



SHOCKING


CELEBRITY

DEATHS

AND

MURDERS

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Dylan Frost

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BookRix GmbH & Co. KG
81371 Munich

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A list of references used in the research for this book can be found at the conclusion of the final entry. Though there is dark material in this book I have strived to be sensitive and tactful in writing about the various (and often tragic) cases we will encounter. I have written crime and celebrity books before and hope that my experience in such matters makes this an interesting and balanced read.

INTRODUCTION

Despite their wealth, fame, and power, celebrities are ultimately just flesh and blood like all of us. Their status or accomplishments are not a magical shield of protection when it comes to death. In fact, in some cases, celebrities are more vulnerable than your average person. As we shall see in this book, a number of celebrities have been murdered by their own fans. A number of celebrities have also been murdered in cases that remain unsolved. Fame can be a fickle and fleeting phenomenon and Hollywood is awash with former child stars who died in tragic circumstances when the phone stopped ringing and the money rang out. Our morbid fascination with celebrity deaths has existed since the early days of Hollywood. The infamous book *Hollywood Babylon* was one of the first volumes to cash in on this curiosity.

Hollywood Babylon is a trashy cult book about Hollywood scandals and 'secrets' from the 1900s onwards. It was written by 'experimental' underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger and first published in French in 1959. Anger was once a child actor and apparently culled together all the stories he'd heard and picked up about the darker and seamier side of the film industry, a world of 'cocaine-crazed comedies' and 'amoral extravagances'. The book, which was somewhat ahead of its time with its fixation on lurid tittle tattle involving celebrities, only appeared in the United States in 1975 after being banned in the sixties.

Hollywood Babylon is witty and morbidly compelling at times but not to be taken too seriously. Anger was desperate for money at the time he wrote it and it could be construed as a piece of experimental art itself rather than a

legitimate book. Many of its claims have been completely debunked and the book is said to have created a number of urban myths that have no basis whatsoever in reality - like the story that the actress Clara Bow once slept with an entire American Football team. There are however plenty of strange tragedies and incidents in Hollywood and beyond which are verified and all too true.

In this book we will look at a number of celebrity deaths and murders. The cases that follow are eclectic and all darkly fascinating. Drug overdoses, murders, suicides, crazed fans, unsolved deaths, autoerotic asphyxiation, car crashes, freak accidents, drownings, disease, and so on. The book that follows is often dark and sad but hopefully a tactful read. While not sparing the details of these cases I have strived to also celebrate all the celebrities that are mentioned in this book. Many of the people that follow (the serial killers aside naturally) were very talented and often beloved. It is a great shame that many of them didn't live longer to accomplish more.

BRIDGETTE ANDERSEN

Bridgette Andersen was only seven years-old when she made her mark as a highly accomplished child actor in the film 1982 film Savannah Smiles. Savannah Smiles was a family film about a little girl who runs away from home. Sixty girls tested for the part of Savannah in the movie but Bridgette Andersen beat all of them to the role and was nominated for a Youth in Film Award for Best Actress. On the back of this success, Bridgette Andersen appeared as a guest on the Johnny Carson Show and acted in famous shows like The Golden Girls, Fantasy Island, Hotel, and Remington Steele. Bridgette Andersen was also in the short lived western sitcom Gun Shy. Around this time it would be hard to think of too many child actors in Hollywood who were as much in demand or appeared to have a brighter future ahead of them than Bridgette Andersen.

Andersen also appeared in television commercials and was soon drawing in a very decent income for her family. She also tested for the role of Charlie in the movie adaptation of Stephen King's Firestarter (this movie is a trifle forgotten these days but it was a pretty big deal at the time and was later a big influence on the popular Netflix TV show Stranger Things) but lost out to Drew Barrymore. This was slightly ironic because Drew Barrymore was one of the girls who lost out to Bridgette when they were casting the lead in Savannah Smiles. Bridgette Andersen and Drew Barrymore were rather similar in terms of their looks and talent so it was perhaps inevitable that they would often find themselves going up for the same child actor parts in the early 1980s.

In 1982, Bridgette Andersen also portrayed Mae West as a child in a television movie. Horror buffs might also note that Bridgette was in the 1983 anthology horror film *Nightmares*. Her later roles included the TV movie *The Parent Trap II* with Hayley Mills and an appearance in *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Bridgette Andersen worked all the time and was building a CV that most adult actors would be happy to have - let alone a child actor. Andersen was not only talented but highly intelligent for her age. She read voraciously and even learned sign language for an acting part in the 1985 film *a Summer to Remember*. Andersen seemed like someone who would be intelligent and savvy enough to make the transition into teen and young adult roles when the time came but it wasn't to be.

Sadly, like many child actors, Bridgette Andersen found that life in Hollywood was tough when she started to age out of 'cute kid' roles and become a teenager. Andersen eventually developed a drug problem and became completely estranged from her family. Acting work (which had once piled up on her doorstep when she was a little kid) was suddenly hard to come by and the telephone stopped ringing. Andersen studied theatre and ended up working in a health food store as she tried to get her life together and work out what to do next. Though she tried to kick her drug habit she was - tragically - not successful in this aim.

Bridgette Anderson died in 1997 at the age of twenty-one after a heroin overdose. She had been rushed to hospital in an unresponsive state and was eventually declared brain dead and taken off life support. The official cause of death was an accidental overdose from drugs and alcohol. Her last acting job had been in an independent film called *Locker 28* but the film was never released in the end. Bridgette did make an appearance in a 1996 Pepsi Cola commercial which aired during the Superbowl but she is hard to make her out

in the commercial. It is possible that she may have refloated her career in the end and staged an acting comeback but any chance of this happening was obviously destroyed by her drug addiction.

The story of Bridgette Andersen, sadly, was by no means new. Hollywood history is littered with child actors who went off the rails after early success and got into drugs. Bridgette Andersen was merely the latest. Ashleigh Aston Moore appeared in the 1995 film *Now and Then* when she was fourteen - for which she won a YTV Achievement Award. She had been acting since she was eleven and had also appeared in TV shows like *Northern Exposure*. Her last credit was an episode of *Touched By An Angel* in 1997. After that she drifted out of acting and vanished into obscurity. In 2007 she died of a heroin overdose at the age of 26. It seems that Moore, like a number of child stars who have fallen on hard times, tried to use drugs to fill the hole left by the loss of fame and an acting career.

Scotty Beckett was one of the kids in the popular *Our Gang/Little Rascals* series of shorts. He was acting from the age of four and signed a contract with MGM in the 1930s. His life rapidly went off the rails though - an all too familiar trope with child stars. He was arrested many times for drink driving, financial fraud, and was once caught trying to cross the Mexican border with illegal pills. He died at the age of 38 in 1968 after a suspected overdose. Brad Renfro was discovered at age 10 by director Joel Schumacher and cast in *The Client* with Susan Sarandon and Tommy Lee Jones. He went on to star in films like *Apt Pupil* and *Sleepers*. In 1998 Renfro was arrested for cocaine possession and in 2000 he attempted to steal a yacht from Fort Lauderdale harbor. Renfro had other charges for underage drinking and heroin possession. He died of a heroin overdose in 2008 at the age

of 25. It was a tragic and all too familiar waste of a Hollywood career that had begun so promisingly.

Bobby Driscoll was the voice and model of Disney's Peter Pan and won a Juvenile Academy Award in 1949. At one point he was making \$50,000 a year (with inflation that equates to half a million dollars today). Driscoll however, in a familiar child star trope, blew the money on drugs and couldn't get any work when he grew up. He died in 1968 and was buried in an unmarked grave because no one knew who he was or came forward to claim the body. It was only a fingerprint match from the police station that later enabled the authorities to deduce who he really was. There are countless other examples of doomed child stars and - sadly - Bridgette Anderson ended up part of this unenviable club.

It seems that Bridgette Anderson could never quite manage to extricate herself from friends who were a bad influence and facilitated her addictions. This ultimately cost Bridgette Andersen her young life. Because of her drug and alcohol abuse, Andersen looked older than her twenty-one years when she died. She looked tired and light years removed from the little girl who was a rising star in the early 1980s. Her ashes were scattered into the sea in Malibu.

JUDITH BARSÍ

Judith Barsi was a highly talented child actor in the 1980s and appeared in big productions like *Jaws: The Revenge*, *The Land Before Time*, and *All Dogs Go to Heaven*. She was especially good at voice acting and had no shortage of work in this field. Her home life was tragic though and she suffered domestic abuse from her unhinged and violent father. Judith's father Jozsef eventually killed both his wife and Judith before shooting himself. This happened in 1988 when Judith was only ten years-old. Judith's parents were Hungarian immigrants who had fled Soviet communism in their country (in the 1980s the countries of eastern Europe were obviously still under the control of Moscow and the Cold War had yet to show any concrete signs of thawing - though the days of the Soviet Union, unknown to anyone at the time, were numbered).

Judith was first noticed by a talent scout at a San Fernando Valley ice rink when she was five years-old. She was talented and charismatic. Judith appeared in over seventy commercials as a photogenic child actor. Judith's mother Maria was proud of her daughter and would always watch all of her commercials on television. Maria and Judith would excitedly sit on the sofa with celebration popcorn when a new commercial featuring Judith was due to air. Maria was even more proud when Judith began to be cast in movies.

However, there was a tragic cloud on the horizon in the form of Judith's father Jozsef. Jozsef was a heavy drinker prone to violent rages. He began to become paranoid that Maria might take Judith (who was obviously now the family cash cow and earning far more money than her father) and

leave him. The attitude of Jozsef Barsi was curious and unfathomable. It was almost as if he was jealous of his daughter's success and resented her accomplishments. You'd think that his daughter becoming a successful actor would have made him proud and happy but this clearly wasn't the case at all.

Jozsef Barsi was an unpredictable and intimidating man with a bad temper. When you factor in the fact that he was often drunk one can see how nightmarish the home life of Judith must have been in the end. The domestic abuse suffered by Maria and Judith began to take its toll. Judith gained weight and pulled out her eyebrows. She was under great stress at home but still somehow attending acting auditions. Judith Barsi must have been exhausted and stressed in the end juggling her acting commitments with her awful home life. It is a great shame that Maria and Judith were not able to escape from his awful man or manage to tell anyone about their dreadful situation. That might have saved their lives but - alas - it never happened.

On July 25, 1988, Jozsef crept into Judith's bedroom as she slept and shot her in the head with a handgun he owned. He was likely drunk at the time. Ten year-old Judith was killed instantly. Maria rushed out to see what the noise was - whereupon Jozsef shot her dead too. Jozsef Barsi then spent two drunken days in the house where the dead bodies of his wife and daughter still lay. He then set fire to the house and went in the garage and shot himself dead. It could be that Jozsef Barsi only realised the gravity of what he had done when he sobered up. It was too late now. The damage had been done.

At the funeral for Judith, the actor Lance Guest, who played her father in *Jaws: The Revenge*, was one of the pallbearers. Many actors and children who had appeared in

shows and movies with Judith attended the funeral to pay tribute. They were all shocked and upset by Judith's tragic demise. It was heartbreaking to think this talented little girl would never grow up now and that they would never see her again. It appears that no one outside the family was aware of how bad - and dangerous - things were at home for Judith and Maria.

Judith and her mother Maria were buried together at a cemetery in the Hollywood Hills. You won't be surprised to hear that Jozsef Barsi was buried somewhere else. No one knew where he was buried in the end and - to be brutally honest - no one cared either. The promising acting career of Judith Barsi was cut tragically short by this senseless and tragic act of violence and madness. Jozsef Barsi, for reasons that are hard to fathom, seemed to become increasingly angered and embittered by the success of his young daughter. This manifested itself in the worst way possible. The death of Judith Barsi is one of the most tragic and sad murders in the long and dark history of Hollywood.

JONATHAN BRANDIS

Jonathan Brandis appeared in his first commercial when he was four years-old and his family moved to Los Angeles to facilitate his career. He became a notable teen star and appeared in the TV miniseries Stephen King's IT (which is still fondly remembered thanks to Tim Curry's memorable and terrifying performance as Pennywise the Clown), The Neverending Story 2, and the TV show Seaquest DSV - in which Brandis played computer whiz Lucas Wolenczak. Seaquest DSV was produced by Steven Spielberg and a pretty big deal at the time although the show rather fizzled out in the end and was never terribly good. Don't ask me why, but I always remember Brandis for his part in the 1992 Chuck Norris comedy Sidekicks. In that movie Brandis played a bullied kid who dreams of being the action sidekick of the mighty Chuck Norris.

At the height of his fame, Brandis received four thousand fan letters a week and had to have security guards to protect him from adoring fans. Brandis was a clean cut looking kid and good at playing vulnerable or sympathetic characters. In his day he was one of the biggest teen stars in Hollywood. However, like many child and teen stars, Brandis found that when he got older his telephone didn't seem to ring as much as it used to. Once he began to age out of the teen roles that made him famous his career became less high profile and the parts were harder to come by.

There seems to no particular rhyme or reason to this phenomenon. Some child actors and teen stars make a fairly smooth transition to an adult acting career and maintain their status in Hollywood (one thinks of people like

Natalie Portman, Scarlett Johansson, Ethan Hawke etc) while others inevitably tend to get rather forgotten. When he got into his twenties, Jonathan Brandis seemed destined to end up as one of those teen stars who ends up rather forgotten. He was no longer a big star and those days when young fans used to congregate outside the Seaquest DSV set to get his autograph suddenly seemed like a very long time ago.

Brandis did some TV and direct to video movies and was said to be annoyed when his scenes in the Bruce Willis film *Hart's War* were cut. Jonathan Brandis was a fairly private sort of celebrity by all accounts. He didn't lead the sort of crazy hedonistic party lifestyle that other young people in Hollywood were known for. Like many of the characters he became famous for playing, Brandis was quite sensitive and shy in real life. He had a small circle of friends and was anti-drugs - though he did drink too much apparently near the end of his life. Brandis was clearly prone to depression and the extent of this depression was (in hindsight) obviously hidden from his closest friends.

In November, 2003, Brandis was found hanging in the hallway of his Los Angeles apartment in what was clearly a suicide attempt. He was taken to hospital but declared brain dead and taken off life support. Jonathan Brandis had killed himself at the age of 27. His death was a great shock to those that knew him. They never dreamed his spirits were this low because he had always seemed cheerful and funny to them in person. Jonathan Brandis left no suicide note so his death remains mysterious. It was reported in the media that Brandis killed himself because he was depressed at the way his career had fizzled out and not lived up to early expectations. This theory, on the face of it, seemed as good an explanation as any for why he taken his own life.

The theory was disputed though by the actress Danielle Harris (who is best known for her horror roles and the Halloween movie franchise). Danielle Harris knew Brandis for ten years and was one of his closest friends. She said that Brandis had no depression about his career at all and was still working steadily. Brandis apparently wasn't that bothered about securing acting jobs anymore and wanted to move into writing and directing anyway. It appears that depression and mental illness was behind the suicide of Jonathan Brandis rather than worries about his career. It is a great tragedy that he was never able to talk to anyone and get the help he patently needed. His death was a great shock to eighties and nineties kids because they had essentially grown up with Jonathan Brandis watching him on television.

TED BUNDY

Ted Bundy was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1946. Bundy is probably the most famous American serial killer of all time. Ted Bundy is often considered to be the first celebrity serial killer in that he gave television interviews and looked more like a game show host than a deranged killer. Bundy was born Theodore Robert Cowell. He got the name Bundy when his mother married a cook named Johnny Culpepper Bundy. Bundy grew up thinking that his mother was his sister. Ted Bundy's aunt said that, when he was a child, she once awoke to the sight of Bundy carefully placing knives around her sleeping form. Ted Bundy was a Peeping Tom as a teenager and also got into trouble for car theft. His elan in stealing cars was something he used to his advantage in his various prison breaks later in life.

Bundy's first official victim was killed in 1974 but he may have killed for the first time in 1961 when he just fourteen. An eight year-old girl named Ann Marie Burr vanished from her Tacoma home in August of that year. At the time, Ted Bundy was the Burr paperboy and lived only four blocks away. Ann Marie's mother later became convinced that Bundy was responsible for her daughter's disappearance but Bundy never confessed to this crime. Bundy was said to have been seen in a construction ditch shortly after Ann Marie disappeared and his uncle was teaching the girl to play piano at the time. All of these details seemed more than mere coincidence.

Ted Bundy was ultimately rejected by his first girlfriend Stephanie Brooks. Bundy said he felt socially out of depth with Brooks. She had brown hair parted in the middle - which obviously led to the theory that Bundy always sought