

OPINION

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The death of Harlow's husband



By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Upon discovering the grisly scene, MGM honcho Louis B. Mayer blurted out: "Oh my God, we can't have a murder."

When the police arrived hours later, their job was made easy. A cursory investigation was conducted, and it was quickly concluded that Paul Bern, the 42-year-old wunderkind movie producer, had taken his own life. They even had a suicide note.

Whispers, followed by a press conference held by Mayer, provided the reason for Bern's suicide: He could not sexually satisfy his 21-year-old wife, "the reigning sex queen of the 30s," known variously as "The Blond Bombshell," "The Platinum Blond" or simply "Baby."

Jean Harlow was all that and more. At a time of strong social mores, she wore provocative outfits that highlighted her striking physical attributes.

Harlow was a bright woman with a backstage mother and stepfather intent on making their well-educated daughter a star. The mother-daughter relationship was at some early point rocky, however, as evidenced by Jean running away from boarding school at the age of 16 to marry her wealthy and well-connected 23-year-old businessman boyfriend.

The couple moved to Hollywood, where Jean found work in the movies. Within two years the marriage was kaput, and Jean moved in with her mother and stepfather who, by then, had also come west.

Compared to Harlow's roller coaster ride, the cultured and reserved Paul Bern led a more serene life. Born in Germany in 1889, he and his family emigrated to America nine years later, ultimately settling in New York City. While there, Bern attended acting school.

Bright and droll, Bern soon met a fellow student, the attractive and alluring Dorothy Millette. Soon the two were a couple. Sadly, Millette grew ill and went into a sanitarium. Bern, meanwhile, followed the movies to Hollywood and traded acting for writing, directing and producing. Within short order he found himself at MGM and at the top of the heap. He produced, with his boss, the highly regarded Irving Thalberg, some of MGM's greatest hits.

Bern recognized Harlow's talents and became her greatest supporter, convincing Thalberg to put her in the film "Red-Headed Woman."

The movie's release in June 1932 catapulted Harlow to stardom. A month later, on July 2, Harlow and Bern married to everyone's surprise. They appeared to all to be very much in love.

On Sept. 5 he was dead.

An inquest was held in which numerous witnesses appeared. Harlow, citing emotional strain, was not there. Testimony revealed Harlow leaving their marital home and going to her mother's for dinner while Bern stayed behind.

The police told of the physical evidence: Bern found dead of a single gunshot wound to the head, the weapon underneath his body. While the location of the suicide note was discussed, surprisingly the note itself was not.

Regardless, the conclusion reached was "suicide ... motive undetermined." MGM supplied the motive: impotency.

And so the judgment, valid to this very day.

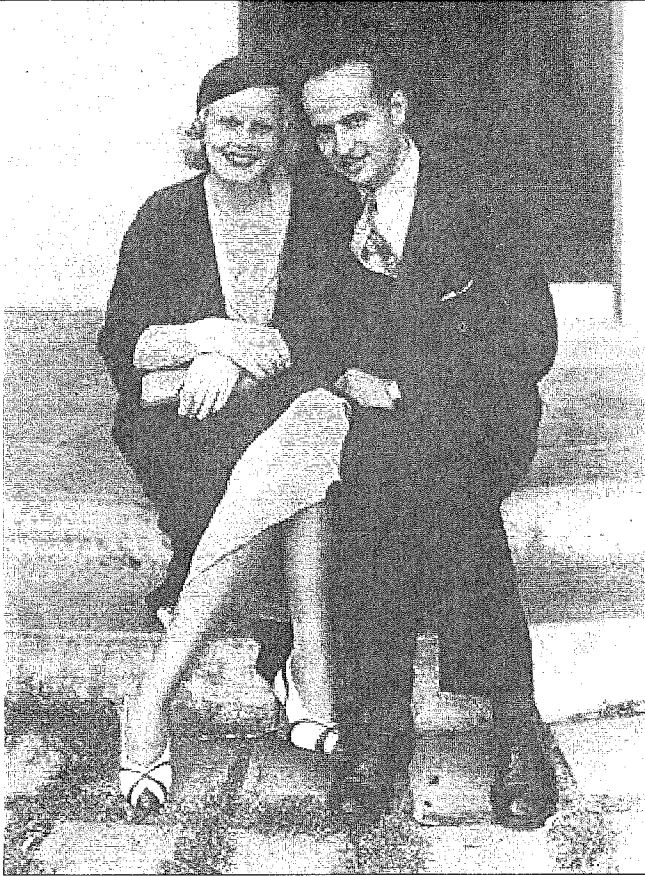
A more likely scenario

At all costs, the image of MGM and its stars had to be preserved and protected. Scandal was unacceptable. Taking care of the distasteful Bern matter were the head of MGM security, Whitey Hendry, and its publicity director, Howard "The Fixer" Strickling. Both were on the scene before the police.

The inquest never heard from a neighbor who saw a limousine deposit a "woman in black" at Bern's house. Later, the neighbor heard loud voices, intermittently arguing and laughing.

Nor did it hear any evidence concerning

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Jean Harlow and Paul Bern

Dorothy Millette, who was far more than a casual prior girlfriend of Bern. They had earlier lived together in New York and held themselves out as husband and wife. Indeed,

Bern's earlier will left everything to "my wife Dorothy."

Bern paid for Millette's living expenses at the famed Algonquin Hotel. His motive appeared altruistic given Millette's serious mental health issues.

Frequently threatening to join him to rekindle both their relationship and her acting career, she made good when she checked out of the Algonquin and traveled first to San Francisco and then Los Angeles.

She was the woman in black. They argued and she shot him, using one of his guns. She fled, leaving behind a single shoe never given to the police, in a waiting MGM limo that Bern had earlier called. The voucher for the trip indicated that she was driven to San Francisco.

As for the undated, ambiguous "suicide note," it was either forged or more likely it referred to a prior tiff between the parties.

Most damaging, long after he left the studio, Hendry confided to a friend that he had arranged the crime scene to make it look like a suicide.

Epilogue

A few days after the murder, Millette killed herself. Penniless and about to be buried in a pauper's grave, an anonymous donor paid for her burial in an upscale cemetery. Her tombstone read: "Dorothy Millette Bern 1886-1932."

The donor? Jean Harlow.

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In addition to writing, Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. He can be contacted at rmackantrowitz@comcast.net. The above column is based, in large part, on "Deadly Illusions: Jean Harlow and the Murder of Paul Bern" by Samuel Marx and Joyce Vanderveen.