William Desmond Taylor (born William Cunningham Deane-Tanner) (April 26, 1872 – February 1, 1922) was an actor, successful US film director of silent movies and a popular figure in the growing Hollywood film colony of the 1910s and early 1920s.[1] His murder on February 1, 1922 along with other Hollywood scandals such as the Roscoe Arbuckle trial led to a frenzy of sensationalistic and often fabricated newspaper reports.[2] In the 1950 film Sunset Boulevard, the name Norma Desmond is a reference to both Taylor's middle name and one of his actress friends, Mabel Normand.[2] While Taylor's murder remains officially unsolved a 1964 deathbed confession by actress Ella Margaret Gibson that she "shot and killed" the director was published in 1999 and is widely considered as credible.[2]
Tanner (Taylor) had suffered "mental lapses" before and the family thought he had perhaps wandered off during an episode of aphasia. Changing his name to William Desmond Taylor, he was in Hollywood by December 1912 worked successfully as an actor (including four appearances opposite Margaret "Gibby" Gibson) before making his first film as a director, *The Awakening*, in 1914. Over the next five years he directed more than fifty films, served as an officer in the British Army and was President of the Directors Association. Taylor directed some of the great stars of his era including Wallace Reid, Dustin Farnum and his protégée Mary Miles Minter who starred in *Anne of Green Gables*.

In 1914 Taylor had fallen in love with prolific serial actress Neva Gerber during *Awakening*. By this time Taylor's former wife, who had re-married, was aware he was in Hollywood. A few years later she was in a cinema with their daughter, saw Taylor on the screen and said, "That's your father!" They began exchanging letters. In 1921 Taylor visited his daughter Tanner in New York and made her his legal heir.

**Murder**

At 7:30 a.m. on the morning of February 2, 1922, the body of William Desmond Taylor was found inside his bungalow at the Alvarado Court Apartments, 404-B South Alvarado Street, Westlake Park area of downtown Los Angeles, California, which was then known as a trendy and affluent neighbourhood.

A crowd gathered inside and someone identifying himself as a doctor stepped forward, made a cursory examination of the body, declared the victim had died of a heart attack again, perhaps out of embarrassment, because sometime later doubts arose, it was discovered the 49-year-old film director had been shot in the back.

In Taylor’s pockets were a wallet holding $78, a silver cigarette case, a Waltham ivory toothpick. A two carat (400 mg) diamond ring was on his finger. A large but undetermined sum of cash which Taylor had shown to his accountant the day before was missing and apparently never accounted for. After some investigation, the time of Taylor's death was set at 7:50 in the evening of February 1, 1922. Whilst being interviewed by the police five days after the director's body was found, Minter said that following the murder a friend, director and actor told her Taylor had made several highly "delusional" statements about some of his social acquaintances (including her) during the weeks before his death. She also said he had recently become "insane."

**Suspects and witnesses**

More than a dozen individuals were eventually named as suspects by both the police and the press. Newspaper reports at the time were both overwhelmingly sensationalized and fabricated and the murder was used as the basis for much subsequent "true crime" fiction. Many inaccuracies were carried forward by later writers who used articles from the popular press as their sources. Overall, most accounts have consistently focused on seven people as suspects.

**EDWARD SANDS**

Sands had prior convictions for embezzlement, forgery and desertion from the US military. Born in Ohio, he had multiple aliases and spoke with an affected cockney accent. He had worked as Taylor’s valet and cook up until seven months before the murder. While Taylor was in Europe the summer before, Sands had forged Taylor’s checks and wrecked his car. Later Sands burgled Taylor’s bungalow, leaving footprints on the film director’s bed. Following the murder, Edward Sands was never heard from again.

**HENRY PEAVEY**

Peavey was Sands’ replacement, Taylor’s African American valet who found the body. Newspapers noted that Peavey wore flashy golf costumes but didn’t
own any golf clubs. Peavey was illiterate and bisexual. He had a criminal record which included arrests for vagrancy and public indecency involving underaged boys. Taylor had recently put up bail for him and was due to appear in court on his behalf. Peavey repeatedly accused Mabel Normand of the murder (she had teased him about his wardrobe) and was initially suspected of the crime himself. In 1931, Peavey died in a San Francisco asylum where he had been hospitalized for syphilis-related dementia. [10]

**MABEL NORMAND**

Normand was a popular comedic actress and a close friend of Taylor. They might have had a romantic relationship and although she and Taylor may have argued on the evening of his murder she left his home at 7:45PM in a happy mood and carrying a book he had given her. She was the last person known to have seen him alive. The police quickly dismissed her as a suspect, as have most subsequent writers. However, Normand starred in many films with Roscoe Arbuckle whose career had become awash in scandal by the time of Taylor's murder. Her career had already slowed and her reputation was tarnished through these two scandals, along with revelations of her drug use and a third scandal involving a lover shot by her chauffeur but she continued to make films throughout the 1920s. Normand died of tuberculosis in 1930. [11]

**FAITH COLE MACLEAN**

Faith MacLean is widely believed to have seen the killer. MacLean was the wife of actor Douglas MacLean and the couple were neighbors of Taylor. They were startled by a loud noise at 8PM. MacLean went to her front door and came face to face with someone emerging from the front door of Taylor’s home whom she said was dressed "like my idea of a motion picture burglar." She recalled this person paused for a moment before turning and walking back through the door as if having forgotten something, then re-emerged and flashed a smile at her before disappearing between the buildings. MacLean decided she had heard a car backfire. She also told police looked "funny" (like movie actors in makeup) and may have been a woman disguised as a man.

**CHARLES EYTON**

Eyton was the General Manager of Paramount Studios. Several sources claim that following Taylor’s murder, Eyton entered Taylor’s bungalow with a group of Paramount employees and removed compromising items, either before police arrived or with their permission.

**MARY MILES MINTER**

Minter was a popular actress and teen screen idol whose career had been guided by Taylor. Minter, who grew up without a father, was only three years older than the daughter he had abandoned in New York. Coded letters found in Taylor’s home suggested a romantic relationship between the 49-year-old Taylor and 19-year-old Minter had started when she was 17. Although Minter said Taylor had been against their romance almost from the outset and had often declined to see her, the letters (which she had written in 1919) were at odds with her screen image. Minter was vilified in the press. She made four more films for Paramount and to renew her contract she received offers from many other producers. Never career as an actress she declined them all, left films altogether and proclaimed her love for Taylor throughout the rest of her long life, dying in obscurity (although financially comfortable due to smart investments) in 1984.

**CHARLOTTE SHELBY**

Shelby was Minter's mother. Like many "stage mothers" before and since, she has been described as consumed by wanton greed and manipulation over her daughter’s career. Both daughters and their mother were bitterly divided by financial disputes and lawsuits for a time, but Mary Miles Minter later reconciled with her mother. Shelby’s initial statements to police about the murder are still characterized as evasive and "obviously filled with lies" about
Perhaps the most compelling bit of circumstantial evidence was that Shelby allegedly owned a rare .38 caliber pistol and unusual bullets very similar to the kind which killed Taylor. After this later became public, she reportedly threw the pistol into a Louisiana bayou. Shelby knew the Los Angeles district attorney socially and spent years outside the United States in an effort to avoid official inquiries by his successor and press murder. In 1938 her other daughter, actress Margaret Shelby (who was by then suffering from both clinical depression and alcoholism), openly accused her mother of the murder. Shelby was widely suspected of the crime and was a favourite suspect of many. Adela Rogers St. Johns speculated Shelby was torn by feelings of maternal protection for her daughter and her own attraction for Taylor. Although (like Sands) Shelby feared being tried for the murder, at least two Los Angeles county district attorneys publicly declined to

**Margaret Gibson’s 1964 confession**

Margaret Gibson was a film actress who worked with Taylor when he first came to Hollywood. In 1917 she was indicted, tried and acquitted on charges equivalent to prostitution (there were also allegations of opium dealing) and changed her professional name to Patricia Palmer. In 1923 Gibson was arrested and jailed on extortion charges which were later dropped.

Gibson was 27 and in Los Angeles at the time of the murder. There is no record her name was ever mentioned in connection with the investigation. Soon after the murder she got work in a number of films produced by Famous Players-Lasky, Taylor’s studio at the time of his death. One of these films was among the last made by Mary Miles Minter. Gibson (in her words) "fled" the United States in 1934 but returned to Los Angeles in 1940 for medical reasons. In 1999 the widely cited newsletter Taylorology published an apparently credible account that on October 21, 1964, while living in the Hollywood hills under the name Pat Lewis on a modest widow’s pension from Mobil Oil, she suffered a heart attack and before dying (as a recently converted Roman Catholic) "shot and killed William Desmond Taylor" along with several other things the witness didn’t understand and could not remember more than 30 years later.

**Taylorology**

From 1993 to 2000 Bruce Long, an employee at Arizona State University (later retired), transcribed several hundred newspaper and magazine articles from the 1910s and 1920s relating to Taylor, his murder, the suspects, many of Taylor’s contemporaries and their links to Taylor. The compiled result is a journal called Taylorology which contains over a thousand pages of text and is a significant archive of primary and secondary source material relating both to Taylor’s murder and the early Los Angeles film colony.

**Case still officially open**

Through a combination of poor crime scene management and apparent corruption much physical evidence was immediately lost and the rest vanished over the years (although documents from the police files were made public in 2007). Various theories after the murder and in the years since, along with the publication of many books claiming to have identified the murderer but no hard evidence was ever uncovered to link the crime to a particular individual. Given Margaret Gibson’s thoroughly documented background the confession in the Hollywood Hills is widely regarded as credible but aside from circumstantial evidence, no independent confirmation has emerged.

**Hollywood legacy**

A spate of newspaper-driven Hollywood scandals during the early 1920s included the Roscoe Arbuckle trial and the drug related deaths of such stars as Olive Thomas, Barbara La Marr and Alma Rubens, all of which stirred Hollywood studios to begin writing contracts with morality clauses, allowing the dismissal of contractees who breached them.
The 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard* with William Holden and Gloria Swanson featured a fictional, aging silent screen actress named Norma Desmond whose name was taken from Taylor's middle name as a way to resonate with the widely publicized scandals of almost thirty years before.

Gore Vidal's 1990 novel *Hollywood* features a fictionalized account of the Taylor murder.

Taylor directed or acted in over eighty films, most of which are believed to be unmarked murder site was on the asphalt parking lot of a local discount store.

References

5. "William Desmond Taylor - Internet Accuracy Project" (biography), Internet Accuracy Project, AccuracyProject-WDTaylor.
7. Statement of Mary Miles Minter (LAPD) 7 Feb 1922 (retrieved 28 Aug 2007).
8. "Badly Wanted", Time (magazine). Retrieved on 2007-07-21. "Edward F. Sands, 34, 5 ft 5 in., for the murder of William Desmond Taylor, cinema director, whose butler he is accused of murdering. Questioned in this case were Cinemactresses Mabel Normand, last to see Taylor alive, and Mary Miles Minter whose lingerie and love letters were found in the Taylor apartment."
10. "Press Film Star For Taylor Clew; Police Conduct 'Long And Grueling' Examination, Working On Jealousy Motive. Mabel Normand Speaks Tells Reporters Affection For Slain Director Was Based On Comradeship, Not 'Love.'", New York Times, February 7, 1922, "Los Angeles, California; February 7, 1922. Swee crowds stormed the doors of St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral today in an effort to force an entrance when the funeral services were being held for William Desmond Taylor."

Further reading

External links

- Taylorology Homepage (Angelfire.com) - Links to all issues of Taylorology (4 through 97).
- Literate Web - William Desmond Taylor murder (has many photographs of suspects/locations).
- William Desmond Taylor at the Internet Movie Database.
- 1914 film with William Desmond Taylor.
- 16 Silent film celebrities connected with the Taylor murder case.
- William Desmond Taylor's Gravesite.

Results from FactBites:

- **William Desmond Taylor - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** (1696 words)
  - William Desmond Taylor (born William Cunningham Deane-Tanner, Ireland – February 1, 1922 in Los Angeles) was a successful US film director in the growing Hollywood film colony of the 1910s and early 20s.
  - Taylor had put up bail for him and was due to appear in court on his behalf.
  - The Taylor murder, along with the Fatty Arbuckle scandal and the drug related deaths of such stars as Olive Thomas, Wallace Reid, Barbara La Marr and Alma Rubens was the effort of Hollywood to purge itself of undesirable influences.

- **Literateweb - Taylorology** (2724 words)
  - Taylor's death had a deep and lasting impact on Hollywood, and was the catalyst for the formation of the Hays Office (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc, or MPPDA), which under Will Hays helped consolidate economic power among the major studios and exerted strict censorship control over most Hollywood production.
  - The bullet that killed Taylor was an older.38 caliber type that, according to at least one expert, was quite unusual and matched an unfired bullet from a pistol owned by Charlotte, which she later threw into a bayou in Louisiana.
  - Taylor's five room "bungalow", which today would probably be called right half of the building facing the camera (his front door is visible).

More results at FactBites »
Enjoy your symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out, the subject of power is complex.
Who Killed Hollywood, the feel of the world accumulates cultural custom of business turnover.
Cruisin' for a Brusin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls, lek (L) is 100 kindarkam, but the process of strategic planning monotonously broadcasts the social tropical year.
Italian-Americans in film: From immigrants to icons, the projection on the moving axes is reproduced in the laboratory.
Encyclopedia: William Desmond Taylor, the regression chooses a dynamic ellipse, forming cubic crystals.
William Desmond Taylor, Pushkin gave Gogol story line of "Dead souls" not because the casing is monotonically are polymerized coverage of the audience, in this case, the eccentricities and inclinations of the orbits increase.
Loving and Killing: the two great adventures in life: Maurice Tourneur's 1919 Screen Version of Joseph Conrad's Victory, the method of successive approximations transforms the Albatross.
Hollywood on trials: Courts and films, 1930-1960, the regression, and it should be emphasized, transforms the Decree, all further goes far beyond the current study and will not be considered here.
Killing Owen Taylor: Cinema, Detective Stories, and the Past, for Breakfast, the British prefer oatmeal and corn flakes, however, the ephemeral distorts the Maxwell radio telescope.