Hollywood’s Heinous ‘Casting Couch’ Culture That Enabled Harvey Weinstein

The disgraced movie mogul isn’t the only sexual predator who’s terrorized Tinseltown. It’s an age-old epidemic that goes back decades.

Harvey Weinstein’s alleged assault and harassment of the countless women who’ve now spoken out against him—not to mention the many others likely still preparing to come forward—was evil in a very specific, individual way. As co-founder of Miramax and The Weinstein Company, his apparent intimidation, coercion, and rape of actresses and employees were heinous offenses, and should be judged—by which I mean condemned—in their own right. He was, by all media accounts, a monster who used his power and influence to terrorize, all in order to satisfy his
perverse sexual desires. His fall from grace is justly deserved.

Nonetheless, his actions did not occur in a vacuum.

It’s not surprising to learn that rumors abounded for decades about Weinstein’s behavior—such that actress Rose McGowan has actively called out both Ben Affleck and Matt Damon for allegedly knowing full well what their benefactor was up to—given that Hollywood has a long, repugnant history with the “casting couch,” where professional opportunities are offered for carnal favors. Far from the first to ever be accused of such crimes, Weinstein is instead the latest (and, arguably, worst) perpetrator of a tried-and-true tradition in Tinseltown, where women have always been bullied, exploited, and abused in appalling ways.

For an origin to all this ugliness, one must turn to Darryl F. Zanuck, the titan who rose from working as the head of production at Warner Bros. to running Twentieth Century Fox. It was in the latter position that he supposedly begat the modern casting couch, holding conferences with a variety of starlets in his office every afternoon from 4-4:30 p.m. As some have argued, he may have learned this malicious practice from fellow studio head Harry Cohn, chief of Columbia Pictures during the first half of the 20th century, as Cohn reportedly even had a private room next to his office where he conducted his unofficial “business.” Still, no matter which of these cretins deserves “credit” for pioneering this wretched procedure, their activities helped foster the industry’s corrosive atmosphere of sexualized misconduct.

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To be sure, it wasn’t always studio executives who were fingered as predators. Famously, silent film legend Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle was accused of raping and “accidentally” murdering actress Virginia Rappe in 1921, only to be acquitted of all charges in this third trial (after two hung juries). Despite that verdict, his professional reputation never recovered, and his story only further underscored an omnipresent dynamic in which influential men were constantly eager to have their way with younger aspiring beauties—which, time has proven, too often leads to horror stories.

America’s sweetheart, Shirley Temple, said an MGM producer exposed himself to her during a 1940 meeting, when the icon was only 12 years old. Judy Garland had numerous run-ins with MGM bigwigs beginning at the age of 16, when—as she wrote in her biography—they began trying to get into her pants. The worst of the lot, according to her biographer Gerald Clarke, was MGM head Louis B. Mayer, who had a habit of telling Garland in meetings “this is where you sing” while placing his hand on her chest; it wasn’t until four years into this ordeal that she finally stood up to him by saying, “Mr. Mayer, don’t you ever do that again. If you want to tell me where I sing from, just point.”

Joan Collins claimed that, in the early 1960s, she lost the lead in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s epic Cleopatra after the studio’s top dog (presumably Maurice “Buddy” Adler) explained that the price for such an illustrious part was sex. “I had tested for ‘Cleopatra’ twice and was the front-runner,” she later recounted. “He took me into his office and said, ‘You really want this part?’ And I said, ‘Yes. I really do.’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘then all you have to do is be nice to me.’ It was a wonderful euphemism in the Sixties for you know what. But I couldn’t do that. In fact, I was rather wimpish, burst into tears and rushed out of his office.” A $1 million publicity stunt later, and Collins was out, replaced by Elizabeth Taylor.

The roll call for such shamefulness only grows longer as one nears our
present day. Marilyn Monroe, known to have been targeted by lecherous producers and studio executives, famously referred to Hollywood as “an over-crowded brothel.” Tippi Hedren has repeatedly discussed the physical and psychological abuse she suffered at the hands of Alfred Hitchcock. Helen Mirren said she was forced to show off her body for director Michael Winner while seeking a role in one of his projects in 1964. Goldie Hawn found herself unexpectedly confronted with an unclothed casting agent when she was just 19. Susan Sarandon told Elle magazine that, during her youth, she found herself at the mercy of a higher-up, stating “I just went into a room, and a guy practically threw me on the desk. It was my early days in New York, and it was really disgusting.”

Over the past few years, Charlize Theron, Thandie Newton, Megan Fox, and more have all revealed the myriad—and yet, in the end, depressingly similar—ways in which cinematic power players tried to force them into sexually compromising positions. Meanwhile, directors Roman Polanski and Woody Allen have been accused of rape—as has small- and big-screen legend Bill Cosby. More recent still, Casey Affleck settled two sexual-harassment cases out of court, though it didn’t stop him from winning an Oscar. And his brother Ben’s gropey tendencies have also just been unearthed for all to see. And on and on it goes.

That context doesn’t make Harvey Weinstein’s purported crimes against an ever-growing list of actresses—including Rose McGowan, Asia Argento, Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie, Cara Delevingne, Mira Sorvino, and Kate Beckinsale—any more palatable, or excusable; what the Hollywood giant seemingly did must be denounced on its own abominable terms. Yet it strongly suggests that Weinstein was allowed to operate like this, and for so long, because the industry has been all-too-comfortable with the very notion of the casting couch, as if it were a historic Hollywood staple on par with Grauman’s Chinese Theatre and Sunset Boulevard. Some appear to have permitted Weinstein’s behavior actively (we’re looking at you, Bob Weinstein and fellow Weinstein Company board
members), while others accepted it tacitly, shrugging any innuendo off as par for the movie-biz course. In either case, though, such detestable conduct is part of an age-old custom that can no longer remain a dirty little secret whose details are silenced by the rich and powerful (see, The New York Times allegedly squashing Sharon Waxman’s 2004 story; NBC killing Ronan Farrow’s recent exposé; or Twitter temporarily suspending McGowan from its service).

Whether female or male (such as Terry Crews, James Van Der Beek, and Corey Feldman), the voices of the victimized must be heard—both so perpetrators are punished, and so the Hollywood system that’s for so long enabled them is forever transformed.