

The Last Tycoon: Hollywood in the 1930s

By David Walsh
13 September 2017

The Last Tycoon is an American television series about Hollywood and the film industry in the mid-1930s, which takes its title from the unfinished novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The first and only season of the series, as it turns out, which emanates from Amazon Studios, comprises nine episodes. *Variety* reported September 9 the series had been cancelled by Amazon. According to the publication, the cancellations of *The Last Tycoon* and, ironically, *Z: The Beginning of Everything*, about Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, a couple of days earlier "seem to reflect a sea change at Amazon Studios, one mandated by Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos."

The publication reported Friday night "that Bezos is pushing Amazon Studios toward a massive strategy shift, looking for the streaming service to find its own global hit like *Game of Thrones*. In an interview, Amazon Studios chief Roy Price said they're looking for 'big shows that can make the biggest difference around the world.'"

Although the issues raised by *The Last Tycoon*—war, fascism and social class—are dealt with unsatisfactorily and, in some cases, quite clumsily, it is possible that Bezos, Price and company were made uncomfortable by the thought of these questions being placed before a wide audience.

One of the first difficulties a reviewer encounters in discussing *The Last Tycoon* is that its claim to be "based on" Fitzgerald's posthumously published novel can only be accepted by the most generous possible definition of the phrase. Other than the general setting, the names of several lead characters and a handful of sequences, there is very little in the series that connects it with the book.

In itself, the desire to adapt *The Last Tycoon* seems a healthy one. From his vantage point as a would-be screenwriter, with most of his earlier novels out of the public eye by the late 1930s and possessed of a critical attitude toward bourgeois society as a whole, Fitzgerald was uniquely positioned to treat Hollywood in a complex, artistic manner. The published chapters substantiate that notion.

At the center of the series (and the novel) is Monroe Stahr (Matt Bomer), a top executive at Brady-American Pictures. He has a genius for the popular story-making possibilities of movies and a relentless dedication to the details of the filmmaking process. He seems to operate virtually without food or sleep. Stahr is still recovering from the death of his wife, film star Minna Davis (Jessica De Gouw), two years earlier in a house fire. Moreover, he suffers from a congenital heart condition that may well kill him before long.

Stahr's thuggish boss and nominal "partner" is Pat Brady (Kelsey Grammer), who has risen from harsh, impoverished beginnings to ownership of a major film studio. The latter's daughter, Celia (Lily Collins), is in love with Stahr. A college student, she has come under the influence of radical ideas and hobnobs with left-wing screenwriters, much to the displeasure of her father.

In the course of the season, Stahr meets and falls in love with Kathleen Moore (Dominique McElligott), an Irish immigrant who reminds him a great deal of his dead wife.

These characters, more or less (Brady has very few lines in the unfinished novel, although the author had plans for him), come from Fitzgerald—at least in their general contours.

The Amazon series has initially interesting themes and story-lines. Much of the drama revolves around the conflict between Stahr and Brady for the supposed "soul" of the studio. The self-made, budget-conscious and heavily indebted Brady is even prepared to accept the demands of the Nazi German consul in Los Angeles as to the content of his studio's films "to make sure that we're not producing anything that might be offensive to the German people." Germany, after all, is Brady-American's "second biggest foreign market, and we need the money."

The character in the series, Dr. Georg Gyssling (Michael Siberry), was in fact the German consul in Los Angeles in the mid-1930s and monitored the studios' filmmaking activities on behalf of the Third Reich. According to Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*, the big studios kowtowed shamelessly to the Hitler regime.

As the WSWs wrote in 2013, in a review of Urwand's work, the collaboration between Hollywood and the Nazis "would deepen throughout the decade of the 1930s. When the Nazis insisted the Hollywood studios fire their Jewish salesmen in Germany, the studio heads, most of whom were Jewish and well aware of what the Hitler regime was doing to the Jews, readily acquiesced to the Nazis' demand."

Gyssling intervened to insist on the censorship and outright banning of projects such as a film version of Herman J. Mankiewicz's *The Mad Dog of Europe* (1933), an anti-Nazi play. "Urwand asserts," the WSWs commented, "that the blocking of *The Mad Dog of Europe* defined the terms of the relationship for the rest of the decade, i.e., the Hollywood studios would not portray or criticize the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. During these years, the Nazis had final approval on over 400 American films."

The Last Tycoon makes much of Gyssling's foul role—and Brady's acquiescence—in the initial episode, but fails to draw sharp conclusions from it and the plot strand ultimately fades away.

Stahr, who is Jewish, objects to Brady's relations with the Nazi consul and his other cowardly or philistine decisions. He wants the studio owner to remember "that kid in the street, Pat. He made you rich." Forced to cancel a picture dear to Monroe's heart, Brady counters, "You can't have art without commerce, Monroe. ... If you want to tell your story so bad, you go buy your own studio. You're not going to sink mine." This conflict dominates much of the nine-episode season.

Meanwhile, Celia, all of 19, is determined to produce a film that will shed light on conditions in a "totalitarian, murderous" country, very much like Nazi Germany, but fictionalized. Stahr, given a blank check by Brady, promises to see that Celia's anti-fascist work reaches the screen. Her mother, Rose Brady (Rosemarie DeWitt), bored, unhappy and drunk too much of the time, and Monroe have been having an affair, which he now ends. She protests that the affair must continue, because "I hate everything else."

A flurry of plot elements are introduced over the course of the more than eight hours. Considerably too many, in fact. Too much that is too briefly and perfunctorily treated comes the viewer's way.

Monroe vaguely involves himself in anti-Nazi efforts, which include bringing a Viennese orchestra to Hollywood and inviting its members, many of whom are Jewish, to remain behind. One of the musicians

becomes attached to one of the left-wing writers on the Brady-American lot.

Brady becomes indebted to infamous MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer (Saul Rubinek), who makes an appearance under his real name, as does his famous right-hand man, the “boy genius,” Irving Thalberg (Seth Fisher). For Brady to dig himself out of that hole involves making some ruthless decisions, including the imposition of a 30 percent wage cut, which triggers a studio-wide strike. Mayer also threatens to make public the sexuality of a leading actress to win her back.

(One of the series’ odder choices is the inclusion of Mayer and Thalberg as characters. The general critical opinion is that Fitzgerald was loosely basing Brady and Stahr on those two luminaries. Why create doubles?)

An impoverished refugee from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl becomes one of Brady’s operatives, working under his menacing security chief. This “Okie” also crosses Celia’s path, and an unlikely pairing develops.

Stahr and Kathleen become deeply involved, and he envisions a brilliant film career for her, but she has sinister connections and a secret that may destroy their relationship, and much more.

The series recounts the fate of various film projects at Brady-American. A spoiled, obnoxious child star features in one. A second, sentimental movie that was Brady’s “baby,” but which Stahr was forced to fix drastically, wins a number of Oscar nominations, a first and a major coup for the studio.

In one of the series’ weakest sequences, German-born director Fritz Lang (Iddo Goldberg) and actress Marlene Dietrich (Stefanie von Pfetten) together preside over “decadent” orgiastic parties, and Lang horribly tyrannizes Kathleen during a Christmas Eve rehearsal for the anti-Nazi film.

Unhappily, this television “adaptation” of *The Last Tycoon* descends into unconvincing soap opera. The final scenes, veering into violence and blackmail, largely defy logic and credibility.

Bomer as Stahr retains his dignity. The Brady character is too conventionally conceived to present immense acting challenges for the competent Grammer. And his studio owner has far too many “soft-hearted” moments. The love relationship also suffers from conventionality, even taking into account Kathleen’s skeletons in the closet. McElligott’s faux-Irishness is grating. Enzo Cilenti is more successful as the smitten, leftist screenwriter.

But many of the acting and dramaturgic problems come about as a result of the limited conceptions underpinning the series. It is not good enough to make intriguing references to Nazism, “reds” in Hollywood, the clandestine sexuality of prominent stars, the Spanish Civil War, unionism and a dozen other phenomena. Something truly substantial needs to be made both of the film industry as a whole and the historical period and its social driving forces. Here the series falters.

A divergence between the novel and the series where each treats, or plans to treat, the same phenomenon, the wage cut at Brady-American, is illuminating. The Amazon series, first, makes the cut 30 percent, whereas in Fitzgerald’s notes the studio will slash wages by 50 percent. Second, Stahr and Brady are both given ample opportunity in the recent series to make the case for concessions (for example, Brady tells protesting writers: “It’s what the studio can afford to pay right now. Meanwhile, you’re jeopardizing the jobs of people who can’t afford to be out of work like you can. The grips, costumers, drivers,” etc.). Third, the protest makes Brady withdraw his cut in the television series.

Fitzgerald, according to his editor Edmund Wilson, planned to have Stahr, returning from a trip, discover “that Brady has taken advantage of his absence to put through a 50 percent pay-cut. Brady had called a meeting of writers and told them in a tearful speech that he and the other executives would take a cut themselves if the writers would consent to take one. If they would agree, it would not be necessary to reduce the

salaries of the stenographers and the other low-paid employees. The writers had accepted this arrangement, but had then been double-crossed by Brady, who had proceeded to slash the stenographers just the same.”

Fitzgerald knew whereof he wrote. In desperate financial shape, he moved to Hollywood in the summer of 1937. He initially negotiated a lucrative contract with MGM. Most of his screenwriting efforts for the studio, however, came to nothing, and the studio terminated the deal in 1939. After that, the novelist worked as a freelance writer until his death from a heart attack in December 1940.

He witnessed the dishonesty, greed and large-scale and small-scale thievery practiced by the film corporations. Commenting to his companion Sheilah Graham, whom he was introducing to *Capital*, Fitzgerald pointed to Marx’s passage about the “small thefts of the capitalists from the laborers’ meals and recreation time,” and noted, “They do this at M.G.M. in a big way; so the secretaries say.”

American filmmaking during the Great Depression presents itself as a series of immense contradictions. Dedicated to raking in profits, the film studios nonetheless found it necessary to reflect, albeit often in a highly distorted manner, certain of the basic social realities of the time. The most shameless escapism, some of it charming and even enduring, alternated with social dramas, crime stories and biographical pictures that touched upon the flaws of a social system whose bankruptcy had become obvious to millions.

The Depression propelled large numbers of American workers and intellectuals to the left, many in the direction of the Communist Party. The latter claimed to represent the traditions of the Russian Revolution and invoked Soviet economic success and industrial growth in contrast to the misery and precariousness of life for the working class and poor in the US. Many writers and actors joined the Stalinist party. The Roosevelt administration introduced certain modest reforms in an effort to forestall social upheaval, deluding many liberal and left intellectuals into believing that American imperialism was evolving in a socialistic direction.

Fitzgerald is one of the most remarkable literary figures in US history. This is not the occasion to treat his life or work in depth, but his generally dim view of business and capitalist society as a whole needs to be pointed out. The novelist considered himself a “Socialist in politics” (his first *Who’s Who* entry in 1922)—and even a “Marxian” (although he was no such thing)—for most of his adult life.

In his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), Fitzgerald singled out Trotsky as exemplifying the “natural radical,” the “spiritually unmarried man” (unconventional, unsettled), who “continually seeks for new systems that will control or counteract human nature. ... He is a part of progress—the spiritually married man is not.”

Fitzgerald’s humiliations at the hands of the movie studios only deepened his hostility to large corporations and corporate executives. According to Graham, the writer “detested ... business tycoons. ‘I don’t know any businessman I’d want to meet in the next world—if there is a next world,’” he told her.

In a July 1940 letter, Fitzgerald wrote a friend, “Isn’t Hollywood a dump—in the human sense of the word? A hideous town, pointed up by the insulting gardens of its rich, full of the human spirit at a new low of debasement.”

However, Fitzgerald did not envision *The Last Tycoon* as some facile, “leftist” attack on the film industry in the manner of Stalinist pseudo-“proletarian” writers of the period. He planned something far more objective and thus more devastating.

As literary critic Edmund Wilson noted, Fitzgerald returned in his final novel “to the more concentrated and objective vein of *Gatsby* [*The Great Gatsby*, 1925].” Wilson commented that the book was “Fitzgerald’s most mature piece of work. It is marked off also from his other novels by the fact that it is the first to deal seriously with any profession or business.” He observed that Monroe Stahr, “in his misery and grandeur ... unlike any

other of Scott Fitzgerald's heroes, is inextricably involved with an industry of which he has been one of the creators, and its fate will be implied by his tragedy."

Fitzgerald was attempting something difficult in *The Last Tycoon*, an all-sided portrait of an individual capable of both utter ruthlessness and genuine artistic genius (Stahr, narrates Cecilia Brady in the novel, "was a marker in industry like Edison and Lumière and Griffith and Chaplin. He led pictures way up past the range and power of the theatre, reaching a sort of golden age, before the censorship"). The chapters we have are elegantly, calmly written, with great assurance.

For example: "Stahr smiled at Mr. George Boxley. It was a kindly fatherly smile Stahr had developed inversely when he was a young man pushed into high places. Originally it had been a smile of respect toward his elders, then as his own decisions grew rapidly to displace theirs, a smile so that they should not feel it—finally emerging as what it was: a smile of kindness—sometimes a little hurried and tired, but always there—toward anyone who had not angered him within the hour. Or anyone he did not intend to insult, aggressive and outright."

Or: "'Mr. Stahr's Projection Room' was a miniature picture theatre with four rows of overstuffed chairs. ... Here Stahr sat at two-thirty and again at six-thirty watching the lengths of film taken during the day. There was often a savage tensity about the occasion—he was dealing with *faits accomplis*—the net result of months of buying, planning, writing and rewriting, casting, constructing, lighting, rehearsing and shooting—the fruit alike of brilliant hunches or counsels of despair, of lethargy, conspiracy and sweat. At this point the tortuous manoeuvre was staged and in suspension—these were reports from the battle-line."

Translating Fitzgerald's precise, poetic insights into dramatic form, into the shape of television episodes, would unquestionably be a great artistic challenge. The creators of Amazon's *The Last Tycoon* fell far short.

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