

The Curdling of American History ‘M’

A Recap of the Exodus that transformed Hollywood from Starlit Mecca to Celebrity Babylon

by Nick Zegarac

“Hollywood is a place where they place you under contract instead of under observation.” – Walter Winchell

The history of Hollywood is only one third fairytale. No, that’s not entirely true or open-minded to the reputation of the fairytale – except if one regards those watered down predigested versions made for the kiddies by Disney. No, Hollywood is all fairytale, as in the Brothers Grimm; both the light and the fantastic, and, the disturbing and the frightfully dismal - effortlessly blended in one tight-knit community.

Hollywood’s earliest moments are a history of trial and error; a tale about making great strides through blind ambition despite steadfast adversities. It is a history of the 20th century’s most resilient art form, even though eighty percent of that art has been lost for all time through recent shortsightedness and a very public neglect that almost universally failed to preserve or even classify motion pictures as anything beyond cheap thrills entertainment.



(at right: Natalie and Herbert Kalmus: he the great inventor and pioneer of the 3-strip Technicolor process, she the woman behind the man who would forever be associated with the company and its output than he. A bitter separation and divorce left Mrs. Kalmus with the right to insist her name be accredited to every Technicolor film made between 1929 and 1953, a right that made her a very rich divorcee indeed.)

(Left: The man who might have been king – at least of comedy: Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle. The rape and murder of Virginia Rappe effectively ended his career even though many today claim that Fatty was the unwitting dupe of a publicity scandal perpetrated by William Randolph Hearst.)

It is a shiny history about the transformation of nobodies into enviable epicenters of worldwide idol worship. But it is a dark history too, peppered in failed attempts at stardom and its inevitable fallout of suicides, murders and untimely natural deaths from stress. The scores of forgotten relics and faded legends left for the scholar and film student to rediscover are far more plentiful than the iconography of those few trail-blazing accidents that have since entered the realm of Hollywood’s folklore; the stories and the gossip worthy of those who ‘made it’ and those that were lost in the great shuffle toward that flickering light.



(Left: Don't let the smiles fool you. Between L.B. Mayer (far left) and Irving Thalberg, the two cultural leviathans responsible for MGM's illustrious output in the 30s, there existed a cool animosity weighing heavily on the young Thalberg's fragile heart. His zeal to produce the most opulent entertainment ever seen frequently came under fire from Mayer's make a buck mentality. At age 36 the showdown was over.

Thalberg died of a massive heart attack and Mayer enjoyed another 23 years as undisputed monarch of the finest film studio in all the land. Was he responsible for 'killing' Thalberg? Let's just say, Mayer's parting line after leaving the producer's funeral – "Isn't God good to me" left little to the imagination.)

Only a very small percentage of the Hollywood story concerns what goes on in front of the camera. The manic frustrated panic and profit-driven Mecca of make-believe so vitally captured on celluloid by its artists and artisans infinitely pales to the unraveling going on back stage. Behind each camera and beyond every soundstage are the real stories about Hollywood – those rarely made public; never celebrated; quietly swept under the glamour of the red carpet or paid hush money. These represent, perhaps more fully than those placed at the forefront, that driving and destructive ambition to maintain a level of saintly quality and godlike supremacy in 'the industry'. The stench of success is far more odious and palpable here, more trend-altering than anything ever put on the screen.



Behind every executive suite or darkened recess of a screening room is the story of possessive moguls and spurious agents, trading starlets for studs and auctioning both to the highest bidder after their fifteen minutes of fame is up. Who can say what makes a star famous or which mover and shaker was responsible for casting those twinkling apparitions down from the heavens after all the polish and allure had been vigorously rubbed off. But the casting couch plays strange tricks on those enticed to trade their tangible bodies for that brief taste of the dream.



For example: director Howard Hawks might have thought nothing to ruin Lauren Bacall's fledgling career after she denied his advances, if only Bacall's new love had not been one of Hollywood's most successful leading men – Humphrey Bogart. Certainly Jennifer Jones' star outshone her prowess as an actress so long as producer husband, David O. Selznick continued to fetch offers and mount productions tailor-made for her. But Ms. Jones fared less than average after Selznick's death. Perhaps the story of how stars are made to serve even as their autonomy within specific projects seems to grow was best summed by Rick Nicita, "*You become a prisoner of your image. It's a gold-plated cell, but it's still a cell.*"



The story of Hollywood cuts deep into that tapestry of life – behind the curtain of faux magic we affectionately coined 'the movies.' It is a brooding, festering underbelly of quiet in-fighting amongst creative personnel, some driven by greed, others by vanity, most by profit and all in their need to be successful, if only at the expense of dismantling a rival's popularity to briefly attain their own, quickly eclipsed by another's waiting in the wings.



Gossip columnists played into this hand: Walter Winchell, Louella Parsons, Hedda Hopper, Mike Connolly: the minions working for that unseen widely regarded and feared force of executive nature peering from just behind the curtain at each premiere. *“The way to become famous fast is to throw a brick at somebody famous,”* Winchell mused. Hedda Hopper would offer a more revealing glimpse into the beginning of the end of stardom. *“Two of the cruelest, most primitive punishments our town deals out to those who fall from favor are the empty mailbox and the silent telephone.”*

(Left: the zealous Hedda Hopper relished her role as gossip columnist. Christening her lavish Beverly Hills mansion ‘the house that fear built’, she, perhaps more than her rival muckrakers, at least attempted a modicum of sympathy for the ladies and gentlemen she raked across the coals: understandably, since she herself had begun as an actress – first on Broadway, then film.)

Given the prestige associated with ‘brick throwing’ did any star of the golden age honestly think they had a chance at defying a Darryl F. Zanuck or Jack Warner? Olivia de Havilland tried – and won. So did Bette Davis. But with each modest success came the proportionate backlash. For example: de Havilland’s request to costar in Selznick’s **Gone With The Wind** was granted only after an impassioned appeal to Warner’s wife – with repercussions pending upon her return to Warner Bros. and a string of substandard roles she was forced to begrudgingly accept. What else could she have done? To be blacklisted in Hollywood meant to be quite dead anywhere else. To be discarded and forgotten and forced to trade on one’s prior success and aspirations for a chance at doing product endorsements for Playtex or Alpo or wind up as the center square on that well known celebrity has-been game show.

(Right: Jack Warner with costars Bette Davis and Joan Crawford of whom Warner once said, “I wouldn’t give you a nickel for those two broads.” Apparently Warner had a change of mind, if not heart. Davis had once been the studio’s number one box office draw. The conflicts between she and Warner throughout that tenure were then legendary. But none of that venom appears here. Again, don’t let the smiles fool you.)



And if one were to write or act or produce a piece of fiction that even remotely challenged the status quo...well then, one might be suspected of belonging to that hateful breed of anti-capitalists who secretly desired to topple the American way of life even while he or she greedily indulging their every whim in that fruitful crapulence provided to A-list talent. Most of those branded communists and communist sympathizers probably found their way to HUAC’s pulpit by the backdoor – casual rumors and innuendo, done at first in jest, then more readily, more seriously, looking for that moment when the guard had been let down just enough for the jealousy to creep in. Ah, ha, John Garfield – you are a

traitor, simply because you choose more civic-minded roles instead of playing the same congenial fop we all came to know and love in **Four Daughters**; because when the legend has eclipsed the truth, one must run with the legend. The legend sells copy. It makes the rumor fact and the fact thereafter becomes one tiny footnote in the great history of fame.



(Left top: Involved in liberal politics John Garfield came under HUAC's scrutiny, was forced into testifying and shortly thereafter blacklisted from every major studio in Hollywood. Left middle: Charlie Chaplin's involvement with the communist hearings proved even more damaging to his reputation. Once considered the greatest comedic genius of his generation, Chaplin was literally exiled from the U.S. and, upon receiving an honorary Oscar in 1972 was only granted a temporary visa from the state department. Today, Chaplin is again considered a genius – only forty years had to pass to restore that honor to him. Below: the press has a field day with the start of the HUAC committee meetings.)



To some degree then, the Hollywood elite were not comprised of its stars, but a private club of quiet behind the scenes investors, dedicated to the stock and trade of movies as a business instead of an art. If wealth was the byproduct of fantasy, power was its most illusive and destructive commodity. Yet few who wielded such power with all the sensitivity of a buzz saw ever possessed it completely.

One recalls the sad final days of L.B. Mayer at MGM as an example, or perhaps lesson in how not to misperceive one's own importance in the realm. Seeing as Mayer did, his once-seemingly galvanic tyrannical stronghold crumble in a matter of moments under his ever so slight naiveté, Mayer had assumed that a threat by telephone would remove the stone



from his shoe at Culver City – Dory Schary. He was mistaken and unceremoniously deposed by Loewe's Corp. President Nick Schenk in one of many seismic shifts of corporate alliances that rocked Metro's executive cabinet in the years that followed.

As for Mayer, he was made to bear the brunt of quiet humiliation. One of the old mogul's many studio perks had been the bequeathing of a luxurious Ford touring car. Yet in that brief span of time it took for L.B. to receive the news that he was no longer master of his domain, and, to walk out to the lot, the embittered

lion discovered that his car had vanished from his parking space.



From that point on L.B. Mayer – the man who had maintained control over Hollywood’s most successful film studio; the star maker responsible for the creation, shaping and maintenance of so many careers; the ‘father figure’ who sought to maintain his roster of talent under the guise of his extended family - was persona non grata in Hollywood. No one came to his racing box or home. No one bothered to look in on his failing health as he expired with MGM’s press agent, Howard Strickling by his side, muttering his final farewell with *“nothing matters...nothing matters”*. Mayer’s removal from

MGM was not a departure, but an erasure, a cleansing of the palette and a stiff warning to anyone who thought their contributions to ‘the industry’ were indispensable.



(Above: demolishing Fox’s backlot in the preliminary stages of prepping for **Cleopatra**. Although that film was eventually shot in Europe, Fox never bothered to rebuild sets on the ground it had cleared in Century City. Instead, it sold off the land to developers. Left: MGM’s most lavish backlot, depicting sets from nearly every conceivable period in history. When Kirk Kerkorian annexed MGM in the 70s his first order of business was to demolish this vintage stretch of priceless history.)

(Right: Fox Studio Chief Spiros P. Skouras and other executives look on as inventor Henri Chrétien demonstrates the new Cinemascope widescreen film process that Fox patented as their own in 1953. Cinemascope was supposed to provide a new lease on movies from the healthy competition of television by proving the old adage of ‘bigger is better’. Although Cinemascope and its successors did temporarily stave off the onslaught of dwindling profits and theatre attendance, it became more a passing fancy rather than a main staple for Fox or rival studios.)





And if the studios themselves were to lose much of their autonomy through government intervention in the 1950s, that effectively splintered their monopolistic kingdoms into scrambling little satellites of the television age, those who had lived through the ‘good ol’ days of union and guild-busting found little use from the sudden infusion of ‘youth’ talent that effectively exposed, then dismantled the saintly prestige of their once galvanic surface glamour. All that Hollywood had allowed up until that point had come to an end –



violently, suddenly and with casualties on both sides of the lens.

(Above: employees report for work at 20th Century-Fox circa 1960. In the intervening decades literally all but a skeleton crew would remain. The hundreds of thousands of skilled behind-the-scenes laborers one of the first to go during the cost cutting drive that effectively crippled Fox for most of the decade. Left: one last look at the Fox backlot before it came under the wrecking ball. Below: MGM’s motto of “more stars than there are in heaven” was fairly truthful. Here, L.B. Mayer – seated centre – is surrounded by his elegant roster of talent circa 1945. A decade later virtually all would be let go from their seemingly secure long-term contracts.)



Gone was the star system that once seemed so necessary for the industry to survive. Stripped of their flesh and blood assets, studios transformed themselves into modest production companies, leasing their facilities and logos to independent interests on a picture by picture basis. A few were

bought outright by other non-film producing entities. MCA, which is a talent agency for example, acquired Universal Studios. Warner Brothers briefly became associated with Seven Arts. Still others found themselves changing hands like the discard in a poker game. Selznick International, which had been RKO became Desilu under the savvy business sense of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez. But these were mere trade offs and turnarounds.



(Above left: Selznick International, as it appeared in the days when David O. was running the show, and, above, right: after Arnez and Ball's makeover to the more streamlined television production company it thereafter became. Today, the studio still stands, but it's façade resembles neither of the above photographs.)

More damaging still was the exodus of time honored traditions and talent in favor of that new breed of executive who clearly did not define his tenure by a résumé of past artistic achievements but rather from a law or business degree attained at one of the more prestigious universities. The thinking cap was replaced with a calculator and market research, and 'finding' the audience became the norm, rather than allowing the audience to discover what had already been produced. The cost of a three piece suit became more the talk of the town that who was ordering what off the menu at the Brown Derby.

Fashion designers like Gilbert Adrian or **Edith Head (right)** who had literally defined a studio's trademark style with their creative designs were no longer in vogue. This need for pretending had been transplanted from the big screen to the small bungalow adjacent those vanishing backlots. Warehouses were cleaned out of their



irreplaceable costumes and props. The ones in relatively good shape were privately auctioned – the rest, tossed in large BFI bins out back. Animation cells, scripts with notations from directors like Capra and Hitchcock, office memos from Selznick to Mayer or even more priceless, Mayer to Thailberg, production stills and head shots taken by the great Laszlo Willinger or George Hurrell these were forsaken in dumpsters and dust bins for the ‘new’ Hollywood.



The close knit community of self-gratifying moguls was not left standing in this annex. Studios were now property alone to be rented, converted, demolished or reborn as production facilities for television and commercial shoots. For the most part, ‘new’ Hollywood was not to be found inside those cavernous sound stages that had once contained the infinite possibilities of an Oz or Brigadoon. The ‘new’ Hollywood was wherever one chose to find it. It was reduced to the status of a traveling sideshow, a series of unattached caravans shooting bits of dialogue and exposition under the most limiting of conditions and without much flair or concern for the way things looked. Realism was paramount. If one could find it looking out a front window or down an alley, then it needed to be shot, even dirtied up a little to make it less than larger than life.

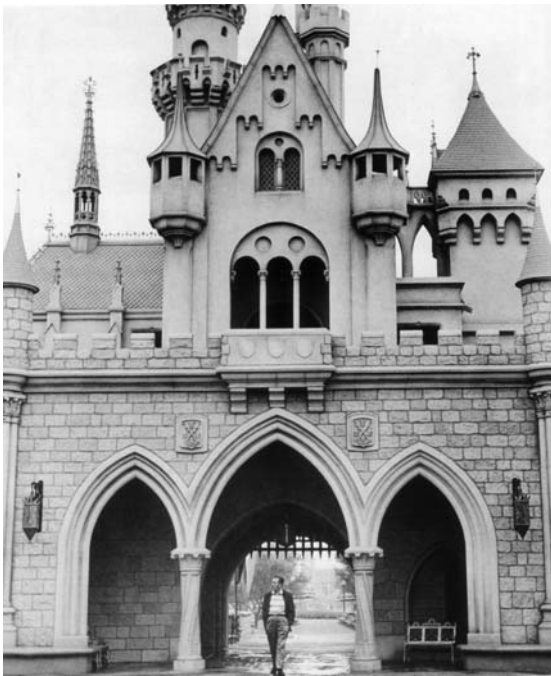
This was the Hollywood awaiting Coppola (right), Scorsese, Lucas, Spielberg (left), Pollack and Polanski. And it is saying much of their talents that what little was left to be had by them was enough to sustain and nurture their dreams for the Hollywood that is today. But the Hollywood then, the antithesis of the Hollywood that had been for so long, must have seemed like some apocalyptic black hole for the creative auteur. The cohesive structure between the front office and the layman toiling on location had been removed.



If one of the creative persuasion could at all convince one of the executive mindset that what was being proposed would make them money, he was first hard pressed under the scrutiny of market research and endless polling from outside firms dedicated to the tabulation of such invisible need to prove his illusive faith. A project that began as a proposed comedy could easily mutate into dark melodrama, the hero – once a gentleman, transformed into a vigilante with a gun. Any resemblance between the pitch and the general release was purely coincidental.

Even those creative types who proved through their blind faith that audiences were with them at the box office, even after clinical market research failed to prove as much, even then were these dreamers sneered at behind closed doors. Even as Lucas’ nostalgic **American Graffiti** rang registers across the nation he could find no one willing to finance **Star Wars**. **The Godfather** narrowly escaped being shelved when Paramount fought Coppola to recast Brando as his Don. And Spielberg?...well, Spielberg was rarely taken seriously in his youth perhaps because his stock and trade was more puppetry than people, even though his glib and charming fantasies frequently ranked among the most profitable entrées served up for studio coffers.

“The trouble with movies as a business,” Charlton Heston once mused, *“is that they’re an art; the trouble with movies as an art is that they’re a business.”* What emerged throughout the 1980s in American cinema perhaps more than any other decade before it embodied this age old struggle between commerce and art. The studios were gaining ground again, in part because they were slowly being allowed to acquire those raw elements that had once made them the envy of film production throughout the world. Slowly but most surefooted, the old monopolies came marching forth once again, buying up talent on a limited contract basis and music publishing houses and struggling independent film companies.



Disney established Touchstone Pictures for its more adult fair then later sold those production facilities to Paramount. MCA/Universal swallowed whole Don Bluth Animation Studios, then spit Bluth and a few colleagues out after the success of **An American Tale**. Bluth moved to 20th Century-Fox, producing the glorious **Anastasia** and the exhilarating **Titan A.E.** before once again finding himself on the outside looking in. Universal was even more aggressive in repackaging its films as theme park attractions. Like Disneyland before it, Universal Studios today exists largely as a game and ride metropolis, rarely producing films outright, but rather acquiring its product from smaller independent firms. Such leapfrogging was imminent and healthy to the mounting climate of mergers and acquisitions.

(Above: the entrance way to Universal Studios Theme Park. When Universal undertook the risky venture of turning its acreage of old sets into a tourist attraction, Debbie Reynolds suggested MGM follow the same line of logic. Her requests were laughed out of the front office. No one at MGM was laughing after demolition was complete on their own backlot and Universal Studios turned out to be a success. Left: Walt Disney surveys the fruits of his labors in California on the eve before the grand opening of his enduring legacy – Disneyland.)

Only MGM failed to find a suitable suitor during these heady days. Instead they got Las Vegas financier, Kirk Kerkorian and Ted Turner. The latter expressed an interest in the studio as a production facility. The former merely wanted the name ‘MGM’ for his casino and hotel empire. But Turner had gambled too much to win. To save his fledgling cable empire he was forced to sell off almost all of his controlling interest in MGM. The studio went to Columbia/Tristar, as did most of the filmic properties that MGM had briefly toyed with making before being raided into extinction. But Turner and film buffs everywhere were arguably the real winners – for in his trade off, the media mogul had managed to hide away MGM’s library of classic films for his own cable network exploitation.



(Left: The Val Lewton collection from Warner Bros. just one of many re-releases of films to the home video market. In the 80s studios suddenly realized that what they had in their vaults was pure gold in terms of untapped revenue. Below: clunky old VHS revolutionized the way we watch movies today. No studio executive of the early 80s, even one peering into his crystal ball of market research could have foreseen the evolution on the horizon.)



Television, that arch nemesis that had sent shock waves of imminent doom throughout the industry in the 50s inadvertently aided Hollywood in its rebirth throughout the early 80s with the dawning of the home video revolution. Executives were frankly shocked, however pleasantly, by the public's rising fascination for the treasures in their vaults.

They began to reclassify their ancient relics as art to be offered to the public either on a rental or wholesale basis. For under thirty dollars one could take home **Casablanca** or **Citizen Kane** or even **The Wizard of Oz** – but **Gone With The Wind** could always sell for a bit more. And if one chose not to own, there was always the prospect of borrowing art for a modest fee from the fast expanding satellite industry of retail video chain stores. Then, in the comfort of their own homes consumers could endlessly replay the memory, or play it at least until the tape wore out.

And if studios lamented the fact that once sold, at least on tape or laserdisc or even more currently, DVD, there was no telling as to what end that cassette or disc might find itself being misused or pirated, or at the legitimate end of things, being viewed by fifty close friends for barely the price of two admissions to the Saturday matinee, then studios quickly discovered the press value in re-issuing limited sell-through with different covers, extra features or insightful reminiscences from the stars who were inadvertently continuing to make them millions. Disney once again proved itself at the forefront of this marketing strategy with the 'for a limited time only' campaign that sent prospective buyers scrambling in line for the latest edition of **Cinderella** or **Sleeping Beauty**.

Today, the story of Hollywood in front of the camera is largely a tale told in triplicate, or at least, in remakes. Copying the past has become the new favorite past time. Pre-sold titles rarely recast to perfection as in the originals, relegate the moviegoer to an unmemorable déjà vu. Thus, when one asks today 'have you seen **War of the Worlds**?' the inquiry must first be met with another, 'which version?'

Nobody makes a star today except the public. Nobody commands the output of studio product but the public. If it sells it's good. If it doesn't it's



destine for an early video release, and maybe just a bit more strenuous market research that never fails to insight public interest for less than stellar entertainment.



There are no stars today, but perhaps, as the late Grace Kelly more astutely pointed out to Cary Grant over fifty years ago, “*just common people with a bank account.*” Hence, today’s celebrities are disposable. They are far removed from the legends of Gable, Crawford, Hepburn, Garland, even as those not presented on film for over forty years continue to sparkle and have their reputations renewed, though a River Phoenix who walked among us - where no James Dean ever was - is all but forgotten, except by a few ardent fanatics who haven’t seen Dean’s work on celluloid.

The story of Hollywood behind the camera today is perhaps not so far removed from the legend of the casting couch of yesteryear. Starlets still gravitate to men in the industry with considerable clout, money and box office potential. The male stars try to retain their level of virility for the average star gazer who actually believes Harrison Ford is more the man than any Joe Average passed on the street. Press agents have taken over the domain where once prominent gossip columnists of their day left off. Those of either sex who marry for love are as rare as that ancient flower of faux respectability that the Hollywood before it paraded as though it had been divinely blessed as the singular remaining Eden on earth. But in the commissaries and upscale restaurants, inside the boardrooms and barrooms uptown and downtown it’s still the same old story – get or be had, sell or be sold off: an irony more tragic than ironic: that in a town where so much on the surface has been irreversibly, or rather forcibly, changed so much behind its closed doors remains exactly the same.

