

BORDERS – GLOBAL INTERVIEW

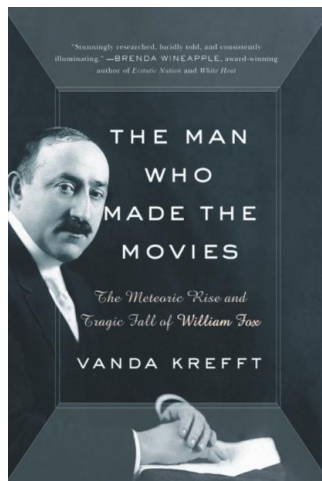
Vanda Krefft



On November 30th 2017, people gathered at Shakespeare & Co. located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, New York. They took their seats in a basement at the book sellers in a room ornamented with archives, ready to hear elegant journalist, Vanda Krefft, speak about *The Man Who Made The Movies*, her 2017 magnum opus which chronicles the rise and fall of William Fox, one time 'unquestioned czar of Hollywood'. Dr. Jide Williams, medical author and neurologist at Columbia University, was one of the people captivated by Krefft's conversation with the moderator of the event, Phillip Lopate, scholar and author, also of Columbia University.

Jide later provided a glowing report of the chemistry between Lopate and Krefft as they spoke about her book. Jide spoke to me about Krefft's positive energy, her warmth and the sincerity shining from her startling, beautiful eyes. He was impressed by her responses to questions from Lopate and from the audience in which she demonstrated an uncommon capacity to connect the dots and to create stories from patterns she identifies as she looks through a three-dimensional lens: a capacity which ultimately produced her brilliant and thoroughly researched biography of William Fox. It is a biography that has been spectacularly (and mysteriously) late in coming. It has also been spectacularly well-received. Its lateness- in-coming is a question I put to Vanda Krefft when I interviewed her about Fox: the man, his empire and the questions which continue to surround it.

*By way of an introduction to Vanda Krefft, journalist and author of *The Man Who Made The Movies*, tell us about your romance with the American film industry and about the decision to write this epic biography of William Fox.*



I've always been fascinated by the inner workings of the motion picture industry and by history in general—so much of the past tells us who we are today and why our culture is as it is. For years before writing the book, I worked as freelance journalist in Los Angeles, mainly covering the entertainment industry for national women's magazines. During the course of that work, I

met the late Angela Fox Dunn, a fellow journalist who was William Fox's niece. Angela had spent a lot of time with "Uncle Bill" and had fascinating stories about him. For the longest time, I assumed that someone had already written William Fox's biography because his name was on a major Hollywood studio. Then I decided to find out if that assumption was correct. And it wasn't. I decided to take on the task myself. One aspect that intrigued me was the sense of tragedy that still seemed to hang over the family. Although Fox died in 1952, my friend Angela remained profoundly affected by him, bound to those long-ago memories and unable to move past them completely, even though she was otherwise a very strong, positive, and independent person.



*Publicity appearance: Los Angeles Festival of Books, April 2018 (second from left) on "American Cultural Icons" panel with moderator Elizabeth Taylor, Dan Kois, Caroline Fraser, and Isaac Butler. (Kois and Butler wrote the book *The World Only Spins Forward* and Fraser is the author of *Prairie Fires*.)*



*Publicity appearance: at Orinda Books, Orinda, CA in February 2018, with Michael Troyan and Jeffrey Paul Thompson, authors of *Twentieth Century Fox: A Century of Entertainment*, and event coordinator Beth Ann Gallagher*

The rivalry between William Fox and the inventor Thomas Edison birthed what became known as the golden age of movies in America.

Share some of the most exciting facts about their rivalry.



*John Wayne, in *The Big Trail* (1930)*

When Fox started out in motion pictures in 1904 as the owner of a small movie theater in Brooklyn, Thomas Edison was taking steps to monopolize the motion picture industry through his patents. Edison claimed that he had invented the movie camera and projector (a disputable claim, given much important prior work by others) and thus was entitled to control the new the industry's development and profits. This led to the formation in 1908 of the Motion Picture Patents Company, which allowed only ten licensed production companies to make movies in the U.S. Soon, the Patents Company tried to monopolize movie distribution as well. There it ran into the formidable figure of William Fox, who by now was a movie distributor as well as an exhibitor. Rather than sell his small New York based company, Fox instigated a Justice Department antitrust lawsuit that ultimately dismantled the Patents Company and laid the foundation for the Hollywood studio system. It was an astonishingly courageous move by Fox. The Patents Company tried everything to drive him out of business, but he refused to give up and spent a lot of time and money over a period of several years to help the government's lawsuit. He did so because he loved the movies and wanted to see them prosper—and he believed that creativity could thrive only amid unfettered competition.

In the early days of Fox's ascent to power, cinema was associated with the poor and degenerate populations of America.

How did he help change public perception of movie going from nefarious to a recreational activity fit for the country's cultural elites?

That's very true. In their early years in the U.S., movies were considered—at best—cheap and disposable entertainment for uneducated, lower class immigrants and—at worst—schools for crime for impressionable youth. New York newspapers and social reformers often screamed hysterically that movie theaters were the place where boys learned to steal and girls were set on the road to ruin (because they were often escorted into a dark auditorium by an older male stranger who had bought their ticket). William Fox always believed that the movies could appeal to audiences all the way up the social scale and that they represented a major new art form. To help movies get where they were going as quickly as possible, he made sure that all his early small theaters were clean, nicely decorated, and—importantly—welcoming to families. Then, around 1908, he began building some of the first movie palaces in New York City, large and lavishly decorated venues that rivaled the splendor of millionaires' homes. He built these theaters before there was much demand for them: he was that certain, correctly, of his vision for the future.

He played a significant role in shifting the geographic nexus of movie making to the city of Los Angeles in California.

Tell us a little about Hollywood as the geographic heart of the American film industry.

Fox wasn't the first to transplant his movie studio to Southern California from the New York metropolitan area, where the U.S. industry had started, and he was not particularly happy to do so. Money was the lifeblood of the business and financial power was centered in New York, so that was where Fox always kept his home and Fox Film's headquarters. However, he recognized that everyone else was going west—for the weather, the variety of scenery, and to elude harassment by the Patents Company—so in the mid-1910s, he set up a major studio in the heart of Hollywood at Western Avenue and Sunset Boulevard. Then, in the mid-1920s, he bought the land that remains the site of the current studio, now called Twentieth Century Fox. It's an astonishing property, adjacent to Beverly Hills and surrounded by very expensive residential neighborhoods. When Fox bought the land, it was a bean field. He sensed that the area was about to increase in value exponentially, and he preferred to pay a bit more rather than go to outlying or more industrial areas of Los Angeles, where other studios were located. Then, in the late 1920s, Fox built his "Movietone City" here, with beautifully designed buildings, carefully manicured grounds, and state-of-the-art sounds stages to usher in the era of talking pictures. Fox Film quickly became known as the best looking studio in Hollywood.

Your chronicle of the big studio takeovers and mergers in Hollywood, makes for fascinating reading.

Share some of the landmark features of the pivotal takeover by William Fox of Marcus Loew's MGM.

In early 1929, Fox bought a controlling interest in Loew's Inc., which was the parent company not only of M-G-M but also of the prestigious Loew's theater chain. This was a major turning point in his life and was hailed as the biggest deal in motion picture history. Fox thought the acquisition was going to catapult him to the top of the worldwide motion picture industry. It did, briefly—but then, swiftly, it became the start of his downfall.

In researching this takeover, I first had to learn what it means to buy a publicly traded company. As it turns out, one doesn't buy the physical assets—the real estate, the buildings, the tables and chairs and pictures on the wall—one buys a large block of stock, which confers control of the company. That's what William Fox did, for \$50 million, and to make the purchase secretly (which was not illegal then), he borrowed \$27 million for one year. In early 1929, with the stock market roaring ahead, that didn't look like a problem. Of course, everything changed in October 1929 when the stock market crashed, creating chaos in the U.S. economy. Fox's two creditors decided they didn't want their money back. Instead, they wanted control of the robustly profitable Fox Film and Fox Theatres. Backed by Wall Street financiers, they pushed Fox into a corner, threatened to destroy his companies, and wrested control from him in April 1930. It was a devastating loss for Fox, who had devoted twenty-five years of his life to building these companies. Suddenly he was exiled from the industry he loved, with no means to fulfill his remaining ambitions. He still had a great deal of money, but that was no compensation. He had lost his purpose in life. Psychologically, he went off the rails.

From silent movies to sound-on-film technology. In what other ways did William Fox influence the improvement of film production quality and viewing experience?

In addition to his pivotal role in promoting Movietone sound-on-film—the winning technology that ensured a rapid transition to talking pictures—Fox led the early development of widescreen projection. After the first rudimentary television broadcast in the late 1920s, Fox immediately understood the eventual catastrophic impact for the movie industry. He foresaw that audiences would have no reason to go out to a theater if they could get essentially the same entertainment from a box in their living room. He proposed the correct solution: movies would have to become more spectacular via widescreen projection. To develop the 70mm format, Fox started the Grandeur company in 1929. Although Grandeur failed for complex reasons that had nothing to do with its merits, and although the commercial introduction of TV would be delayed until after World War II, Fox's intuition was right. In the mid 1950s, widescreen projection restored the movie industry's revenues, which had been slashed in half by television.

At his studios, Fox nurtured actors and directors who went on to become big Hollywood stars. Their legends - until your biography - outlived his own.

Name and very briefly profile some of the personalities who became and continue to be household names.

Fox's biggest star was "vamp" Theda Bara, the screen's first brand name sex symbol. Her enduring fame is remarkable—testimony to the power of her studio-created image—because of her forty movies for Fox Film released between 1915 and 1920, only two are known to remain. And those aren't even her most spectacular work. Among film scholars and fans alike, Theda's *Cleopatra* (1917) ranks as one of Hollywood's most wanted lost films.



*Theda Bara in Cleopatra (1917)
Photo courtesy of Phillip Dye*



Tom Mix in 3 Gold Coins (1920)

Cowboy actor Tom Mix was another iconic Fox Film star during the silent era. Mix came to the studio down on his luck in the mid-1910s and was about to be dismissed by a lesser executive when he caught William Fox's eye. Fox gave him another chance and Mix proved an instant success with his low-budget, high-action westerns, which consistently made so much money that many theater owners called him "the rent man."

Especially among directors, William Fox had a keen eye. He gave the great John Ford his first big break with the railroad epic *The Iron Horse* (1924), and gave important career-boosting assignments to Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks, and Frank Borzage. Fox also brought German director F. W. Murnau to the U.S. to make his first Hollywood movie, *Sunrise* (1927), which today is considered one of the best movies of all time.

William Fox is known to have exhibited what has been termed ‘boilerplate racism’ in his films. As an African and as a promoter of African arts, I am particularly interested in that aspect of his work.

Shed light on Fox’s attitude towards race as expressed in specific films.



Hearts in Dixie (1929), starring Clarence Muse (left)

Racism was a very difficult issue for Fox. On the one hand, he professed to be broad-minded and inclusive in hiring, and as a Jew in a time of rampant anti-Semitism, he well understood the personal and social damage caused by ethnic prejudice. On the other hand, he was fiercely ambitious in an unstable, unpredictable, and very expensive industry where any divergence from prevailing public opinion could quickly lead to ruin. Usually the latter frame of mind won out. A few examples: In *The Nigger* (1915), which was based on an acclaimed play of the same name, a white politician cancels his engagement to the woman he loves after being told that he has a tainted mixed race heritage. In *The Liar* (1918), a mother-to-be is terrified by visions that her child will be born black. Yet, Fox’s social conscience wasn’t completely in eclipse. *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) was—for its time—an unusual attempt to use the movies to try to improve race relations.

The first almost all-black talking picture (the movie had one white character, a sympathetic doctor) released by a major studio, *Hearts in Dixie* had as its main character dignified African American farmer, Nappus, played by stage actor Clarence Muse, whose daughter dies at the hands of a voodoo woman. In order to ensure a better future for his beloved young grandson, Nappus sells his farm and sends the boy north for an education. The subtly subversive message is that education is the way out of oppression and that while enlightened whites (such as the doctor) may help, the downtrodden themselves have it within their power to seize control of their destiny. It was remarkable that William Fox—who never stopped worrying about money—chose to make *Hearts in Dixie* because Southern theaters were legally required to be segregated, and it was unlikely that white audiences there would be eager to see such a movie. Those were the movie’s positive aspects. Pandering to the status quo, various scenes showed black laborers happily picking cotton and singing and dancing while Stepin Fetchit provided “comedy” as Nappus’s lazy, sneaky son-in-law. However, such denigrating stereotypes are probably best understood as a reflection of Fox’s financial pragmatism, a willingness to do as much good as it was possible to do—and some good was better than none—without serious self-injury.

The Wall Street Journal describes the man who emerges from your book as a man with ‘a frightening level of expedience and aggression, with a touch of megalomania’.

As you researched him and pieced him together, how did you respond? In the same way?

I don’t see William Fox’s expedience and aggression as “frightening,” except perhaps as they measure what it takes to achieve something great in an often-ruthless capitalist society. And I am not sure megalomania is exactly the right term for the driving force of his ambition. Fox didn’t have delusions of personal grandeur or much egotistical conceit. True, he did want to rule the motion picture industry—but it’s also true that over the years he had demonstrated remarkably clear long-term vision and, for the benefit of the whole industry, he had fought battles that no one else was willing to fight. I think Fox wanted to rule the industry not for self-glorification, but because he believed he had earned the position and would continue to earn it.

The Washington Post review refers to William Fox as becoming a mere ‘footnote in mainstream cinema history’. This is a man who was once the ‘unquestioned czar of Hollywood’.

In broad terms tell us how William Fox slipped out of public consciousness.



*William Fox, second from right, with Theda Bara, second from left, circa 1917.
Photo courtesy of Phillip Dye*

In late 1929, following the stock market crash, Fox found himself squeezed for money to pay back two large loans and thus he was targeted by a Wall Street coalition that wanted to take over the robustly profitable Fox Film and Fox Theatres. Fox lost the battle in April 1930 and was replaced by a series of crooked and/or incompetent executives who promptly drove both companies into the ground. As I see it, Fox’s successors had to erase him from history as much as possible. Otherwise the question would inevitably have arisen: why did they get rid of a brilliant leader, under whose guidance the companies had always made money and who had delivered many vitally important innovations? Another reason that Fox disappeared from public view was that he was very proud, and if people didn’t want to remember him for his accomplishments, then he was not going to beg them to do so. He tried to draw attention to his story by hiring Upton Sinclair to write a book, which was published in 1933 and drew scant attention. Then Fox bribed a federal judge and was sent to federal prison, so now the studio had even more incentive to try to forget him.

How big did his empire actually become and what remains of it today?

In 1929, the Fox motion picture empire—comprising Fox Film, Fox Theatres, and the Loew’s Inc. acquisition—ranked first in the industry worldwide and had an estimated value of \$300 million. Today, Fox Film has become Twentieth Century Fox (the Loew’s acquisition fell through, after opposition by the U.S. Department of Justice), and remains in West Los Angeles on the prime real estate that William Fox bought in 1923. Fox Theatres, sadly, went bankrupt in 1932 thanks to the egregious mismanagement of the bankers who pushed Fox out. The Fox lot still has many buildings from the William Fox era, so one can see many reminders of the past. The future is uncertain, though, because Disney is poised to take over the studio, assuming it can avoid antitrust charges by the Justice Department.

Finally, having engaged with a man of William Fox’s stature, one who lived at a watershed period in American political and cultural history, have you been able to identify a worthy successor for your biographer’s pen?

Excellent question! I wish I had an answer. It’s very difficult to find someone of comparable historical and cultural significance who hasn’t already been written about. William Fox was a lucky find—everyone knows the name from the studio, but no knew anything about the person behind the name. As one reviewer put it, Fox was hiding in plain sight. I’d love to find another biography subject with a compelling, important story, perhaps a woman this time.



Host, Olatoun Williams