



THE MAJOR
NBC-TV EVENT STARRING
LONI ANDERSON

HOT TODDY

The True Story of Hollywood's Most Shocking Crime -
The Murder of Thelma Todd

ANDY EDMONDS

(CANAL)

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Most Shocking Crime—
The Murder of Thelma Todd**

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DEDICATED TO:

Ann D. McMahon Wilson, “Mac,” because Thelma would have wanted it that way

Ginny Mullaney, who bridged the past with the present through her generosity

“Trust me.”

PREFACE

No murder can really be considered solved until every question is answered, every shred of evidence taken into account, every alternate theory unraveled, and every loophole closed. A murder must be considered in its entirety, weighed against the events of the time and in relation to the people in proximity to the victim. All aspects must be fully explored, all the pieces of the puzzle must be measured, and they must all fit. A murder should be considered the final sequence in a chain of events; the events leading up to the murder are often as important as the actual killing—if not more important in some cases.

The brutal murder of comedienne Thelma Todd has captured the imagination and fascination of film fans and murder-mystery buffs for more than fifty years. Since the 1935 killing, many theories have surfaced; some died a natural death, others remain because they were based on fragments of evidence. Numerous magazine writers and book authors have claimed the murder “solved,” only to dredge up further questions, leave more loopholes, without ever reaching an unshakable conclusion. In any event, no murder has garnered more bizarre solutions and as much false information through the years.

When the beautiful blond actress was found battered and bloodied in her Lincoln Phaeton convertible on a cold December night, authorities immediately declared it a suicide, and desperately tried to close the case. But they achieved just the opposite. By insisting it was suicide, they opened the floodgates of fantastic speculation, a succession of confessions by strangers and friends, and lurid details of Thelma Todd’s private life—a life that skirted death in the fringes of the underworld.

Those who were suspected had plenty of reason to kill the woman known as "Hot Toddy."

Roland West, her sometime lover/business associate in the Sidewalk Cafe, wanted out of the business because of continued pressure to lease the third floor as a gambling casino. That pressure came from gangster Charles "Lucky" Luciano, a companion of Todd's. Thelma refused to buy West out, and then refused to lease the floor to Luciano, bringing further pressure on West. West was also jealous of an affair Thelma was having with a San Francisco businessman, and in many ways he blamed his fall from grace in the movie industry on Thelma and their ill-fated film project *Corsair*. West remained a prime suspect for fifty years.

Charles Smith, cafe treasurer, was suspected by both Todd and West of juggling the cafe's books, draining the account, and either pocketing the money or turning over a cut to the underworld, which had been infiltrating the cafe and other restaurants. Todd was going to have a professional accountant examine the books after the first of the year. Her death stopped the audit, and there was no solid evidence against Smith.

Lucky Luciano had been intimate with Thelma for the last two years of her life. He put her on the road to drug addiction, hoping to force her into leasing the cafe for his gambling operation. She also started getting close to the heart of Luciano's West Coast business—gambling, drugs, and prostitution—and she suspected Luciano and others in the "Million Dollar Movie Shakedown," which established gang rule in the movie industry. He had plenty of reason to see Toddy dead.

Her former husband, Pasquale "Pat" DiCicco had a violent temper and had beaten Todd during their whirlwind courtship and brief, stormy marriage. He introduced her to Luciano, who, he felt, stole her away. DiCicco felt betrayed by Todd because of her interest in Luciano. He reportedly returned after their cold and abrupt divorce to claim a new part of the cafe, a steakhouse Toddy was just about to open. He was seen with Toddy hours before she

was found dead, and he was identified by several witnesses as the last man to see her alive.

Thelma had also been receiving a series of death threats and extortion notes from strangers who used such names as "The Ace" or "A Friend." She bought a bull terrier for protection and carried a gun in her purse.

I first became interested in the murder of Thelma Todd a number of years ago, in 1980, while researching a book on comedian Charley Chase, a popular but forgotten funnyman who died in 1940. Todd made eleven comedies with Chase and he returned the favor by directing what is considered to be her best comedy, *The Bargain of the Century*. While talking to Chase's co-stars at the Hal Roach Studios, I started learning about this beautiful, bright, bubbly blonde they lovingly called Toddy.

Those stories sent me digging through old newspaper and magazine clippings, court, police, and coroner's records, as well as interviewing men who live on the other side of the law, who had inside knowledge of the killing or of the workings of Luciano, Al Capone, and Frank Nitti. My research took me from Los Angeles to Florida, Chicago to Lawrence, Massachusetts. It was through seven years of exhaustive research, based upon the stories and accounts given to me by these people and gleaned through transcripts and records, that the final, shocking solution to the murder came to light.

The incidents related in the book were obtained through interviews and from personal letters and memorabilia of Thelma Todd's. The dialogue also is based upon these stories or gleaned from letters saved or conversations remembered by friends of the actress.

What follows is, I believe, the true story of the murder of Thelma Todd—a woman who had a compulsive attraction to gangsters learned at her father's knee, an attraction that eventually cost her life. Thelma was destined to die young; the most tragic part of the story is that she realized it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would also like to thank the many people who shared their time and memories with me through the years and helped add invaluable pieces of information for this book. "Tall oaks from little acorns grow." Among the many—Mr. Hal Roach, June Chase Hargis, Anita Garvin Stanley, Venice Lloyd, Roy Seawright, T. Marvin Hatley, Lassie Lou Ahern, Muriel Evans, Lois Laurel Hawes, Dorothy Granger, Mike Hawks, historian/author Randy Skretvedt, Dick Bann, my dearest Joe Rock, the folks at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Herrick Library, Douglas Hart of Backlot Books, Malcolm Willet of Collectors Book Store, Chicago P.D. Detective "Bald Eagle," Betty Brown (Mrs. Thad Brown of the LAPD), Andy Reynolds and Tom McDonald of the Los Angeles District Attorney's office, the men in "Docky's kitchen," and several others who must remain anonymous, who loved Thelma and her movies, and shared files and information that provided the glue.

The following books have also provided a wealth of information:

The Legacy of Al Capone by George Murray
Laurel and Hardy (The Magic and the Movies) by Randy Skretvedt
The Warner Bros. Story by Clive Herschhorn
The Paramount Story by John Douglas Eames

The Great Movie Shorts by Leonard Maltin (which helped cut several large corners when compiling the filmography)

Most of all, I'd like to thank my mom and dad, Leona and Norman, for their help and encouragement, and for putting up with a seven-year obsession.

“There’s going to be a change in my life, and it’s going to happen before the first of the year.”

—THELMA TODD (to dressmaker Helen Ainsworth)

“Now be a good girlie, or I’ll lock you up in the garage.”

—GROUCHO MARX (in their movie *Monkey Business*)

“My daughter has been murdered!”

—ALICE TODD (to newspaper reporters)

“There are so many mysterious and unusual circumstances in this case that I recommend a grand jury investigation.”

—FRANK NANCE (Los Angeles County coroner)

“I have obtained independent information that could indicate foul play in Miss Todd’s death.”

—GEORGE ROCHESTER (grand-jury foreman)

“We have a middle-aged woman here who claims she knows the identity of the man who killed Thelma Todd . . . that man is staying in a hotel here in Ogden, Utah.”

—RIAL MOORE (Ogden police chief in an unanswered telegram to the Los Angeles police)

“I can’t speak out of fear I’ll be kidnapped and killed.”

—ALEX HOUNIE (Trocadero head waiter)

“Witnesses before the grand jury are not being as helpful as they might be. Why? Are they afraid?”

—BURON FITTS (Los Angeles County district attorney)

“You’ll open a gambling casino in my restaurant over my dead body!”

—THELMA TODD (during an argument with mobster Lucky Luciano)

“That can be arranged.”

—CHARLES “LUCKY” LUCIANO
(in response to Todd’s threat)

CHAPTER ONE

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1935. PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIFORNIA

It was just after midnight in the quiet Southern California beachside community. A typical winter night: cold, damp, the temperatures struggling to climb above the nighttime low of 37 degrees. It was a winter chill that cut right to the bone of Southern Californians, who were better prepared for the hot, smoggy afternoons than the frosty December nights. The waves settled down from their earlier high tide, cresting three to four feet, crashing down hard against the sandy shoreline. It was a crash that should have been heard echoing a mile away, but was oddly muffled by the thick, choking fog that was still rolling in offshore. It was the type of fog that cut a scream down to a whisper; so thick it was impossible to see five feet ahead. It was an eerie fog that sent wealthy Palisades residents locking doors and windows out of fear someone might be lurking in the shadows or standing right outside, concealed under the shroud of darkness. Only a week before, on a night like this, three beachside homes had been robbed, one woman beaten. The robber was still out there, somewhere.

Expensive, Spanish-style houses dotted the coastline, tucked away between the rolling hills that edged the shoreline and the rambling, winding coastal road, Roosevelt Highway (now called Pacific Coast Highway). At the edge of the highway, nestled on the Palisades/Malibu border, was a popular restaurant, usually crowded with movie stars, politicians, and, as 1935 wound to a close, gangsters.

Posetano Road snaked up three levels above the restaurant, each level dead-ending, dotted with expensive homes breaking up the seemingly endless brush and weeds that blanketed the hillside. A two-car garage was set into the hillside at the point where Posetano Road met Stretto Way. It had two wooden doors, separated in the middle by a cement post; a small apartment was just above the garage; to the far right of the double doors—a single doorway; behind the doorway—a stairway that led to an opulent, massive house in the hills above. The garage and apartment shared an address—17531 Posetano Road. Both the garage and the main house in the hills above were owned by Roland West and his fading beauty-queen wife, Jewel Carmen. The front entrance to the main house was one road above Posetano Road at 17320 Robelo Drive. Everything appeared quiet on this cold December morning. Yet in the garage, behind the closed wooden doors, a macabre and horrifying death scene was unfolding.

A young blond woman was slumped forward across the steering wheel of her 1934 Lincoln Phaeton convertible. The engine was sputtering, choking, misfiring, burning up what little oxygen was left in the dank garage. The room was rapidly filling with deadly carbon monoxide, enough to choke the car's engine, enough poison gas to kill an adult in minutes. The young woman coughed, fighting to bring herself back to a state of semiconsciousness. As she struggled to lift her head off the steering wheel of her chocolate-brown car, she coughed again, this time coughing up blood that slowly trickled out of the corner of her mouth. It was a warm sensation against her cold skin, which was growing numb from the ravages of a savage beating and suffocation from carbon monoxide.

Still drowsy, still teetering on the brink of death, she clumsily reached for the keys, dangling in the ignition near the steering column. She could not muster the strength to turn off the engine. Taking one last breath, she reached to her left for the thick, leather-lined car door, which had been left ajar. The door was just beyond her feeble touch and she was too weak to slide toward it. She collapsed, wedged between the steering wheel and the seat, her fists

clenched in frustration. Her life had slipped away; her once beautiful body, now brutally disfigured from a beating, her once creamy-white skin a contorted crimson-red, her blond curls scattered across the face that had catapulted a naïve little girl from Lawrence, Massachusetts, to movie-star status.

As her body lay limp, the last bit of life flowed from her mouth, across her cheek, and dripped onto the lining of her elegant fur coat. The young woman died alone in the garage, above the restaurant that bore her name: "Thelma Todd's Sidewalk Cafe."

Mae Whitehead arrived on schedule that fatal Monday, shortly before ten o'clock as she did every morning. Her first duties as Thelma Todd's maid were to take the Phaeton convertible out of the main house and drive it two streets below, to the apartments at Castellemmare Drive, at the rear of the Sidewalk Cafe. The right garage door was now mysteriously open about six inches, enough to have allowed the carbon monoxide to dissipate during the night. When Whitehead discovered Todd's bloodied and battered corpse, she thought her mistress was merely asleep behind the wheel, passed out from yet another night of heavy drinking and partying. Whitehead, a usually calm and cautious woman, walked to the Phaeton, gently shaking the body, whispering, "Get up, honey. C'mon now, wake up, baby." The body was still limp but cold. When Whitehead saw Thelma's crimson-colored face, she knew she was staring at the face of death. She ran from the garage, hysterical, screaming, "She's dead! She's dead! Miss Todd's dead!"

Delirious and frightened, Mae Whitehead raced down the 270 cement steps that led from the death garage to the rear of the Sidewalk Cafe. Out of breath, nearly fainting from panic and dizzy from exhaustion, Whitehead pounded on the rear door, a door used as an entryway to the apartments of Todd and her part-time lover, former movie director Roland West. She pounded frantically, raving wildly about blood, death, and murder.

The pounding and maniacal ranting roused West from a fitful night's sleep. He stared groggily at Whitehead as

she rambled on about the gruesome scene in the garage above. She grabbed West by the arm and dragged him to the site. He was still bleary and confused until they peered into the garage together. But when West saw Todd's lifeless body and bright-crimson face, he was jolted to his senses. A horrible nightmare had actually come true.

Suddenly taking control, West ordered Whitehead to close the door, leave everything as she had found it, and get Rudy Schaefer, the cafe business manager, who was staying upstairs in the Carmen home. He phoned Todd's doctor, J. P. Sampson, who then called the police. West headed back to his apartment. The time was 10:45 A.M. Usually quick to arrive on the scene of a crime, especially when a celebrity was involved, this time the police were surprisingly slow. The first investigators did not show up until forty-five minutes after Sampson's phone call.

The first official at the scene was Los Angeles Police Captain Bert Wallis, head of the LAPD's homicide squad. When he arrived at the cafe, he ordered the now-calm Mae Whitehead, Schaefer (who had just emerged from the Carmen house ahead of cafe treasurer Charles Smith, who was also living there), and the increasingly nervous Roland West to accompany him and his officers to the garage. When they opened the heavy door, they saw a shocking sight—Thelma's body had moved.

When Whitehead and West left the body nearly an hour earlier, it was wedged between the seat and the wheel. When Wallis brought them back to the scene, the corpse had fallen to the left, slumped across the leather seat, clear of the steering wheel. How could the body have moved so drastically? Had someone returned to the garage to alter the evidence, to erase fingerprints from keys and car, and in doing so, inadvertently moved the body? Whitehead screamed and fainted. West turned white and shook violently. As Wallis peered at Todd's body, Los Angeles County Medical Examiner A. F. Wagner drove up to the garage. Wallis conferred with Wagner, filling him in on what little information he was able to obtain from Whitehead, who had been taken into Carmen's house, and West, who babbled on with vague and rambling stories. Wallis

ordered his crew to halt their investigation immediately and get out of the garage, to conduct their probe elsewhere on the premises. Wagner was then free of intruders and began his preliminary examination before police had dusted the car, the keys, and the garage for fingerprints and remnants. Valuable evidence was now being permanently altered and destroyed.

In his notebook, Wagner detailed Todd's bright-crimson skin color, immediately determining the cause of death to be carbon-monoxide poisoning. He noted bruises around her neck, and attributed them to "postmortem lividity" caused by an involuntary jerking motion of her neck triggered by a violent reaction to the poisoning moments before death. Her nose was broken, obviously, Wallis asserted, from a jolting forward of her head, which slammed into the hard, rigid steering wheel. He accounted for two cracked ribs on the right side of Thelma's rib cage as resulting from the same incident. Bruises and swelling, Wagner claimed, were caused by the deadly gas—a common reaction, he pointed out in his notebook. He took a blood sample, and later found it contained 70 percent carbon-monoxide saturation (the identical saturation level as blood samples taken off the running board). Her blood-alcohol content was .13, with .10 being considered enough to intoxicate. Wagner believed his findings pointed to one conclusion.

As Wagner wrapped up his examination inside the garage, police carried out their investigation of the surrounding area, primarily questioning West, Whitehead, Smith, and Schaefer. West told authorities that he waited for Todd to return from a Saturday night of partying at the Trocadero. When she stayed out past two in the morning against his orders, he went to bed, locking the doors, assuming she had the proper keys to get into the building.

The building had an elaborate key system because the cafe had had several close calls with prowlers. Questions about which keys fit what locks, and which of the keys Thelma had or had not been carrying the night of her death caused tremendous confusion throughout the inquest.

The front entrance to the building was just off the highway. The door to the cafe was to the left, a drugstore off to the right. In the center were two wooden doors: This was considered the "main entrance." It had one lock and Todd and West each had a key. It is believed Thelma was not carrying this key when she was killed.

Behind the wooden doors, inside the building, was a stairway; at the top of the stairway was another set of doors that opened to an isolated courtyard off Castellammare. These doors on the second floor were considered the "outside door" and most vulnerable to breakins because of their secluded location. These doors required two, separate keys as an extra security measure. Todd and West each owned both keys in the two-key set. The doors were double-locked from the inside by West on the fateful Saturday night. Todd and West used these doors during the day to avoid cafe customers entering near the main door, but Thelma rarely used these doors at night out of fear because of their seclusion. It was at this door that Whitehead usually parked Thelma's car.

Just to the right of those doors was a small apartment, with its own door and lock, used primarily as a guest room because of its privacy and easy access to the nearby footbridge that led to the beach. Todd and West rarely carried this key and almost never used this entrance.

The actual apartment shared by Todd and West was on the right of the building, above the drugstore, overlooking the ocean, with Thelma occupying the area nearest the center of the building, West living in the area nearest the footbridge to the extreme right. This had a front entrance just off the landing above the staircase, and a common entrance through a sliding door, erected to give the appearance of "friendship" rather than romance. How often that door remained locked is unclear.

When Thelma returned and found herself locked out of the main entrance, West surmised, she walked around the block, up the 270 cement steps from the restaurant to the garage, thinking she would sleep in her car. (If this was the case, it would be logical to assume Thelma would go through the garage to the West/Carmen home, or wake

up the Smiths in the apartment above the garage.) West guessed that to stay warm, Thelma turned on the ignition, passed out, and died. To help make his tale stick, he offered "inside information," the little-known fact that Thelma suffered from a heart condition, one so bad she was refused life insurance. That, coupled with the climb and her drinking, he claimed, did her in.

A policewoman made the climb herself to verify West's story. Though she was in adequate physical condition, she was out of breath by the time she completed the hike. It seemed likely West was telling the truth. Thelma could have passed out from drink and exhaustion. Then the policewoman noticed something unusual, something that seemed to contradict evidence uncovered before Wallis ordered everyone out of the garage. The officer's shoes were scuffed from the climb on the rough, concrete steps. An initial exam of Todd's shoes showed few scuff marks. Had she changed her shoes inside the car, or had she not made the climb as West insisted? Was it even possible that Todd had been placed in the car? The first of many puzzling fragments surfaced.

Wagner was now heading back down the hill, with Wallis close behind. They had already ruled out robbery as a motive. Twenty thousand dollars' worth of jewelry was left on the corpse, along with an expensive fur coat, still wrapped around Todd's body. Wagner felt certain his conclusions would stick, and stated the cause of death as suicide, though he had no real evidence to support his claim. But such a ruling would allow a quick investigation and a closed file. He pinpointed the time of death at 2:00 A.M. Sunday, ignoring the basic fact that rigor mortis sets in after twelve hours. If his time was accurate, Thelma would have been dead for more than thirty-five hours, but her body was just beginning to grow rigid when police arrived. The discrepancy seemed to cause no initial concern. Case closed. Wagner and Wallis were pleased with themselves.

As the two detectives headed back down to Roosevelt Highway, they were mobbed by reporters, who had by now heard something unusual was going on at the Side-