

The Celluloid Mafia – Behind the facade of glamour, Hollywood is a deadly pit

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BY DEE GIBNEY

He knew Hollywood well during its golden age. But he was not of it.

British cinematographer and director Jack Cardiff worked with Hollywood legends Marilyn Monroe, Ava Gardner, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida and titans like Alfred Hitchcock and Errol Flynn.

A soft-spoken man with a professional, gentle demeanor, rather like the old-fashioned family doctor, Mr. Cardiff retains a sense of detachment, an objectified distance as he reminisces about Hollywood the paradise and Hollywood the “pit.” He strove to avoid the mired politics of what he calls the “big American movie game.”

Mr. Cardiff spent his life in the film industry first as a child actor then behind the camera.

“By the time I was 14 I was a little too old to be considered a ‘child’ actor so I decided to work in the camera department because everyone who did seemed to go abroad and that is what I wanted to do,” he says.

He had a passion for art, especially the paintings of the great impressionists. He saw how they used exaggerated reflected light and how it could be adapted to cinematography. No one had tried the techniques he began to experiment with.

Critics loved his “beautiful cinematography” without really being able to put their finger on what it was that created such a unique look, so subtle was the effect.

He worked with Alfred Hitchcock on *Under Capricorn* which he describes as the most memorable film as well as the most frustrating he ever shot. Hitchcock had begun to use unprecedented long takes (a series of edits is the norm) to heighten the theatricality of the scene and probe into the psyche of his characters.

“Hitchcock had been experimenting with ten minute takes for a year. Then with *Under Capricorn* he decided to push it a step further and shoot an entire reel in one take. Rather than a set of separate sets he designed a composite set of several rooms comprising one large house. All the sets or ‘rooms’ had to be lit at the same time so the camera could travel from room to room.

“It was unimaginably complex and very mechanical with us gliding from one room to another on this incredible crane with people holding lighting and running all over the place trying to keep out of sight while sliding doors crashed open and shut around us, Mr Cardiff says.

“Shooting an entire reel in one take was extremely hard on the actors. They were constantly afraid they would be run over. We had a huge job just keeping them moving through the six sets.

“Hitchcock was a master of effect and that is how he used the camera. Everything had to be terribly dramatic and he was absolutely bent on doing *Under Capricorn* this way.

“There was a huge Georgian table, 25 feet long and he wanted a dramatic low tracking shot from just below it looking up at Ingrid Berman. The table was cut into 30 sections with all the place settings stuck down to it, and as we passed down the centre of the table in this huge blimp contraption each actor had to fall back with his section of table so we could pass. Everyone was petrified they would get hurt.

“Despite the grandiose techniques I think we ended up with a very ordinary film. I feel it could have been a great film if we had used straightforward methods. The only rationale besides Hitchcock’s love of ‘effect’ that I can see is economics. Shooting an entire reel in one take cuts the film-making time from four or five months to a couple of weeks.”

Neither critics nor audiences were ready for *Under Capricorn*. It was both widely panned as Hitchcock’s weakest film ever yet also lauded as one of the eccentric director’s finest, “a masterpiece of technical inventiveness and proficiency.”

At the height of his cinematographic career Mr. Cardiff switched to directing “to stretch his creative abilities.”

His first film as director was *Sons and Lovers* which won the Screen Director’s Award and the New York Critic’s Award, followed by *The Lost Ships* and *Girl on a Motorcycle* which he also produced and co-wrote. He is currently in Hong Kong to produce a film for the Trade Development Council.

Over lunch, he reminisced about the myth and the reality of Hollywood’s “golden era.”

“When Hollywood was at its peak, everything rolled,” says Mr. Cardiff. “The big studios used to turn out 50 pictures a year. Film making was a factory-like job. Everything was departmentalized. The director worked from a script which was a fait-accompli. The actors, no matter what they thought, had no input. They were on contract and had to do the films they were told to do.

“Big stars like Gary Cooper, John Wayne and Clark Gable were good looking personalities first and actors second. In fact I believe Gable used to be a stage hand. Actors like him were hired because they had a presence, a charisma and under the director’s instructions they did the best they could. They were uniform actors, suitable for the film purposes of the day.

“Hitchcock used to say that people would look at the marquee and judge the picture by the stars. So he would think, ‘how would Clark Gable and Joan Crawford look in bed together?’ And he would cast the picture accordingly.

“Today of course it’s different. There is a tremendous crop of young people who are actors first with much more say in the script. Some are even producers of the films they star in.”

The history of Hollywood in its so called heyday has yet to be written Mr. Cardiff maintains.

“Many people have tried but no one has captured the unnatural environment, the artificiality. It was like a huge celluloid mafia. Deadly. The power that some people wielded was awesome – and final. If Cecil B. De Mille happened to be offended by someone, that person would likely never work again. You had to be in with the right people or you may as well forget about finding work.”

How did Mr. Cardiff remain unscathed?

“Because I never spent more than two or three months in Hollywood at a time. My work was mainly in England.

“For those who got caught up in that deadly web, their lives could be ruined. The classic example is Marilyn Monroe. She was one of Hollywood’s vulnerable victims.”

Mr. Cardiff knew her well.

“She was manipulated by everyone around her and vastly underestimated, even ridiculed. Yet she was a genius. She wasn’t a great actress in the same way Charlie Chaplin was not a great actor. But they both had this extraordinary presence, an unexplainable charisma.

“There were thousands of beautiful women in Hollywood but no one came near her in emanating that indefinable aura, that luminescence.

“I remember working with her and Laurence Olivier in *The Prince and the Showgirl* which he was directing. He would despair of her ever learning her lines, but then when we watched the rushes this extraordinary quality came through. It was pure genius.

“At the same time she was like a child. She had one of the toughest childhood’s imaginable filled with abuse and endless rejection. Yet she didn’t have the edge of hardness that you would expect. She had a kind of naïveté coupled with a concern for people – like being afraid you would catch cold if you sat in a draft.

“There was no bitterness. The only time I detected a touch of sadness was one time when we were talking and she said, ‘There’s an awful lot of scrubbing in these hands’ referring to her difficult early years.

“I remember going to visit her in a Hollywood hotel. It was night time and there was very little light in her room yet she was wearing dark shades which must have made it difficult for her to see. That was one of those odd little things about her.

“She told me once about being trapped in what she had been told was a nursing home but was actually a mental asylum. They wouldn’t let her out unless a relative signed for her. This was a year before her death.

“Her former husband, playwright Arthur Miller wasn’t interested in helping her. It was finally (baseball icon) Joe de Maggio (to whom Marilyn had been married before Miller) who got her out.

“She had a deep-rooted fear of facing people. Perhaps it was a fear of being mobbed. She would use every excuse to stay in her dressing room once she was made up. She was terrified of going before live cameras.

“I remember attending the opening of Miller’s *View from the Bridge* with them. We were mobbed as the car drove up the theatre. Once we managed to get inside, we waited in a little side room because there were too many people milling about.

“When it was time to go into the theatre Marilyn stiffened and asked for a drink.

“She never went to parties. She was always hiding from people. Her house was surrounded by guards.

“To avoid being mobbed she once showed me with great delight, a disguise she had planned. What stands out is the vivid orange wig. I pointed out that she would attract far more attention in that than anything else she could wear. She hadn’t realised this. Again, it was this child like naïveté.

“Even facing people individually was a trial for her. One morning I went to her home to photograph her in some antique Renoir clothes. It was a sideline hobby of mine. I gave my pass ticket to the guards and called her up saying I had arrived.

“She sent a message down that she would be a little late. Her husband at the time, Arthur Miller, said she would probably be a while so we spent most of the morning playing tennis. She finally came down around 6:30 in the evening. I never understood her dread of facing people.

“I think she married Miller because once she was a star she craved exposure to ‘culture’.”

Those who knew her saw a remarkable intelligence which her “dumb blonde” roles belied. She steeped herself in poetry and plays Mr. Cardiff recalls – the works of Dylan Thomas and Chekov, and studied acting in order to be considered for more serious roles.

“Perhaps she thought that once married to Miller, she would be immersed in a cultural environment overnight.”

Mr. Cardiff does not believe she took her own life at the untimely age of 36. “At the time she was on all kinds of pills – pills to get to sleep, pills for the liver, all kinds of medication. Sleep was a big thing. She could never get to sleep. She was under psychiatric care.

“She had taken a lot of pills the night she died. She may have woken up again and not knowing what she was doing, taken some more.”

Some say it was the rejection by John F. Kennedy who she believed would one day marry her that accelerated her downward spiral into depression. As history would later show, she was but one of his many casual liaisons.

Mr. Cardiff also worked with Sophia Loren. He filmed her screen test. Errol Flynn (known for his womanizing, hard drinking and his swashbuckling roles) did not think she had the “right stuff.”

“If he would have snapped her up he would have had her on a seven year contract for very little money. But Carlo Ponti ‘discovered’ her instead and helped build her into the huge star she is today.

“The world unfortunately thinks of her as a big sex symbol but she is the sweetest most natural person you could ever hope to meet – the complete opposite of a hard sophisticate. She’s extremely intelligent and a gifted linguist.

“As for Errol, well you know he was a buccaneer. He knew people and he was ruthless. He took what he wanted and how he wanted it. He loved to shock and he did. But he could be a heap of fun too.

“His hero was John Barrymore who drank himself to death. ‘That’s the way to die,’ Flynn always said and that’s how he really did want to die himself.

“He had a stomach of lead. He drank constantly and consumed an astonishing amount. Yet he was never overtly drunk – just a little drunk all of the time.”

Flynn carried around a “doctor’s bag” with his “daily medicine” – two bottles of vodka. When alcohol was banned from a set he reportedly injected oranges with vodka which he savored with gusto in plain sight.

“One day while we were working on a picture with Gina Lollobrigida in Italy he collapsed and was rushed to hospital. The producer inquired a few days later when Flynn would be able to return to work. ‘You don’t understand,’ the doctor said, ‘he is going to die. He hardly has any liver left.’

“The producer said, ‘*You* don’t understand. We’re working on a very big picture here.’

“For six weeks we shot all the scenes with Lollobrigida with a Flynn double, his back to the camera. Then Flynn left the hospital and came back to the set. The hospital was stunned. They didn’t know how he was able to get up and walk away.

“He brought with him a huge bottle of vodka and a tumbler and he started over again, right where he left off. He died three years later in Vancouver.”

An official in the coroner’s office said that although Flynn was only 50 when he died of a heart attack he had the “tired and sick body” of a 75 year old man. His hedonistic devil-may-care lifestyle had caught up with him. He suffered from heart disease, atherosclerosis and degeneration and cirrhosis of the liver.

If Jack Cardiff were to produce his own film on Hollywood's golden age he says he would portray it as a kind of paradise but behind the facade of happiness would lurk a deadly force that could sweep people away, swamping them under the fickle waves of the never ending power play. It would be as much a documentary as a feature film.