

Chapter Four Paramount Studios

Paramount-Lasky Studios were located on the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Vine Street. There were five enormous glass stages – the roofs being made of glass made it possible to get lots of sunlight and less arcs and spotlights were necessary for shooting a picture. This was all quite some time before talking pictures were ever thought possible; they were discussed, but not believed.

In the early 1920's, when Rudolph Valentino and Gloria Swanson were two of the greatest silent motion picture stars, I was under contract to Paramount Pictures, the same studio they were under contract to. Another up and comer at that time was a handsome and talented young man, William Boyd. He later became Hopalong Cassidy.

There were six of us men called stock players and about twenty or thirty stock girls. When a picture was in need of bit players or small parts, the stock players were always used. It seemed there were never enough stock girls to go around. I never knew why.

Usually, if the job was a little rough for the girls, some of the men in stock were sent to the make-up department, then to wardrobe, and they did the parts the girls wouldn't or couldn't play.

Gloria Swanson and Rudolph Valentino were making a picture called *Beyond the Rocks*. They were shooting most of it on a yacht in Catalina bay. They tried the first few days with the stock girls, but they'd get too seasick and just couldn't make it. Finally, Bill Boyd and myself were called with one of the other stock men and we had to play very English ladies on the yacht.

To say the least, the picture was a stinker. Swanson and Valentino hated each other. They both hated the director. And the director hated them and everyone else because he was so seasick. He'd spend half of his time bent double over the rail.

Gloria Swanson was holding her own in the seasickness department and so was Valentino. I knew Valentino was going to do something to upset Swanson – I could tell by his expression. I had worked in several other pictures with him and I was fully aware of his sense of humor.

One mid-afternoon came the big love scene between Swanson and Valentino on the deck, both leaning against the rail. They moved in for the kiss. Swanson broke away screaming and swearing about Valentino eating so much garlic that she couldn't get her breath. Bill Boyd and myself walked away quickly – we didn't dare let them see us laughing.

Shortly, everything quieted down. Swanson and Valentino went to their respective rooms and the makeup men made the repairs.

However, Valentino took some Limburger cheese and rubbed it all around his mouth. Then, he wiped off just enough so that the stink would stay. He was powdered down and he and Swanson were ready to try the scene again.

The director had them move into position and started the scene. They moved slowly to each other – then, the kiss.

Swanson started trying to break away from Valentino. The harder she fought, the more tightly he held her. She finally broke away and heaved all over Valentino and herself. He let go of her. I thought for a moment she was going all the way over the rail. I've never seen anyone that sick – Valentino was covered with vomit, from his collar right on down to the deck. But, he didn't lose his reserve. He just turned away from her and went to his room. Bill Boyd looked at me and then we both made a rush for the rail. Now, it was our turn to be sick.

Swanson slowly rose up, turned around, and got her breath. She was screaming with rage.

"It's not bad enough with the garlic – now he's been eating SHIT!" she screamed as she went back over the rail.

That was the last day they tried to shoot any more scenes on the yacht. The director ordered the yacht back to Long Beach and they finished the picture in the studio.

During this time, there was a very young actress named Estelle Taylor. I never knew if that was her real name or her stage name. At one time, she was married to the great heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey.

One day, I was crossing one of the huge stages at Paramount made up as a whirling dervish dancer. I stopped and my mouth fell open – here I stood in front of ME.

I had never seen Estelle before and she had never seen me. We stood staring at one another for a few moments and then we both began to laugh. Our faces were so exactly alike that we could have been identical twins.

Estelle immediately took me to Cecil B. DeMille. He couldn't believe it either.

I was taller than Estelle and as healthy as is humanly possible. She was one of the most fragile people I've ever known. If there was anything that was contagious, Estelle caught it.

"Are you under contract here at Paramount?" Mr. DeMille asked.

I told him I was and, a few days later when I went to pick up my check for the week, I got the surprise of my life. I was no longer a stock player -- I was now a feature player. I was to receive three hundred fifty dollars a week on contract plus one hundred fifty dollars a day when we went on location, plus expenses. I was also told to report to Mr. DeMille's office immediately.

As I went into the office, Mr. DeMille motioned me to a seat. When he finished talking on the phone, he informed me that I was going on location. I was to double for Estelle Taylor and I would play different small parts that were needed in completely different makeup.

When I left the office, I was a nervous wreck. To work for the Great DeMille was really something and the one thing everyone on the Paramount lot was hoping to do.

The first thing I did was go to Bill Boyd's dressing room and tell him. Then I went to Valentino's dressing room and told him. Valentino sent his secretary to get Bill Boyd and we opened a bottle of champagne for us three to celebrate my luck.

A special train carrying about five hundred people left Los Angeles for the desert, where we were to start DeMille's first production of one of his greatest pictures, *The Ten Commandments*. The first half of the picture was all Biblical; the second half was modern. Moses was played by one of the finest character actors in show business, Theodore Roberts. Estelle Taylor was to play Miriam, the sister of Moses. I don't remember the name of the little man that played the brother of Moses, Aaron. In the modern part of the picture were Richard Dix, Nita Naldi, and Rod La Roque.

We were on the desert for weeks -- it was like working in hell. The heat was awful and it was just as hot at night as it was in the daytime. I was certainly glad when we finished all the exterior scenes and went back to the studio for interiors.

The night we left for San Francisco, Mr. DeMille gave a big dinner on stage five. All the cast was well on the way to being drunk. Those who were not yet drunk were trying their best to catch up with those who were.

The following morning when the train pulled into the depot in San Francisco, it was quite a sight to see the entire cast of a very religious picture trying to act sober and doing a very bad job of it. The newspapers made a field day of it.

Nita Naldi and I were walking arm in arm. We couldn't have made it without the help of each other. We got into a cab. I helped Nita get in and, as I was closing the cab door behind me, she fell out the opposite door, looking up at the driver and asking, "How much do I owe you?"

Everyone was supposed to stay at the St. Francis Hotel. Everyone did for the first few days. We were in San Francisco for several weeks and then we went back to Hollywood for the interiors. I will say one thing: everyone did behave fairly well while we were in San Francisco. Seems there had always been a grudge between San Francisco and Los Angeles and every time a star or someone that was a name from Hollywood came to San Francisco, the police watched them closely.

At that time, everyone remembered the "Fatty" Arbuckle scandal that had happened in the Bay City. He was completely innocent of everything he was accused of and it was proven in court, but the notoriety of the entire case ruined him in the eyes of the public.

At the peak of Swanson's reign, Paramount signed a new and very big name: Pola Negri. She had co-starred in a picture made in Germany with Emile Jannings, *Dubarry*. It was not that it was a good picture, it was the acting by Negri and Jannings that was really great. So, Pola Negri was brought to Hollywood and a special dressing bungalow was built for her. Swanson was livid.

Negri's first American picture was *Bella Dona* and I was in it. In the part of the picture that was set in Venice, I played the part of a buck-toothed flower vendor and in the last part of the picture, I was an Arab spy disguised as a camel driver. In the very last part of making the picture, I had to do all the long shots for Negri. She was so exhausted from overwork that she could only do the close-ups.

At the end of the picture, *Bella Dona* was supposed to walk away from the camera into the desert to her death. There was a huge leopard following her and, as she disappears over a sand dune, the leopard was supposed to jump from the top of the dune to kill her.

The leopard was so old and tired that it just couldn't jump. I came back up on the dune and sat down with the leopard. I hugged and patted it as it just lay with its head in my lap and purred while I rubbed its ears.

They finally decided that the only way to get the leopard to jump was to shoot it in the behind with a high-powered air rifle. I raised the roof about this – I knew if they wounded the cat, then they would have to kill it. That's when I told them how they made the animals jump from the trees in a serial I'd made at the old Selig studios. They took a large sheet of flat galvanized metal and soldered two wires to it. They ran the wires back under the sand so they could connect it for a short electric shock.

Then, I became worried about the amount of a shock they might use. One of the electricians opened his big mouth (thank heavens) and said he would stand on the metal and test the shock. He did and they finally cut it down to where it would be completely harmless. I reached down, took the leopard by the scruff of its neck and walked it over to the metal sheet. The shock worked and the leopard made the jump.

I went down to the dune, got the big cat and brought it back. I sent one of the prop men to get me some sugar. Then, I sat down on the ground and fed the leopard the sugar, then took it back to its cage. I found out later that they kept the leopard at the East Lake Park Zoo. I made a trip there every week to see my leopard. The keeper finally decided it was all right for me to take the big cat for walks. (Of course, the ten dollar bill helped him make up his mind.)

The director of the picture was George Fitzmaurice. Originally from Paris, he hated Pola Negri with all the passion a Frenchman can hate a German. They fought in French, German, and English before and after every scene. In one of the scenes by a studio built canal on the Venice set, Negri called George something in German. He didn't say a word to her – he just turned, walked up to her and threw her in the canal.

I was certainly glad when that picture was over for me.

Then, there came an order from Negri to the front office: every cat on the Paramount lot was to be gotten rid of. Negri was suspicious of every cat she saw. She believed they were bad luck. The moment she saw a cat, she would make some kind of a sign with her hands, then bow down and beat her forehead on the ground.

When Gloria Swanson heard of the order concerning the cats, the fireworks started. Swanson was in her dressing room when the maid told her about it. All she had on was her shoes and her hat – not another stitch.

She went down the studio street to Jessie Lasky's office. You could have heard her for a mile and the language was classic. Lasky didn't have a chance – Swanson defended the cats and successfully, too.

Lasky, being unable to say anything, wrote on a piece of paper and handed it to Swanson. It said, “YOU’RE COMPLETELY NUDE.”

Swanson looked at it and answered, “Fuck you! And Negri too!” Then, back she went to her dressing room. Swanson went back up the studio street, swearing vengeance on Negri if one cat was missing from the Paramount lot.

With this feud, everyone was either on one side or the other, except for Rudolph Valentino. He hated both Swanson and Negri. I happened to be in his dressing room when his agent came in to talk to him about another picture he was starting in a couple of weeks.

“The Studio and Mr. Lasky both feel that it would be a great piece of casting to co-star you and Negri,” suggested his agent.

“I expected this,” Valentino answered softly, “ – the answer is no.”

“She is a great actress,” his agent countered.

“She is a beer-swilling, kraut-eating bitch as far as I’m concerned,” Valentino replied. “You are my agent, not my father confessor – try and remember that.”

They had a little more talk. The agent finally said good-bye and was gone.

“Look out the window,” Valentino said. “He’ll go directly to Lasky’s office and tell him about my refusing to do a picture with Negri.”

We both watched and the agent went right to Lasky’s office.

“What is your next picture?” I asked.

“*The Young Rajah*,” Valentino said. “It was written by June Mathis. She is a good writer, but she is going to direct the picture -- that I’m worried about. She has written many good scripts, but now she wants to direct and this is to be her first.”

How Paramount ever achieved the things they did, I’ll never know. But, they made sure that Swanson and Negri never met, even by accident. Swanson was never allowed on the set when Negri was working and Negri was never allowed on a Swanson set.

Nothing was ever done about the cats on the penalty of being barred from the Paramount lot forever.

Mr. DeMille was making a picture called *Manslaughter* at this time and he had a pre-historic sequence in it of cave men and cave women. The picture starred a very big name in silent pictures – Thomas Meighan. He was one of the really great ones of that time.

All of the contract men were working on the sequence -- none of the contract or stock girls worked on this except for the close-ups. The cave men were trying to drag the cave women away by the hair and the fights were really something. I was worn out from all of the running and fighting and being dragged over the cave set.

“I think I’ll go home,” I said at the end of the day, “and sit in a hot tub for an hour or so. I’m sore all over.”

“There’s a good part for you in *The Young Rajah*,” Valentino said. “You play the part of my brother.”

That made me feel a lot better. I always enjoyed working with Valentino. He was always thoughtful and in scenes that I was with him, I knew I would have the best photography possible. I had worked with him before in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *The Sheik*, *Blood and Sand*, and *Son of the Sheik*. In *The Four Horsemen*, I played the part of a belligerent barmaid in an Argentine bar-café. I looked like an ugly Phyllis Diller. (I’ve never seen a pretty Phyllis Diller.) Rex Ingram was the director and Alice Terry, Ingram’s wife and one of the most beautiful blondes I’ve ever seen, played the lead opposite Valentino. That one picture made her a star.

In *The Sheik*, I did all of Valentino’s horseback riding. He could ride, but he was scared of horses and would only ride when he was near the camera.

In *Blood and Sand*, I played the young bullfighter that dies in Valentino’s arms after being gored by a bull as he was on his way to Madrid to become a bullfighter. This can still be seen on very late television shows. The rest of the picture, I played the duena (Spanish chaperon) to Dona Sol who was played by Nita Naldi. Fred Niblo was the director and what a great director this man was.

We were shooting the picture on what was then a place called Gopher Flats. It is now the location of the great Warner Brothers Studios in Burbank. And snakes – they were everywhere. Under the heavy black religious costume I wore, I also had a pair of knee high rubber boots. I was taking no chances.

One day, I was following Nita Naldi and walking with sort of a clomp.

“What kind of shoes are you wearing?” Fred Niblo said.

I pulled up the costume and he saw the boots.

“Why boots?” he asked.

“Snakes,” I answered.

The next day, everyone in the cast was wearing boots, including Fred Niblo. Even Nita Nadi had a pair on under her skirts.

“Those boots are not very glamorous or romantic,” Niblo said as she clomped by. “Nobody is making love to my feet. I’m not taking any chances.

I didn’t mention the very glamorous Agnes Ayres. She became one of the big stars after playing opposite Valentino in *The Sheik*.

It was so much more fun making pictures in the Silent Era than it is today.

There is something else they have today they didn’t have then – the method actor. In those days, you learned acting and show business by work and experience. There were no schools of acting.

I hate to say this, but I’ve visited some of those acting schools with friends of mine that thought by going to one of them they could improve themselves. All that I’ve visited were complete nests of Communism. I know there will be a lot of actors and acting schools that deny this. I don’t care how they deny it or how much they deny it, I saw it. Others have seen it and many more will see it.

Why the FBI has never done anything about this, I can’t understand. I know actors who didn’t know a thing about Communism until they attended one of these acting schools. I don’t know any of them that came out of the school that was a better actor, but they were sure as hell learned how to be a good Communist.

I’ve seen Communism in England, in Europe, in Africa, and in Mexico, as well as here at home. Communism is a disease – I know quite a lot of actors that are infected with it.

I’d better get back to show business, something I know a little about, and leave the ‘ism’s to the ones who want them. I don’t.

We finally finished the prehistoric sequence of *Manslaughter* and I was glad. I was black and blue all over and scratched from one end to the other from being dragged through caves, up mountainsides, down mountainsides, through arroyos, through streams, and through deserts. It took me almost a week to get over all that mess.

It was a lot of fun making *The Young Rajah*, except that Valentino and I were seasick most of the time. We had to ride an elephant. The howdah was beautiful that we sat in on the elephant, but as the elephant would walk it had the same effect as riding a ship in a storm. We took every seasick remedy that could be gotten, but none of them did a bit of good.

The picture turned out just as Valentino had predicted. It was beautiful, but it was a stinker. It was dull, but it did the business. The public didn't care what he did – they just wanted to see him. I will say this for me – I had never looked better. The photography was great.

By this time, Paramount had talked Valentino into being seen with Pola Negri. The studio and the publicity department worked it up into a big love affair. Valentino couldn't have cared less. He was mad about a girl named Natacha Rambova. She was related to Helena Rubenstein, one of the great ladies of the cosmetic world. She had money, and plenty of it.

Natacha was a dancer. She wanted to be another Isadora Duncan, but Valentino talked her out of that and taught her to dance the way he could. And he could dance.

Valentino was making millions of dollars for Paramount, but he was only getting \$1,250 a week. Gloria Swanson was getting \$17,500 a week and Pola Negri was getting \$5,000 a week. They had been having fights and discussions about a new contract, but nothing came of it. So, Valentino walked out and went on a national dance tour with Natacha Rambova.

He was clearing from \$20,000 to \$35,000 a week on the dance tour. The studio knew his contract would run out and that any other studio in Hollywood would sign him and pay him what he wanted. This type of greed is what caused the tragedy.

The autopsy after Valentino's death in 1926 plainly showed that he had been slowly poisoned. Holes were eaten completely through his entire stomach and only poison could have done this.

I had left Hollywood about a year before Valentino did. I had been invited to a party given by Gaston Glass, who was quite a big name in Paris. He had been brought to America and so had director Louis Gasnier; they were giving a party to celebrate something. At that time, any excuse for a party was enough to give a party. I arrived quite late and was having my first drink when the place was raided. I hid in the laundry room under a pile of dirty laundry, for which I was duly thankful. After everything quieted down, I crawled out and went home.

The following day at the studio, I was summoned to the front office. I was quite surprised as I went in. There were six or seven stock girls and several of the stock men already there.

Three attorneys, accompanied by Mr. Lasky, came into the office.

"How many in the room were arrested last night in the raid?" asked one of the attorneys.

Seemed everyone in the place, with the exception of myself, had been arrested. One of the girls spoke up and asked why I didn't admit it.

"Because he asked who had been arrested," I answered. "I wasn't arrested."

"Yes, but you were there," she said.

"If this has anything to do with my not being re-signed here at Paramount, it is quite all right with me," I said to the attorney. "I've been here for quite some time and everyone I've known as friends are either gone or going. So, if it is all right with the studio, I'd like to cancel whatever time is left on my present contract and be on my way."

"I think that will be all right," the attorney said.

"Thank you," I replied and left the studio.