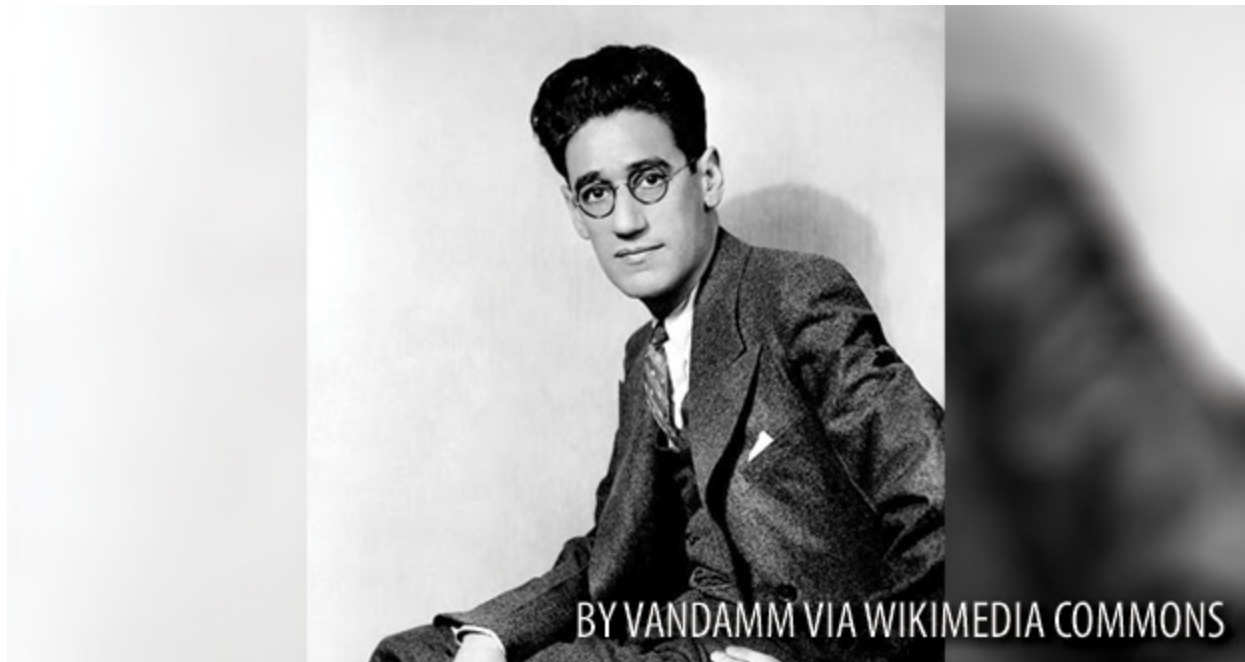


The sex scandal of 1936



By R. Marc Kantrowitz
Massachusetts Lawyer's Weekly
March 22, 2018

A rather ordinary-looking man with a fear of germs, he did possess a great head of hair. As an added bonus, he stood over 6 feet tall. Most alluring, though, was the fact that he was one of America's foremost playwrights.

A virgin when he married in his later 20s, his timing was off. Most sow their wild oats in anticipation of marriage. He decided to do so after. Some friends and fellow wits quickly dubbed him "Public Lover #1," while others tagged him a male nymphomaniac.

George S. Kaufman, when not regaling people as a member of the renowned Algonquin Round Table, was dazzling audiences with a string of Broadway hits.

Meanwhile, 3,000 miles away in Hollywood, Mary Astor was making her mark in the movies. On husband number two, she, too, strayed — and unwisely recounted her numerous conquests in a diary. Shortly, the world would eagerly lap up what she wrote.

Born Lucile Vasconcellos Langanke, in 1903, to a harsh and haughty father who viewed himself in an unwarranted regal light, and a meek mother who essentially despised her only child, she morphed into the stately Mary Astor at the age of 14.

With her unloving parents viewing the attractive and talented child as their private cash cow (on a \$2,500 a week salary, she was given a \$5 allowance), she sought love elsewhere. He came in the form of her 41-year-old co-star, John Barrymore, with whom she entered into her first sexual affair, statutory rape laws be damned.

Although perhaps the love of her life, as many first loves tend to be, they both moved on: Barrymore to another film star, and Mary eventually marrying an attractive, undersexed film director, Kenneth Hawks, in 1928. Given his lack of interest, Mary turned elsewhere, quickly becoming pregnant and just as quickly having an abortion. Two years later, while filming an aerial scene on "Such Men Are Dangerous," a film about World War I flying aces, Hawks proved the point by perishing, along with nine others, when two planes collided.



Despite her continuing movie work and the support of friends, Astor suffered from the tragedy and soon came under the care of Dr. Franklyn Thorpe for treatment of a mysterious rash. They married in 1931. As with her father, Astor found herself exploited, both emotionally and financially, by a hot-tempered husband who was 13 years her senior and an inch shorter than her 5'6" stature.

Thorpe essentially abandoned his practice when they purchased a yacht and sailed off to Hawaii, where they had their first and only child, Marylyn Hauoli Thorpe. Nellie the English nanny helped raise the girl.

Though finally away from her parents, who over the course of a decade stole 95 percent of her earnings, Mary found herself being sued by them for continued support. Even with a favorable outcome to the suit — she agreed to pay them \$100 a month — she was drained and unhappy, with both she and Thorpe engaging in extracurricular marital activities.

The year was 1933. She needed a break; New York beckoned. George Kaufman and scandal awaited.

Although Kaufman had married the attractive and fun-loving Beatrice Bakrow in 1917, their marriage was an open one. They traveled their own sexual highways, but always came together in the end.

Kaufman and Mary met through friends and quickly grew enchanted with each other. In her diary, she wrote of the prodigious sexual appetite of "G." and his amazing stamina. With Kaufman's great wit serving as an aphrodisiac and his sexual appetite conquering his ever-present fear of germs, Mary found the entire affair exhilarating.

And then it ended. She had to return to work and Hollywood. And divorce.

Going from the funny, wry and satisfying Kaufman to her brute of a husband, Astor announced she wanted a divorce. Thorpe, unwilling to give up the money and lifestyle Mary afforded him, resisted. Arguments ensued.

Aware she kept a diary, Thorpe found it and threatened to use it. When Mary asserted that she wanted custody of their daughter, he responded that the diary's contents proved her to be an unfit mother.

The trial started at the end of July. As Mary was filming her latest movie, "Dodsworth," the judge, rather than grant a short continuance, decided that the proceedings would be held at night, starting at 7 on a Monday. And the fiasco started.

To get a jump on the trial, the unscrupulous Thorpe started leaking what he claimed were the contents of the diary to a panting press. Notwithstanding Mary's claim that Thorpe had stolen and doctored the diary, the press reported what would sell papers: "Mary's Scorecard," "Mary's Conquests," "What major star scored a zero?" "Who is the mysterious G?" With the press swarming the courtroom, the trial was moved to larger quarters to accommodate the oncoming tsunami.

Astor was terrified. Not only did she face losing custody of her daughter, but also the real possibility of losing her career. Fearing a strong public backlash, pressure was mounting on the studio to use the morality clause in her contract to fire her. As an added bonus for the press and public, Thorpe's infidelity came to light in a dramatic manner. First denying he ever cheated on his movie-star wife, he was confronted with a card from one of his lovers, reading: "How deeply do I love you sweetheart."

Nellie the nursemaid confirmed his wanderings, placing four different women, including a "Norma the flashy blonde," spending evenings with him. Moreover, when Norma

stabbed Thorpe twice during a spat, the police was summonsed. Thorpe's alleged first marriage and apparent non-divorce added to the salaciousness.

On Thursday evening, Mary took the stand and faced a similar onslaught. Although the judge ruled that the diary itself would not be admitted as it was possibly altered, its contents could nonetheless be used.

It quickly came out that "G" was none other than the noted playwright George S. Kaufman, for whom Astor deserted her child, Thorpe's attorneys alleged, rendering her an unfit parent. The diary entries were so vivid that, whether forged or not, even the press could not quote them directly.

Time told of Mary's "thrilling ecstasy [with Kaufman who] fits me perfectly," of their "many exquisite moments," "twenty — count them, diary, twenty," "I don't see how he does it ... he's perfect."

As Kaufman happened to be in Los Angeles at the time, Thorpe wished to have him testify and verify what was written in the diary. Needless to say, the private playwright was mortified. He avoided the court order to appear, hid and then fled, winding up in Chicago.

With the spotlight burning the studios, political pressure was surreptitiously applied to the judge and others to end the fiasco. Adhering to the dictates of the court, the matter was "settled," with the parties sharing custody of their daughter. Mary's post-Kaufman affair with one of his close friends would not come up.

Epilogue

"Dodsworth" was released to rave reviews a few months after the trial concluded. A year later, Kaufman won a Pulitzer Prize for drama, one of many awards he garnered over his lengthy career.

Astor continued to star in numerous hits, including the classic "The Maltese Falcon" in 1941 with Humphrey Bogart. That same year, she won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in "The Great Lie." She never saw Kaufman again and married twice more, having one more child.

Beatrice Kaufman died in 1945, devastating George.

As for the diary, the judge impounded and sealed it. It was retrieved and destroyed by court order 16 years later.

The above column is based on "Mary Astor's Purple Diary" by Edward Sorel, as well as on internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a retired judge, can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.