Kennedy stirred up Hollywood scene

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Joseph P. Kennedy had nothing but contempt for the Jewish glove-makers, pants pressers and salvage collectors who established a cinematic empire of their own in Hollywood. If he set his mind to it, he boasted, he "could take the whole business away from them."

In the late 1920s, it appeared that he would. The youngest bank president in America, and the first financier to buy a studio, Kennedy controlled Film Booking Offices, a B movie factory; Pathé, a pioneer in newsreels; the Keith-Albee-Orpheum chain of theaters; and First National, a consortium of theater circuits that also produced films. No wonder Louella Parsons called Kennedy "the Napoleon of the movies."

Cari Beauchamp, one of the first nonfamily members with access to Kennedy's papers, provides a fascinating — and unflinching — account of his tenure in Tinsel Town, including the full story of his affair with actress Gloria Swanson.

Beauchamp claims that Kennedy "shifted the gears" of the motion picture industry. Convinced that movie moguls didn't know how to "depreciate, to amortize, to capitalize," she argues, he carefully calibrated the costs of production, promotion and exhibition. Kennedy was one of the architects of the merger that created RKO.

According to Beauchamp, Kennedy spent little time on the lot and rarely watched the movies his companies produced. His most ambitious project — "Queen Kelly," designed as a vehicle for Swanson — was a disaster. Kennedy insisted on a silent film, ordering that the last two reels be shot with dialogue and music, including a song sung by Gloria. He hired Erich von Stroheim to write and direct the movie, ignoring horror stories about his mania for total control, budget over-runs and "finished" films that were six to eight hours long.

With expenses exceeding $700,000, no end in sight to the takes and retakes, and Swanson convinced that "our director is a madman," Kennedy fired von Stroheim. He hired Edmund Goulding to rewrite and "disinfect" the script, then suspended work on the film. In 1956, Swanson enlisted Stroheim in an attempt to salvage "Queen Kelly," but Kennedy would have none of it, telling friends that Gloria had "wrecked my business, wrecked my health and damn near wrecked my life."

By then, Beauchamp reminds us, Joe Kennedy had bigger fish to fry. Although Franklin Roosevelt dismissed him as "a temperamental Irish boy," he appointed Kennedy head of the Securities and Exchange Commission and ambassador to England in the 1930s. At the end of World War II, Kennedy stage-managed the political career of his son.

"What drove your father?" Gore Vidal asked Jack in 1960. The newly elected president paused, looked out at the sea and said "Vanity." Cari Beauchamp concludes that Kennedy was a "complicated man who could be harsh and brutal in his business dealings, able to cut off formerly close friends without a blink." He took Hollywood by storm, we might add, but, when all was said and done, it amounted to little more than a tempest in a fleshpot.

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JOSEPH P. KENNEDY PRESENTS HIS HOLLYWOOD YEARS

By Cari Beauchamp

Alfred A. Knopf, $35

Associate Images:
Gloria Swanson, in an Edward Steichen photo from a 1928 cover of Vanity Fair. She “damn near wrecked my life,” said Joseph P. Kennedy. PRNewsFoto/Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Gloria Swanson by Edward Steichen 1924
Vanity Fair, February 1928
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