

Tom Neal: boxer, actor, killer

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A still from the 1945 film 'Detour' with Ann Savage and Tom Neal

On Sept. 14, 1951, Tom Neal's Hollywood career basically ended when he pummeled the sophisticated and Academy-Award-nominated Franchot Tone. The injuries were so severe that Tone went into an 18-hour coma after suffering a concussion and serious facial injuries.

Starlet Barbara Payton watched the mayhem play out on her property as her lover, Neal, beat her fiancée, Tone. Being the dutiful girlfriend, Payton married Tone two weeks later.

But with Payton unable to stay away from Neal, the marriage ended in less than two months.

Born into a well-to-do family in Chicago in 1914, Thomas Neal eventually entered Northwestern University, majoring in math but loving sports and acting.

After dropping out of school, he embarked on an amateur boxing career, which started in 1932 and ended two years later. Fighting mainly in Cambridge, he compiled an impressive 31-3 record.

While none of his fights lasted more than a few rounds, he probably got the message that the ring wasn't for him after he was knocked out in his final two bouts. Returning to Chicago for a brief period, he pursued his first love, acting.

After summer stock in West Falmouth, he briefly moved onto Broadway, before succumbing to the allure of sunny Hollywood.

In 1938, Neal made his movie debut, appearing in one of Mickey Rooney's popular Hardy Family films. After that, he acted regularly and often, once showing up in nine movies in a single year.

Rarely the star, instead playing the rugged heavy, he appeared repeatedly in B-grade movies. His most memorable film, "Detour," made in 1945, is now considered a film noir classic. Many found the villainous performance of his co-star Ann Savage to be in the same atmosphere as Barbara Stanwyck in "Double Indemnity."

At the end of the movie, as Neal is being placed in the back of a police car, he utters his most famous line: "Fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no reason at all."

As it turned out, that would serve as an omen.

In the early '50s, a recently divorced Neal met the hard-partying actress Barbara Payton, whose beauty, youth and allure attracted men far and wide. In addition to having already married twice despite her young age, she had numerous affairs, including with Bob Hope, Howard Hughes, George Raft and a host of others.

Despite being engaged to the well-bred and highly respected actor Franchot Tone, Payton found the handsome and tough Neal irresistible. Her feelings were reciprocated. But love gave way to violence. Tone and Neal confronted one another. Tone lost the fight, won the girl, and then lost the girl.

Neal and Payton had each other but little else, as Hollywood quickly sided with Tone and shunned them. The press meanwhile had an irresistible front-page story. Soon everything, as is often the case, died away, including Neal and Payton's affair, with the two parting ways.

With his career in shambles, Neal retreated to Palm Springs where he became a gardener, a skill acquired while observing the Japanese gardeners who tended his garden when he had money and a large house. He remarried in 1956, but sadly his wife died of cancer two years later, a year after giving birth to Thomas Neal Jr.

In 1961, Neal married again, this time in Las Vegas to 25-year-old Gail Bennett, a receptionist at a local tennis club who was almost half his age. As with past romances, this one also soured, with the couple separating.



Returning from a visit to Chicago, Neal, perhaps unaware that Bennett was planning on divorcing him, accused her of sleeping around. Unsurprisingly, yet another argument ensued.

What happened next can only be gleaned from Neal's side of the story, what he told friends, and the science involved in determining how Bennett came to be fatally shot once in the back of her head.

Neal confessed to friends that he murdered his sleeping wife. Re-thinking his story, he told the police, and the jury in a sensational trial, that the two argued, she pulled a gun on him, they struggled, and the gun accidentally went off, fatally striking her. While the prosecution established the scientific improbability of his tale, the jury apparently found evidence of another man's clothing in her apartment more compelling. Found guilty of involuntary manslaughter, he served six years in prison.

Epilogue

After getting paroled in December 1971, Neal returned to gardening. He died less than a year later. His son, Tom Neal Jr., remade "Detour." He died the same age as his father at 58, of the same disease that killed his mother, cancer.

Payton, who sat in the gallery during Neal's trial, married three more times and fell victim to alcohol. Over the years, she physically and mentally deteriorated, gained weight, and had run-ins with the law, including an arrest for prostitution. Offered a stint in detox, she replied, "I'd rather drink and die." That she did, in 1967, at the age of 39.

The above column is based on various internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz is a retired judge. He can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.