future of the film industry and of the Dominican Republic.

BY TATIANA PAGÉS

Legend has it that Charles Bluhdorn got his first job in America at the age of 16 by making a telephone call from Columbus Circle in New York City. Years later, to celebrate his success, the 43-story headquarters of the company he built, Gulf & Western Inc., would be located in that same place. It will be a landmark, he said. And it was.

The Man and the Company

Charles G. Bluhdorn was born in Vienna in 1926 and did, in fact, come to America at the age of 16. He later married his French-born wife, Yvette, and they had two children, Paul

and Dominique. He was a European with the classic immigrant's golden dream; for him America was a place where opportunities abounded and everything was possible.

Early in his career Bluhdorn worked as a commodities trader, and his work took him to a number of countries, including Brazil, giving him his first taste of Latin America. Later he entered the auto-parts distribution industry. In the late 1950's, he began acquiring businesses; his purchase of the Michigan Bumper Company, in 1958, was the first step in the launch of the Gulf & Western conglomerate. An amalgam of diverse companies ranging from sports teams to sugar mills, Gulf & Western ultimately became a firm with divisions in manufacturing, communications, consumer products, agricultural products, natural resources, and financial services, and by 1970 had become the 64th largest industrial corporation in America, with annual sales of \$1.6 billion, assets exceeding \$4 billion, and some 85,000 employees. But back then, the group included New Jersey



Zinc, Consolidated Cigar Corporation, Madison Square Garden, Paramount Pictures, and the publishing house of Simon & Schuster.

Bluhdorn also spent much of his time trading commodities for Gulf & Western. He amassed a portfolio of investments for the company that was almost as extensive as the company itself. He saw a challenge, an opportunity, in every business situation. He was quoted as saying, "People say this can't be done... well, that's the best way of convincing me to do it." He was impatient, active, audacious, and driven. To some he was

An Insider's Perspective

"the mad Austrian," a hostile-takeover mogul; to others, he was the giver of rib-crushing bear hugs, a man of great generosity, loyalty, and courage. Dominique says of her father, "He was a controversial person, disliked by some, misunderstood by many, and loved by those who had a chance to work closely with him. His life revolved around work."

Charles Bluhdorn's entrepreneurial style was based on his belief in people. A leader for social good and a man of integrity and great intuition, Bluhdorn gravitated to creativity and passionately fostered genius. He sought out extraordinary people of all sorts. When he went to Cuba to meet with Fidel Castro, he was summoned to speak to Fidel in the middle of the night. Afterward, those who accompanied him on that long night session weren't sure which man had talked more.

To his daughter, he was "incredibly energetic and enthusiastic, a combination of visionary businessman and warm and loving father. He had a remarkable ability to seek out and employ some of the most talented and creative business executives, especially in the entertainment field."

The Movies

The acquisition of Paramount Pictures, in 1966, represented a significant challenge for Bluhdorn. Paramount, then in a difficult financial situation, needed a fresh approach to movie making. Bluhdorn installed Robert Evans as head of production and restored Paramount's reputation for commercial success with such outstanding films as "The Godfather," "Rosemary's Baby," "Love Story," "Chinatown," and "The Odd Couple," along with the major hits "Saturday Night Fever," "Grease," and "Star Trek."

Charles Bluhdorn loved movie production. It was not typical for a businessman managing the scope of operations that Gulf & Western encompassed to be so involved in the creative process, yet there he was, meeting with the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Redford, Warren Beatty, and Costa-Gavras. Michael Korda, editor in chief of Simon & Schuster in 1975, wrote, in a December 16, 1996, *New Yorker* article, "[Bluhdorn] was made for the movie business, and it for him. He loved taking risks... he recognized talent.... He was totally involved in the process, and if he was a monumental pain in the ass and a tyrant, these were just the qualities

that were ... lacking in most studios.... Bluhdorn loved Hollywood, and the glamour that went with it, ... the competition ... [and] the opportunity to spar with egos that were even bigger than his.... [T]he quickest way to gain his respect was to disagree with him, if you had your facts right and were willing to stick up for them."

Dominique observes, "Some of the most talented entertainment and publishing executives worked as a team under my father, including Barry Diller, Michael Eisner, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Frank Mancuso at Paramount, and Dick Snyder and Joni Evans at Simon & Schuster, to mention a few. After his death they all went on to have distinguished careers and run important companies."

Christian Ferry, a French film producer who worked closely with Bluhdorn for decades, says of him, "He was fascinated by the movie business, ... and there is no doubt that had he dedicated himself only to the movie business he would have been a great producer, because he had the imagination, the fantasy, the sense of the *spectacle dramatique* that are the marks of the talent of a producer...."



“Several steps had to be taken shortly after the acquisition of Paramount. First, he had to produce movies that had been chosen by his predecessors, movies that were huge write-offs such as ‘Darling Lili,’ ‘Monte Carlo Rally.’... With the slate clean,” Ferry says, “he was able to choose the directors and movies he felt worked, leading to the success of ‘Love Story,’ ‘Rosemary’s Baby,’ ‘The Godfather,’ and ‘Chinatown.’”

“It is impossible to say what Paramount would have been without Bluhdorn,” says Ferry, “but it is due to him and the choices he made that this company was an industry giant during his time. As a businessman he was inventive and fulgurous, always a step in front of his adversaire. Charles’s policy was to finance movies that didn’t need extraordinary sums of money. This worked more successfully in France, through the Paramount subsidiary Marianne Productions. The resulting films, Louis Malle’s “Le Souffle au coeur” and “Lacombe Lucien” and Bertrand Tavernier’s “Que la fête commence” proved that Charles’s vision was right on track: the movies were profitable to all involved.”

Ferry says that Bluhdorn changed the lives of many, including producer Stanley Jaffe, Robert Evans, Barry Diller, and Dick Snyder. “He helped install the Czech film director Milos Forman in the US. He gave Francis Ford Coppola the opportunity to make ‘The Godfather,’ brought together Costa-Gavras and Mario Vargas Llosa, had detailed discussions with Mario Puzo about scenes in ‘The Godfather’ and ‘The Godfather: Part II.’ He helped Dino de Laurentiis with the flailing ‘King Kong.’ He helped all of them become better by giving them the opportunity to use their talent and abilities.”

In an article in the January 6, 2008, The Hollywood Interview, Robert Evans describes his own memories of Bluhdorn: “I thought I was about to be fired. So I had Mike Nichols shoot this 40-minute film for me, which

I presented to the unsmiling, 18-member board of Gulf & Western (Paramount’s then-owner) in New York, convincing them that Paramount would be the No. 1 studio in town after the release of ‘Love Story’ and ‘The Godfather.’ After I screened it, Charlie Bluhdorn, my boss, called me into his office and told me to go back to work. I said, ‘But Charlie, I resigned.’ He said, ‘Whaddya want, more money?’ I said, ‘I don’t want another dime from you. I want complete control.’ He says, ‘Evans, are you crazy? I can’t do that? It’s against all corporate rules.’ I said, ‘OK, I’m going. Goodbye.’ He said, ‘Get back here!’ So Charlie goes back in before the board. After an hour, he comes back. ‘Okay, Evans, you got what you want. It’s your shop. You better have a lotta mazel, Evans! Now get to work!’”

According to Paul and Dominique, their father had a romantic view of movies. He really thought people wanted to see simple but poignant stories that were well acted and produced. He was influenced by a generation of grand and great movies like “Dr. Zhivago” and “Lawrence of Arabia,” two of his favorites. He had great respect for Francis Ford Coppola, who directed the “Godfather” trilogy for Paramount, but he was also impressed with young filmmakers like Terrence Malick. A December 1995 article in *Los Angeles Magazine* quotes Paul, who worked for many years in the movie business: “Terry seemed very much the artist, which my father enjoyed.” And Dominique says, “When our father went to the screening of ‘Days of Heaven,’ one of Terry’s early movies, he just adored the gorgeous cinematography and the lushness of the film.”

The Dominican Republic

One of Gulf & Western’s early acquisitions was the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company, which owned, among other things, a very large tract of underdeveloped land in the Dominican Republic. Through this purchase, Bluhdorn came to know and love the country and people of the Dominican Republic and the area of La Romana in particular. Ariela Storniolo, who worked



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with Bluhdorn 36 years ago, recalls, “We would drive together to the bateyes—he loved going there and talking to the people.”

Bluhdorn dreamed that the Dominican Republic would become a mecca for filmmaking, and once Gulf & Western began operations in the Dominican Republic, he encouraged everyone he knew to buy land in the newly created Casa de Campo resort complex. He wanted Paramount films to be shot in the Dominican Republic whenever possible, even if the infrastructure didn’t yet exist. He built a villa that was known as the Paramount House, to be used by company executives and film luminaries. When Dino De Laurentiis and Silvana Mangano built their home in Casa de Campo, they hired Roberto Copa to design it, and Bluhdorn promptly got Copa involved in the design of Altos de Chavón, an arts village that he was beginning to develop in the area.

Bluhdorn built Altos de Chavón because he fell in love with the site, high above the Chavón River, and envisioned a place where artists could live and work, a place that would showcase Dominican talent, where tourists could come and get a feel for the local culture. It was the beginning of cultural tourism, the idea that a place like Chavón could generate business from tourism. Bluhdorn was inspired by the look of the villages of the south of Spain and France, places where artists lived and worked and sold their products.

He was involved with every aspect of the realization of Altos de Chavón. He wanted to create a dynamic cultural center: the village would comprise artists’ studios, galleries, a museum, shops, restaurants, and an amphitheater. The original concept and blueprints for the buildings were drawn up by the Dominican architects José Antonio Caro and Tony Caro, his son. Roberto Copa, the Italian designer, understood what the feel of this village should be, and most importantly how to work with the artisans of La Romana. In the course of helping Bluhdorn’s vision a reality, Copa had a huge impact on the local craftsmen, teaching them new designs and new techniques. As they executed their work with local materials, Copa took their talent and capabilities to a new level.



Storniolo says of Copa, “Roberto’s concept came from his being an international set designer. It was very different from the typical approach to building. Copa was relentlessly demanding; he wanted work only of the high-

est quality, and it was difficult because at the time he didn’t speak Spanish, only Italian. But he brought the best out of the artisans he worked with, and today there are many who are known throughout the Dominican Republic, like José Ignacio Morales “El Artístico,” who can trace the beginnings of their art to the time spent with Copa. He put the Dominican Republic on the tourism map. Few thought he could, but he did.”



Dominique, who is president of the Altos de Chavón Cultural Center Foundation, says, “Now, thirty years later, when I am in Altos and I hear the tour groups being told excitedly by their guide, «This place was built by a man who owned a big American company. He built it as a gift for his 16-year-old daughter!» I always approach those groups and begin to clarify. «The man

you are referring to was my father. He didn’t own any company. He was the chairman and chief executive of Gulf & Western, a publicly traded company. He didn’t own Chavón, and in no way was it a gift!”

Dominique’s husband, Hatuey De Camps, describes Bluhdorn’s contribution to the Dominican Republic this way: “He was the one who developed La Romana, with the country’s first industrial free zone and with the very advanced vision he had for developing tourism in the country. He had an enormous impact on our agricultural industries, and clearly also on the real estate of the region.”

Gulf & Western’s investments in the Dominican Republic consisted primarily of the Central Romana Corporation (the sugar company), and later the Casa de Campo resort and Altos de Chavón. Today the Altos de Chavón School of Design, the Regional Museum of Archaeology, and Chavón’s other educational and cultural activities are an important part of Bluhdorn’s legacy. The School of Design, founded in 1983 to meet the growing commercial demands of the Dominican Republic, has graduated university-level professionals specializing in the industrial application of art and design for more than a quarter century.

Stephen Kaplan, Rector of the Altos de Chavón School of Design for the past 30 years, remembers, “Charles Bluhdorn believed in the power of creative people’s passions. Besides building Chavón, an architectural landmark that continues to attract tourism to La Romana,

he was the guiding force behind the archaeology museum, which has raised people’s consciousness about the country’s history. And when he and I talked about an art and design school, he made it clear that our school should enable its graduates to have a role in the development of the country, to apply art and design to industry and commerce. He wanted the school to hum with the life that students bring to a place, but without the berets and bohemians in garrets.”

The School of Design has now empowered well over a thousand young people as designers and artists, many of whom have continued their studies at Parsons School of Design in New York. “We’ve been formally affiliated with Parsons since the beginning,” says Kaplan; “for us it was an ideal match-up.”

Bluhdorn’s contributions to the Dominican Republic are many. His optimism and enthusiasm for the country during the early 1970’s were significant. The sugar industry worldwide was at an important high, and he spent a lot of his time very lucratively trading sugar. His interest in developing the tourism industry was crucial, as evidenced by the development of the hotel and real estate operations of Casa de Campo. He wanted the Dominican Republic to have a strong presence in New York, so he supported the creation of the Dominican Tourist Information Center in New York City. He established the industrial free zone in La Romana, which was critical to the economic development of the area and served as a model for others. He was passionate about the country, its people, and its future.



A Dream Fulfilled

In 1983, at the age of 56, with Gulf & Western ranked 61st among the Fortune 500 corporations in the United States, its Paramount subsidiary operating successfully, the Dominican investments thriving, and Altos de Chavón about to launch the school that would change the lives of so many Dominicans, Charles Bluhdorn died on a plane flying out of his beloved La Romana.

The small group that attended Bluhdorn’s funeral reflected the character and diversity of his life. In addition to his immediate family and executives from the Dominican Republic, movie industry magnates and

many other associates and friends, including Henry Kissinger, were present.

Charles Bluhdorn was controversial and eccentric, but a man for whom the word “impossible” did not exist. His enthusiasm and his passion for work and ideas were contagious, and the influence of his life’s work is undeniable. His achievements have left their indelible mark, and not only on the movie industry.



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