

THEDA BARA

An essay to accompany the Tambakos Silent Film Series
October 24, 2007: *A Fool There Was* (1915)

Oh, please, please don't call me a vampire! I want to play a kind-hearted, loveable human woman. Won't someone write me such a part?

- Theda Bara

Almost from the beginning, movies have influenced style. From Mary Pickford's golden curls to Clara Bow's bee-stung lips, from John Wayne's swagger to Jimmy Stewart's plain-faced honesty, the images actors embodied have shaped the way Americans talk, dress and act. But there was one actress who did more – she contributed a new word to the English language, a word that not only summed up her style, but went on to define an entire generation of successors.

The word was *vamp*. A slangy abbreviation of 'vampire,' it stood for a sultry, exotic, erotic woman who went through the world leaving broken men in her wake. The premiere example of this dangerous breed was a humid-eyed, pale-faced seductress who burst on the screen in 1915 and who, for the next four years, was one of the top box-office draws in the world. Her friends and family knew her as 'Teddy,' a shy, bookish homebody self-described as '*a nice Jewish girl from Cincinnati.*' Her fans knew her as the soul-devouring *femme fatale* Theda Bara.



Why do we remember Theda Bara? Not for her movies - practically the entire output of her years at the Fox Film Corporation (later Twentieth Century-Fox) has vanished, and her surviving films consist of a cheaply-shot debut, a hoary melodrama, a turgid comeback and a ghastly farewell. To modern eyes, her acting style – the 19th century 'Delsarte Method' of stylized gestures and movements - is hammy and overblown, what film researcher Kelly Brown calls 'histrionic' acting, as opposed to the 'verisimilar' style of restrained emotion more suitable to the intimacy of the camera.¹ By all rights, she should long since have passed into the twilight world of forgotten silent stars crumbling into nitrate dust, a name as lost as those of Monty Banks, John Bunny, Flora Finch or Clara Bracey. What did she have that they didn't?

'We didn't need dialogue. We had faces!' Norma Desmond boasted to Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*. And a face was *exactly* what Theda Bara had – pale, bloodless skin that set off her huge, hooded eyes, matched with a long, smoldering stare that caught popular imagination and made her a perfect visual shorthand for the era. As much as the icons of a derby and brush mustache mean 'Chaplin' – and, by extension, 'comedy' –

¹ Kelly R. Brown, *Florence Lawrence, the Biograph Girl* (McFarland, 1999).

two wide, dark, heavily kohled eyes have come to mean ‘silent movies.’² Film historian Robert S. Birchard summed up her survival:

*‘Theda Bara is unique among film stars in that her image comes down to us almost entirely from still pictures. She made something like forty films, and only a handful survive. But the images of Cleopatra and Salome, with the skimpy costumes and exotic poses, are what people remember. They don’t know the actress. They don’t know her films. But they know the image that she projected on the screen – or at least in the still pictures.’*³



The ‘vampire woman of the movies’ was born Theodosia Goodman on July 29, 1885. A rambunctious child, she showed a talent for performing from an early age, and later reminisced about dragooning the neighborhood children to her one-girl shows, where her favorite set piece, “The Dirty-Faced Brat,” was an essential part of the show.

Later, as a rather melodramatic student at the Walnut Hills High School, the *zaftig* Bara continued to draw attention, her biographer Eve Golden describing her as ‘[affecting] *black clothing, capes and mysticism and [taking] herself very seriously.*’⁴ She was anxious to begin a professional career, but bowed to her parents’ wishes and attended the University of Cincinnati for two years before dropping out in 1905 and moving to New York to conquer Broadway.

Of course, the theatrical world has never been an easy one to break into. And for a young Midwestern girl with no professional background, training or contacts, it was harder still, and we can only imagine the difficulties Bara had in getting the attention of casting directors. Pinning down where she went and what she did is a frustrating task for the researcher, but every now and then we do manage to catch sight of her for a moment, far down in a cast list under a swanky alias, usually Theodosia (or Theodora) deCoppet (or DeCoppet).⁵

She claimed to have traveled in Europe with a Shakespearean troupe, though the evidence is slight.⁶ She may have hit the Great White Way at least once in Molnar’s *The Devil*, though she certainly romped in a “summer hotel comedy” called *Just Like John* which never made it there. She might possibly have played in Yiddish theatres on the Lower East Side. She definitely worked in a touring company of the musical *The Quaker*

² The Chicago International Film Festival, for example, uses a close-up of Bara’s eyes for its logo.

³ *The Woman With the Hungry Eyes* (Timeline Films, 2006).

⁴ Eve Golden, *Vamp: The Rise and Fall of Theda Bara* (Emprise, 1996).

⁵ Pauline Goodman, Bara’s mother, was born Pauline deCoppet in 1861. When settling on her film name, Theda would discard this well-worn stage alias, choosing to adapt the surname of her maternal grandfather, François Baranger.

⁶ At the very least, she spent time in France, becoming a friend of the young Preston Sturges while recovering from a love affair gone wrong, as detailed in Donald Spoto’s biography *Madcap: The Life of Preston Sturges*.

Girl and, no doubt, made her way through other obscure productions now lost to history.⁷

All in all, it was a better career than many unlucky actresses, made at least palatable by the fact that Bara had her mother and sister living in New York with her. But it was not a particularly inspiring career either, and she had no reason to think that her next decade in show business would be any less dull than her last one:

*'By late 1914, Theda was pushing thirty and her career was going nowhere in a big hurry. After nearly ten years, she'd played no leading roles and hadn't even made a splash in bit parts. It was then that she met film director Frank Powell, who approached her with a line that was already old: "How would you like to be in the movies?"'*⁸



When Theda Bara entered showbiz in 1905, motion pictures were still a seat-of-the-pants business, with studios and producers springing up like dandelions and dying off just as quickly. By 1914 they were a serious enterprise, with a regiment of hard-headed entrepreneurs anxious to elbow their rivals out of the way. One of these was a pushy Hungarian immigrant and ex-tailor named William Fox.

Fox was an energetic, driven man. Sometime in 1903, he bought (or was swindled into buying) a Brooklyn theatre where he began showing movies, and within four years had parlayed his hole-in-the-wall investment into fifteen movie houses. In 1907, he established the Box Office Attractions Film Rental Company, becoming a movie distributor as well as exhibitor, but his ambitions were thwarted by a powerful cabal of movie studios led by Thomas Edison.

Although the Edison Company had helped to pioneer the development of motion pictures, the inventor himself had initially resisted showing one movie on a screen to an audience; the real profit, he thought, lay in single-viewer kinescopes. But once it was clear that crowds *would* hand over money - and repeatedly! - to see movies, the Wizard of Menlo Park sprang into action, claiming that all cameras and projection equipment in use were derived from his patents, and demanding that other moviemakers knuckle under or face a flurry of lawsuits. Rather than engage in a protracted and expensive fight they might not win, ten major studios agreed to honor Edison's patents and joined together to pool their assets in one monopoly, the Motion Picture Patents Company. *'In brief the Patents Company proposed to license exchanges to deal in the film to be made by the licensed studios, which film was to be rented only to theatres using licensed projection machines. . . [n]o unlicensed film could be handled and no licensed film could be served to any but licensed theatres. It was all a neat package from studio to exchange to theatre. Everybody had to have a license except the patron and he paid at the box office.'*⁹ Independent distributors like Fox were effectively shut out.

⁷ Bara kept detailed scrapbooks of her stage and movie career. Sadly, the ones covering the period before 1913 were lost in an apartment fire.

⁸ Golden, *op. cit.*

⁹ Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights* (Simon and Schuster, 1926).

Some studios, such as I.M.P. (later Universal), Nestor and Thanouser blithely ignored the Patents oligopoly. Fox, however, sued under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, won an out-of-court settlement, and permanently crippled the Patents Company. He also began making his own movies.

The new studio, filming on the old Willat lot in Fort Lee, New Jersey, rolled out its first film in October of 1914 with *Life's Shop Window*, a five-reel adaptation of Victoria Cross' 1907 novel. Reviews were cool and the profits not good enough for Fox. He needed a sure-fire smash. Then into his life came Theda Bara, Frank Powell and the movie that would put the Fox Film Corporation on the map – *A Fool There Was*.



Fool was based on the play by Porter Emerson Browne, who'd taken his inspiration from Rudyard Kipling's poem *The Vampire*,¹⁰ which, in turn, had been inspired by the Philip Burne-Jones painting of the same name. Browne's play was laughable hackwork. It is the story of The Vampire, a "vindictive sociopath. . .[who] is – in modern terms – a total freak in bed."¹¹ Furious at being publicly snubbed by society matron Mrs. John Schuyler, she decides to seduce and destroy the husband of her snobby social enemy. It was a popular play, so Fox was certain audiences would pay to see it on the screen. He quickly snapped up the film rights and began putting his cast and crew together.

Meanwhile, actor / director Frank Powell was a few miles away with the Pathé studio wrapping up *The Stain*, a long-forgotten feature known to film buffs only because it featured Theda Bara in her debut performance. Considering her later reputation as 'the wickedest woman in the world,' it is amusing to see her in front of the camera dressed in the sober black robes of a nun. She doesn't do much, but it was apparently enough for Powell, who was determined to cast her in *A Fool There Was*, which Fox had hired him to direct. Fox watched her rushes, liked what he saw, and signed Bara to a five-year contract at \$150 per week.

The shooting of *Fool*, in New York and Florida, went quickly – so quickly, in fact, that some scenes look like rough rehearsals rather than final prints, and the inexperienced Bara is painfully stiff in the opening minutes of the film. But she was a quick student, and once she partners with Edward José, a stage and screen veteran playing the role of the doomed husband, she loosens up: '*her movements [become] fluid and snakelike, her facial expressions more natural.*'¹² By January of 1915, the movie had been edited and was ready for release. Only one last touch was needed.

Al Selig and Johnny Goldfrap, two ex-*New York World* reporters, were signed up by Fox to promote his new film and his new star. They succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams, to the point where, ninety years on, some of their tall tales are still

¹⁰ Which provided Bara's movie with its title, cribbed from Kipling's opening lines 'A fool there was and he made his prayer - /(Even as you and I)/To a rag of bone and a hank of hair - /(We called her the woman who did not care)/But the fool he called her his lady fair - /(Even as you and I).'

¹¹ Chris Edwards, *A Fool There Was* review at silent-volume.blogspot.com.

¹² Golden, *op. cit.*

repeated as sober fact. In his wonderful, exhaustive history of the silent screen, *A Million and One Nights*, Terry Ramsaye recounts ‘the building of the great Bara myth:’

‘Immediately Miss Goodman began to acquire a most amazing atmospheric past. Conscienceless typewriters plied the motion picture columns of the press with the announcement that Theda Bara was the daughter of a French artist and an Arabian mistress, born on the sands of the Sahara. . . [t]his deadly Arab girl was a crystal gazing seeress of profoundly occult powers, wicked as fresh red paint and poisonous as dried spiders. The stronger the copy grew the more it was printed. Little girls read it and swallowed their gum with excitement.’¹³

For those of us accustomed to tales of studios ruthlessly erasing the beans-and-franks origins of their stars – think of Bristol poor boy Archie Leach transformed into the suave Cary Grant - all of this sounds very familiar. But Selig and Goldfrap’s genius lay in the fact that their version of Theda Bara’s life ‘tipped people off from the beginning that she was not what she pretended to be.’¹⁴ Robert Birchard, whom we have quoted earlier remarking on the singularity of Bara’s posthumous fame, also touched on this aspect of her publicity:

‘The thing I find most remarkable about the Theda Bara legend was that from the very beginning it was known to be a legend. And I think that’s one of the things that is so appealing about the legend. Everybody knew from the beginning that it was a joke and they were all in on the joke.’¹⁵

Knowing that the legend was a joke meant that audiences could gasp in horror at the vamp’s heartless seductions while loving and cheering Bara herself. As critic Molly Haskell noted, her ‘image of exotic, faintly malignant sexuality was far enough removed from real women not to be considered dangerous.’¹⁶

Fool was one of the most popular films of 1915, and to everyone’s surprise, Bara was an overnight triumph. This was something completely new in motion pictures; while the days of studios refusing to give out the names of their actors (for fear they would demand more money) had generally passed, “movie stars” were either well-known stage actors or screen personalities who, by repeated exposure, had become familiar to audiences over the years. Theda Bara ‘was the first film star to rise overnight from anonymity into superstardom. In the fall of 1914 she was an unknown actress. Four months later she was the world’s most famous star.’¹⁷

In Theda Bara, William Fox had found a golden goose. He now proceeded, systematically and deliberately, to kill it.

¹³ Ramsaye, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Eve Golden in *Woman*, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ *Woman*, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).

¹⁷ Golden, *op. cit.*

In March of 1915, *Fool* was still packing them in when audiences got their next look at Theda Bara. This time, she had a supporting role in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, a vehicle meant for stage star Nance O’Neil, but theatre managers – to Fox’s wonder and O’Neil’s anger - put Bara’s name on the marquee to bring in customers.

Bara was now chained to an unstoppable treadmill. For the next four years at Fox she would crank out thirty-seven movies at a rate of nearly one every seven weeks. But with rare exceptions such as the melodrama *East Lynne*, a perversely intriguing *Romeo and Juliet* or the adventurous *Under Two Flags*, the majority of them were limp variations on either the ‘bad woman / good man’ or ‘bad man / good woman’ plots. Sadly, our only real knowledge of these films and of Bara’s own critical reception come from press books, stills and reviews; in 1937 the negatives of every Fox silent were destroyed in a fire at the studio’s storage vault in Little Ferry, New Jersey, leaving only decaying reels in the hands of collectors and fans to preserve her legacy.¹⁸

Bara had high hopes for the now-lost *Cleopatra*, her 1917 “Super Production,” and threw herself with abandon into Selig and Goldfrap’s publicity stunts, posing with a mummy case in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, munching raw beef and lettuce for lunch, even solemnly asserting that she was the reincarnation of Cleopatra herself: ‘*I remember crossing the Nile on barges to Karnak and Luxor as plainly as I recall crossing the Hudson on the ferry.*’ The film broke box-office records across the country, and still photos of Bara in a ‘snake-bra’ – ‘*a halter-top consisting of two intertwined snakes with rather impolite rubies serving for eyes*’¹⁹ – remain her most iconic image. The following year she stepped into slinky costume again in a lavish adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, but it was one last diamond in a heap of trash.

1919 found her given a ridiculous role as a swarthy South Sea princess in *A Woman There Was*; when she tried for a lighter touch as Irish colleen *Kathleen Mavourneen*, she was blasted with an unexpected wave of anti-Semitic jeers. Bara couldn’t seem to put a foot right, finding herself increasingly backed into a corner by both her publicity and her studio.

From *A Fool There Was* to her last Fox film, *The Lure of Ambition*, Theda Bara made William Fox a very rich man: ‘*the Fox studio. . .1914 income of \$272,401 was microscopic compared to its 1915 take of \$3,208,201, and the numbers just kept rising. In 1919, Bara’s last big year, the studio made \$9,380,883.*’²⁰ But by the end of 1919, she was exhausted, mentally, physically and artistically. She wanted a vacation. She also wanted more money, a not unreasonable demand considering her punishing workload and box-office worth. Fox refused both requests, though whether out of petulance or

¹⁸ Bara herself had no better luck with her films; then-schoolgirl Joan Craig remembers ‘*a lot of reels*’ stored in the basement of the star’s Beverly Hills home. When Bara attempted to show some of them to Craig, she recalled, ‘*many of the prints were shrunken and cracked. Some were powder. They were no good at all. . .Unrecoverable. Theda went into a tizzy because I guess they might have been the last prints left.*’ (“*Cleopatra Dressed Here,*” *Statement* magazine, issue no. 4, 2007).

¹⁹ Golden, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Ronald Genini, *Theda Bara: A Biography* (McFarland, 1996). Fox’s 1919 profits translate out to nearly 1 billion dollars today.

because he could sense a shift in popular taste, we do not know. But he refused to renew her contract, and Bara was back where she started – outside the studio gates and out of work.



Bara didn't think her unemployment would be permanent. She took a European cruise with her sister, started dating Metro director Charles Brabin and began knocking on the doors of the other Hollywood studios. To her surprise, they all turned her down. No matter the different roles she had played at Fox, they all saw her as a vamp – and in the new 1920s world of flappers, sheiks and bootleg hooch, who needed a vamp?

Well, if the movies didn't want her, perhaps the stage would. . .

It did, but put her in a ludicrous thriller, *The Blue Flame*, playing a virginal heroine killed by a lightning bolt. Her fiancé, experimenting with a machine that brings the dead back to life, resurrects Bara only to find that she has been turned into (what else?) a soulless vampire.

The Blue Flame began out-of-town tryouts in February of 1920, proving immensely popular during its time on the road. But when it opened at the Shubert Theatre on March 15, the critics panned her mercilessly, with *The Dramatic Mirror's* blast typical of the reaction: *'To see a crude actress, no matter how famous she is in the films, unfamiliar with the rudiments of dramatic art. . .strutting about extravagantly in a series of maudlin episodes is not really worth fifteen minutes time.'* Even waspy Alexander Woolcott tried to be kind in his *New York Times* review, but couldn't resist a swipe: *' . . .she displays a fine self-possession which enabled her to proceed last evening with unflinching gravity even when the audience lost control of itself and shook with laughter.'*

Yet in spite of the brickbats, *The Blue Flame* played to packed houses for two months before going out on tour. And since Bara had negotiated a fifty-percent interest in the play, the receipts from the show made her a very rich woman.

But the show also turned her into a very big joke, dashing any hopes she might have had about returning permanently to the stage. Not without a trace of sympathy, biographer Eve Golden wrote: *'There is no getting around the fact that she was just plain awful in The Blue Flame, and it cannot be laid simply to bad writing. Whatever talent, whatever spark Theda possessed on-screen just didn't translate over the footlights. . .Theda Bara was – arguably – a brilliant and talented film actress. But as a stage star, she was hopeless.'*²¹

In 1921 she married Brabin and tried once again to launch a movie comeback. For a while it seemed as though the young turk David O. Selznick would be her savior, but his idea to adapt the Eugene Walters play *The Easiest Way* foundered, and Bara was adrift again. Finally, in 1924, the struggling Chadwick studio signed her to a film adaptation of the comedic drama *The Unchastened Woman*, which arrived on screen the following October. A beautifully-shot Bara looked lovelier than she had in years, her

²¹ Golden, *op. cit.*

lighting and makeup giving her a softer, younger look, and Chadwick spared no expense when it came to sets and costumes. But the film itself, sad to say, is underwhelming, with a dated plot and indifferent camerawork. Profits were small, and Chadwick let her go.

There was one last humiliation left. In desperation, Bara signed with the Hal Roach studio for a series of comedy shorts. The first, *Madame Mystery*, came out in December of 1926. Directed by Stan Laurel and starring his future partner Oliver Hardy as a ship's captain, Bara, in the title role, played a secret agent carrying a "helium nitrate" bomb. Originally a two-reeler, the film survives today in a choppy 20-minute reduction. A chic, slim Bara turns in a surprisingly funny performance, but Roach's ham-fisted *métier* buries her in an avalanche of non-stop slapstick and crude jokes. Brabin forbid her to continue the series, and Roach cancelled her contract.

After eleven years, Theda Bara's career was finished. She would never make another film.



Critic and essayist Molly Haskell wrote: '*. . . silent films exploited the tendency of American women to conform to type. . . the packaging of women is but another aspect of love-and-sex object consumerism, a process in which they themselves have conspired, leaving themselves open to the risk of becoming passé as the style wears off. For a movie star, the risk is particularly high: she has not just her age, but her type, to undo her. A fey Audrey Hepburn, a busty Sophia Loren, a sun-speckled Doris Day all become obsolete, while sturdy John Wayne, wearing his beat-up basics, survives from decade to decade.*'²²

To that list of discarded types, add Theda Bara. By 1926, it was clear that her fans only wanted to see her in her old 'vamp' roles. But it was just as clear that she had outlived the image. Sex was no longer something mysterious and faintly dangerous, it was *fun*. Actresses like Clara Bow, scheming only to find a complaisant 'butter-and-egg-man,' embodied the frenetic, jazzed-up attitude of postwar America. Movies were different, too. The stagy Delsarte method of Bara's days had given way to a more natural, restrained acting tone, and her performances were simply too old-fashioned to appeal to audiences. Even 'vamping' had changed; the full-blooded passion of stars like Bara and Pola Negri had cooled to the icy, mature seduction of their successors Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich.

Perhaps with an understanding director and a story blending the right amount of comedy and drama, Bara might have been able to return to films – if not in starring roles, then in solid character parts. It never happened, however, and, like Eve Golden, we can only imagine the roles she might have had if she had kept on: as Carlotta Vance in *Dinner at Eight*, perhaps, or Ellen O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* – or, imagine it, as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*!

²² Haskell, *op. cit.*

Out of habit, Bara continued to list herself 'At Liberty' in *Variety*, but over the next thirty years she gently deflected any offers that came her way, always seeming to develop cold feet when negotiations turned serious. She and Brabin settled into the roles of popular hosts, entertaining friends at lavish once-a-year banquets in their Beverly Hills home.

By the spring of 1954, Bara was suffering from digestive problems and stomach cramps; hospital tests showed she was suffering from colon cancer. She underwent surgery, but it was no use; the cancer had metastasized to her liver. At 6.55pm on April 7, 1955, she died.

Heartfelt tributes poured in from around the world, and on April 9 the *New York Times* penned a farewell to the first and best of the vamps:

*'Her audiences loved her, the men because of her unmixed femininity, the women because they were sympathetically concerned with the technique. . . On the silent screen she appealed to men's most primitive instincts. On the screen she was, indeed, a bad girl, and this was her allure. Off the screen she was a good woman, happily married for 34 years. . . Many among us who are close to her age, or even younger, will think warm and grateful thoughts of her, now that she is gone. She took other people's minds off their troubles: is not this a tribute worth having?'*²³

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²³ Genini, *op. cit.*