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## The Patriarch in Hollywood

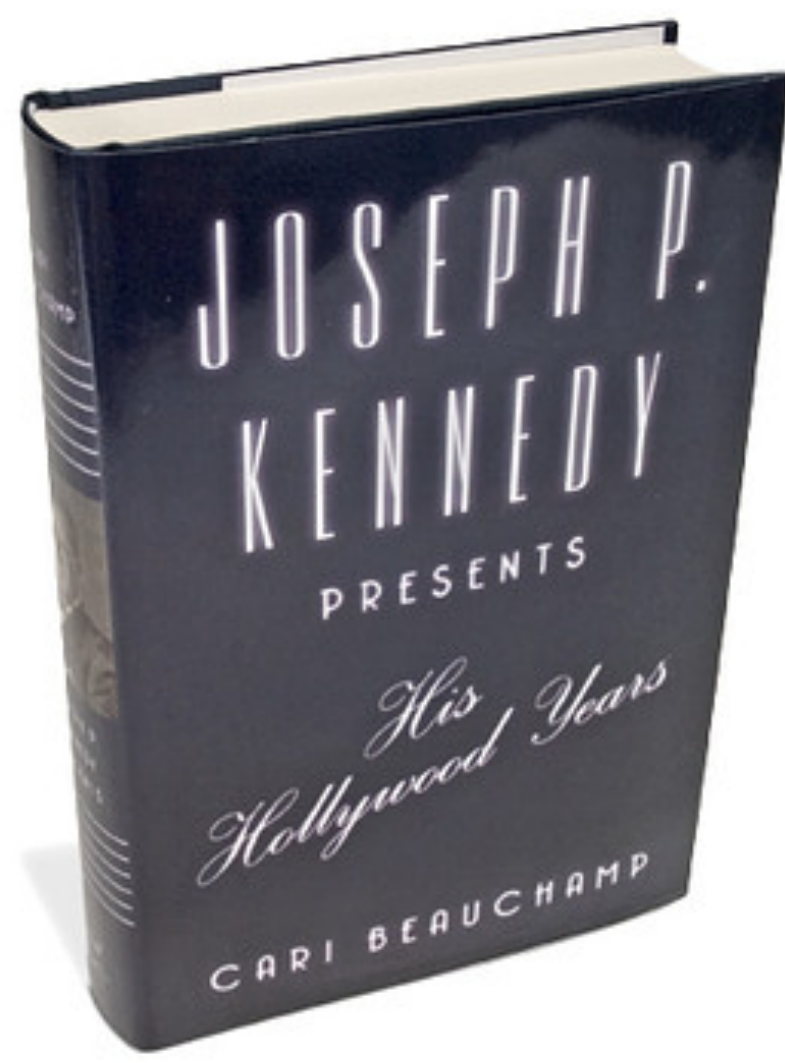
A management style worthy of Scrooge and an obsession with Gloria Swanson.

By Edward Kosner

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Before Camelot, there was Hollywood. Jack Kennedy's run with Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack and Bobby's dalliance with Marilyn Monroe were no flukes. Star-crossed Hollywood escapades were bred in the bone by their rogue patriarch, Joseph P. Kennedy, who first made his fortune as a buccaneering movie mogul.



Joe Kennedy's Hollywood phase was eclipsed by the rest of his gamy career as post-crash head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, isolationist ambassador to London just as World War II was breaking out, and Geppetto for Jack's Presidential run. Cari Beauchamp's "Joseph P. Kennedy Presents" turns this absorbing saga of Jazz Age glamour, nerve and mendacity into an extravaganza that often submerges Kennedy pere in a swamp of detail.

Avid with ambition, Joe Kennedy spent only five years, 1926-31, as "a picture man," as he liked to think of himself. But he managed to cram a lifetime's worth of dirty-dealing, self-promotion, star-gazing adultery and generally odious behavior into that brief interlude. Gossip columnist Louella Parsons called him "The Napoleon of Hollywood," and he acted as

though she meant it. He ran four different studios at one time or another, signed and seduced some of the biggest stars, ultimately double-crossed nearly everyone he dealt with, and left town with the equivalent of about \$200 million today.

Kennedy's gaudiest accomplishment was his capture of Gloria Swanson. Just 28, barely 5 feet tall and "bird-boned," as Ms. Beauchamp writes, Swanson was Hollywood's reigning sex-bomb, married to her third husband, a handsome but cash-strapped French marquis. For all her box-office success, Swanson's finances were a mess, and a mutual friend introduced her to Kennedy to straighten them out. "Together we could make millions!" Joe crowed at their first lunch.

Joseph P. Kennedy Presents  
By Cari Beauchamp  
(Knopf, 506 pages, \$35)

Before long, Kennedy made his move. With his pious wife, Rose, in Boston for the birth of their eighth child, and the rest of the brood stashed in Riverdale, N.Y., Kennedy invited Swanson and the marquis to Palm Beach and had a flunky take the Frenchman deep-sea fishing. Joe arrived at

Swanson's bedroom door tricked out in his white flannels, argyle sweater and two-toned spectator shoes. As she told the story in her memoir, Kennedy rushed in moaning, "No longer, no longer. Now." Joe evidently made up in animal spirits what he lacked in finesse, and their affair was launched.

His behavior with Swanson would have been shameful had he any capacity for shame. Although Kennedy paraded himself as a devoted family man, he flaunted Swanson as the ultimate celebrity trophy. He even invited Gloria to call on Rose in Riverdale. Swanson begged off. Rose, who had once left Kennedy because of his compulsive infidelities, kept going to Mass and acted oblivious to the whole tawdry scene.

Kennedy's accomplishment in Hollywood was to bring a bottom-line management style worthy of Scrooge to what had been a harum-scarum business. But his obsession with Swanson turned him into a lust-struck impresario. He enlisted director Erich von Stroheim to create a silent epic for her called "Queen Kelly" just as talkies were transforming moviemaking. Von Stroheim eventually came up with a shooting script calling for 735 individual scenes. The resulting fiasco left Kennedy sobbing, "I've never had a failure before," and Swanson effectively bankrupt -- after Kennedy ruthlessly laid off the movie's costs on the production company he'd created and staffed for her.

The Swanson episode was typical. Kennedy betrayed his earliest investors along with most members of his original "Irish Mafia," who loyally executed his orders, and performers like Fred Thomsen, a devout cowboy star rivaling Tom Mix. Kennedy finagled Thomsen into a contract that effectively made the actor his chattel. Thomsen died despondent at 38.

A blatant anti-Semite, Kennedy couldn't avoid doing business with the immigrant Jews who built Hollywood from its nickelodeon roots. He worked successfully with David Sarnoff, Samuel Goldwyn and other Jewish movie executives, but routinely derided them as "pants-pressers." As Ms. Beauchamp reports, Kennedy made a pass at one man's mistress by bragging that he was about to take over a studio from "a dumb and ignorant Jew" -- the woman's lover, who promptly booted him.

Still, Kennedy improved the fortunes of the studios he ran or "advised" and pioneered wiring theaters for sound. He even managed to portray his awkward exit from the movie business as a bold career move. He quickly attached himself to the new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and parlayed his past life as a Wall Street shark into a new role as the reformist chairman of the SEC. "It takes a thief to catch a thief," mused FDR.

As Hitler marshaled his forces, FDR's son Jimmy plucked two plums for his new pal Joe Kennedy: the ambassadorship to London and licenses to import liquor "for medicinal purposes" during the waning days of Prohibition. In top hat and tailcoat, Kennedy was soon swanning around the Court of St. James's spreading isolationist gloom. "Hitler will be in Buckingham Palace in two weeks," he proclaimed as France fell, prompting the king and queen to complain to Roosevelt while Joe used his envoy's clout to ship 200,000 cases of Haig & Haig scotch back to the U.S.

To her credit, Ms. Beauchamp, no stylist, deadpans the Kennedy story -- there's no moralizing here. But she takes more than 400 dense pages to narrate a fragment of pop history that a 1996 Kennedy biographer, Ronald Kessler, managed to capture in 27 -- with better dialogue and sex scenes.

Joe Kennedy's most important production was his son's conquest of the White House. It's an enduring wonder of American politics that JFK managed to become an effective and admired president despite the heavy hand of the old scoundrel.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has been reissued in paperback.

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