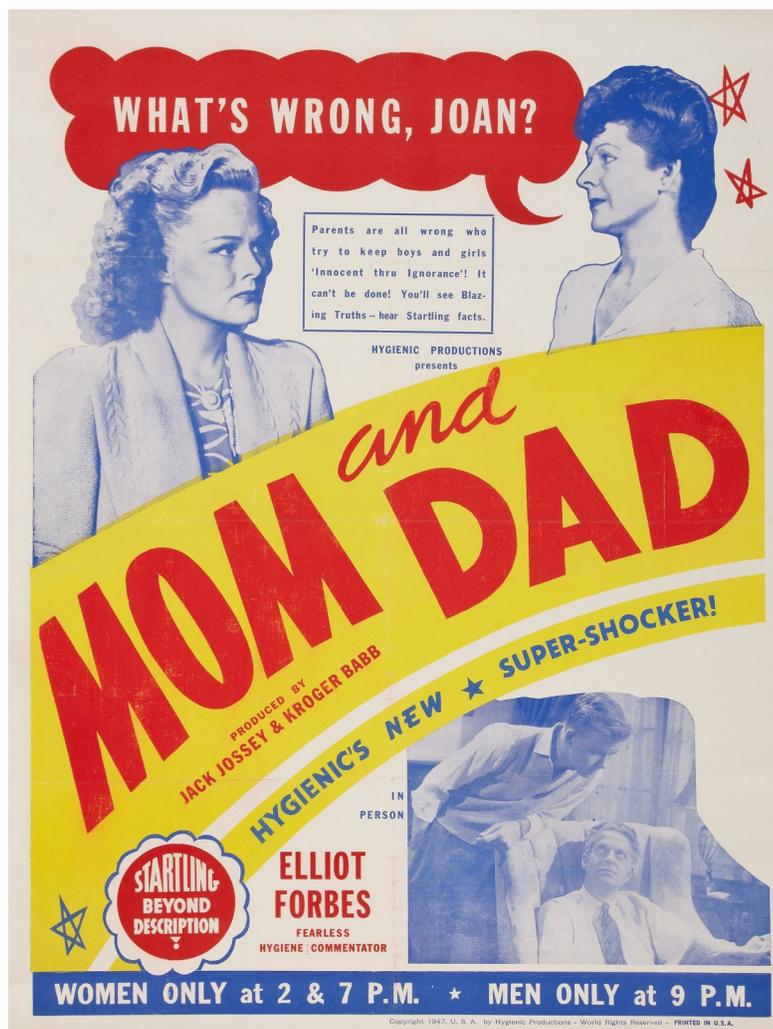


# Mom and Dad

By Eric Schaefer

Producer, distributor, and promoter Howard W. (Kroger) Babb was, first and foremost, a showman. Billing himself at different times in his career as “America’s Fearless Young Showman” and “Mr. Pihsnamwohs” (showmanship spelled backwards), his greatest talent may have been the relentless promotion of Kroger Babb. But his most enduring film legacy remains “Mom and Dad” (1945), a sex hygiene feature released during the waning months of World War II that became one of the biggest exploitation movies of all time. Although now largely forgotten, it made \$16 million in rentals, more than blockbusters like “The Best Years of Our Lives” (1946), and was only outperformed by Walt Disney’s animated features during the 1940s. “Mom and Dad” was one of the most widely seen films of its time, a fact made all the more startling because it had no stars, courted controversy, lacked a Production Code seal, was condemned by the Catholic Legion of Decency, and was barred in many states with censor boards.

Babb was born in Ohio and raised and educated in the town of Wilmington. Promotion was in his blood from an early age and he served as “cheer leader” at Wilmington High School and Wilmington College. He was a sports writer and ad manager for the town’s newspaper before becoming publicity director for several theater circuits and promoting traveling stage shows. In 1939 Babb entered a partnership with Howard Russell Cox and Howard Underwood who were peddling a roadshow attraction called “Dust to Dust.” The core of the program was Brian Foy’s 1934 film “High School Girl,” about the travails of a the titular character who, because her parents have failed to tell her the facts of life, gets pregnant, bringing shame to the family. Clinical reels showing childbirth footage and venereal disease were included with the presentation as well as a lecture by Cox on “The Evils of Sex Intolerance.” “Dust to Dust Attractions” was based in Wilmington, with Babb serving as General Manager. Over time he itched to produce a “modern” hygiene film. Unable to interest his partners in the project, Babb joined with J.S. Jossey of Cleveland, a Monogram stockholder, to produce “Mom and Dad” for their new firm Hygienic Productions. The film was written by Mildred Horn (whom Babb would leave his wife to marry) and shot



*Hygienic Productions promoted the film with posters like this throughout its long distribution life.*

on the Monogram lot for less than \$65,000. Directed by William “One-Shot” Beaudine, it had production values of typical of Monogram’s B-movie product.

“Mom and Dad” covered the same ground as “High School Girl.” The film opens with a “square-up,” a title crawl that justifies presenting the sensitive subject of sex hygiene on screen. “This problem,” it concludes, “is a challenge to every Mom and Dad. If our story points the way to a commonsense solution and saves one girl from unwed motherhood or one boy from the ravages of social disease it will have been well told!” Joan Blake (June Carlson) is a high school girl in the average town of Centerville. Her prudish mother, Sarah (Lois Austin), refuses to tell Joan about the facts of life. Joan falls head-over-heels for the visiting Jack Griffith (Bob Lowell), a recent prep school graduate and flyer. One night the couple pull off the road on the way home and “go too far.” The next day Carl Blackburn (Hardie Albright) answers a few questions about “student romances” in his in biology class, explaining that many young girls have spoiled their

whole lives “by making just one mistake. Not only that, she’s brought shame to her family.” Joan fidgets as if the teacher’s words are aimed directly at her. When Sarah learns that Blackburn has talked about social hygiene in class she sees to it that he is fired. A month passes and Joan realizes that she is pregnant – and learns that Jack has been killed in a plane crash. With nowhere to turn, she tells her brother Dave (Jimmy Clark) of her predicament. Dave goes to see Blackburn who in turn confronts Sarah and her husband Dan (George Eldredge) with the news of Joan’s pregnancy. He asserts that they are to blame for Joan’s condition because of they refused to educate her about sex. Sarah travels east with Joan to have her baby and Dan arranges to have Blackburn rehired at the high school to teach classes in hygiene. In one class for girls he shows a 16mm film explaining conception, showing the birth of a baby and a Caesarian operation. In a class for boys he shows a movie that graphically displays the ravages of venereal diseases. The short hygiene films are interpolated into “Mom and Dad” in their entirety. Dan and Dave travel east for the birth of Joan’s baby. Following a difficult delivery Joan pulls through but the baby is stillborn.

“Mom and Dad” was slightly more polished than most of the tawdry theatrical sex hygiene films up to that time. What really set it apart, however, was Babb’s ceaseless promotion and rigid contracts with theaters that presented strict terms for the film’s engagements – no short subjects, set start times and so on. As “Time” magazine commented the movie was pushed “as if it were snake oil.” Each “Mom and Dad” unit traveled with an advance man and a live lecturer (billed as Elliot Forbes) who offered a spiel mid-way through the film. The talk, ostensibly about sex hygiene, was in fact an opportunity to sell booklets peddled by two nurses who also traveled with the unit: “The Digest of Hygiene for Mother and Daughter” and “The Digest of Hygiene for Father and Son,” edited by Mildred Horn. All the money from book sales went directly into Hygienic’s coffers. At times as many as sixteen “Mom and Dad” units crisscrossed the country with one “colored unit” formed to cater to theaters with predominantly African-American patrons. Babb was in the courts dozens, if not hundreds of times, fighting efforts to

prevent “Mom and Dad” from screening; as a way of hedging his bets, he created a version called “Side Road” that eliminated the hygiene reels. Others quickly noted the success of “Mom and Dad” and in 1948 three features with similar stories and exhibition strategies were released: “Because of Eve,” “The Story of Bob and Sally,” and “Street Corner.” That same year Babb re-edited “Mom and Dad” and it continued to play, more or less continuously, through the 1950s. The distributors of the four movies eventually joined forces to form Modern Film Distributors to coordinate bookings and avoid direct competition and oversaturation in markets.

Babb’s subsequent productions and pick-ups never attained the success of “Mom and Dad.” The film’s subject matter combined with the fortuitous timing of its release – with the “baby boom” just underway and as theaters faced product shortages – could never be duplicated. But in practicing his favorite adage, “You got to tell ‘em to sell ‘em!,” Babb defied conventional wisdom, the Production Code, and censors to turn “Mom and Dad” into a postwar phenomenon, and one of the most successful independent movies of the studio era.

#### Further Reading:

David F. Friedman with Don De Nevi. *A Youth in Babylon: Confessions of a Trash-Film King*. Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1990.

Eric Schaefer. *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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