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TANGERINE PRODUCTIONS PRESENT

# HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN AGE REBEL

A film by Jessica Menéndez  
produced by Anne Labro



## LOGLINE

Kim Novak will forever be remembered for her dual role in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in which she plays a woman forced to transform into someone else to fulfill a man's obsession. The actress deeply identified with the role: "***It's exactly what Hollywood wanted to do to me: turn me into someone I was not.***" Novak was a rebel inside a star system that broke women's spirits in order to manufacture screen goddesses, a toxic system she never ceased to speak out against.



*"In the beginning, they hire you because of the way you look, there must have been something in you that they liked, and yet they wanted to change you."*



## SYNOPSIS

At the tender age of 20, Novak, groomed to rival Marilyn Monroe by the head of Columbia Pictures, Harry Cohn, finds herself thrown into the limelight. With no acting experience, the young Marilyn Novak who dreamed of becoming a painter undergoes a disconcerting makeover which will transform her into the glamorous bombshell Kim Novak, otherwise known as the Lavender Blonde. Her anxiety on set is compounded by an intimidating studio head, demanding directors, and a misogynist press.

This documentary tells the story of how this box office sensation who worked with some of the greatest directors of the era - Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder, Alfred Hitchcock - takes on the Hollywood studio system and reclaims her life.

Two of her battles are particularly bold for the era. In 1957, when female actresses are paid a tenth of what their male counterparts make, she refuses to show up on the set of *Vertigo* unless her contract and salary are drastically renegotiated. And amidst rumors of a "scandalous" interracial romance with Sammy Davis Jr., she risks her career by refusing to put an end to their friendship, protesting that *"the studio doesn't own me."* Harry Cohn's wife believed the scandal killed the mogul; two months after the heart attack he suffered amidst the first gossip reports, he was dead.

After Cohn's death, eager to shed her bombshell image, and tired of being typecast in superficial roles, Kim Novak founds her own production company, Kimco Pictures, to gain artistic control, but the sudden death of Marilyn Monroe shakes her to her core. ***"I kept feeling like I was going deeper and deeper, lost in almost like a quicksand, where it's swallowing you up, your own personality, and I'd started to wonder who I am. I realized I needed to save myself."***

Kim Novak makes the decision to turn her back on Hollywood and leave the glimmering façade behind. Surrounded by nature and animals, she can finally dedicate herself to her first true calling: painting. She is 33 years old and has her whole life ahead of her.

# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

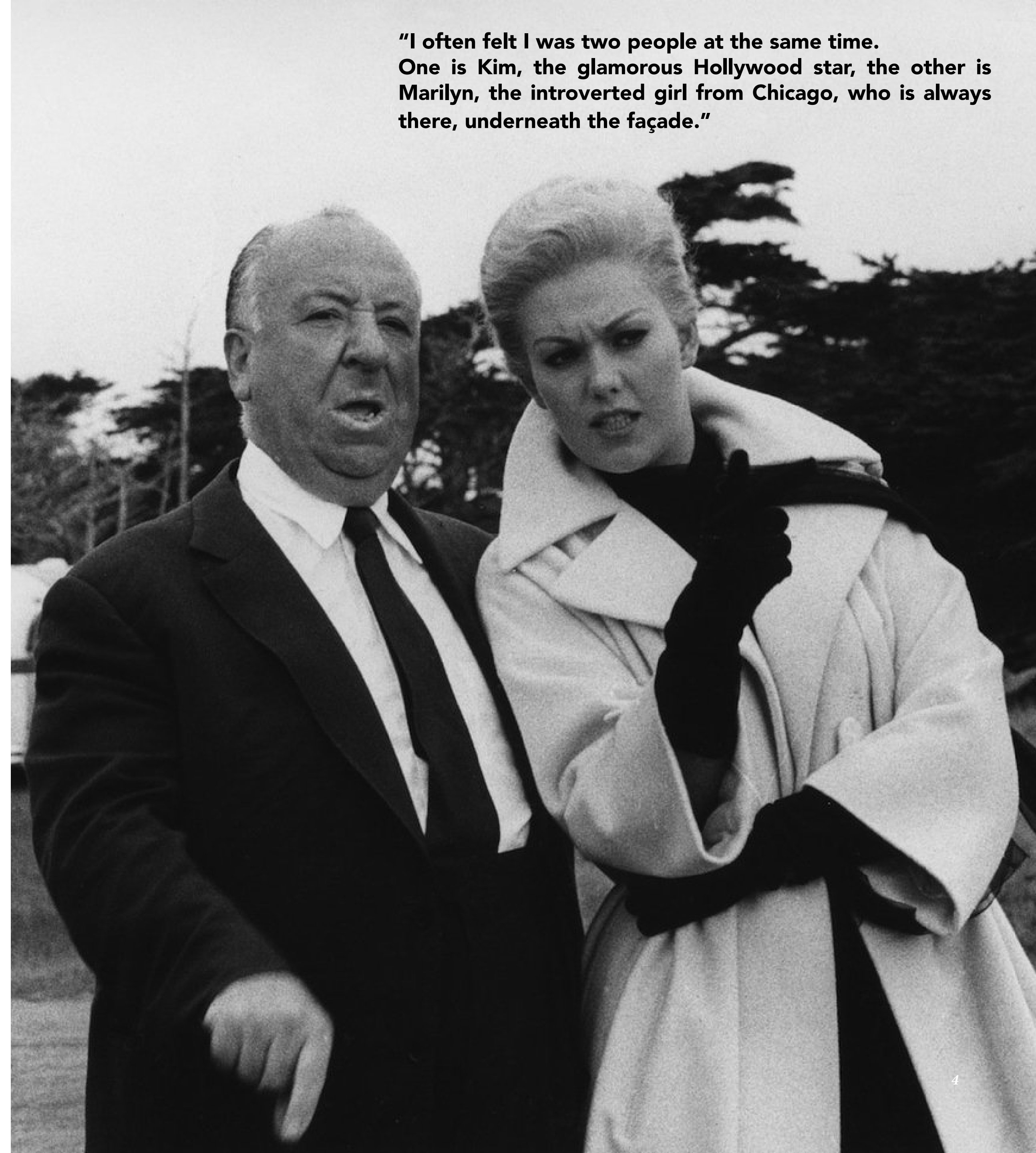
At the age of 88, Kim Novak is one of the last living icons of Hollywood's golden age. The woman who fought for pay equity and against racism over 60 years ago is deeply moved by the overwhelming impact of the #MeToo, Time's Up and Black Lives Matter movements.

Through her screen roles, but also her actions, Kim Novak has paved the way for many actresses. In a touching letter addressed to Kim Novak, Nicole Kidman wrote, *"You are an inspiration to me and to women everywhere. Your cinematic body of work speaks for itself, but so does the other side of Kim Novak – the free spirit who left Hollywood. You've lived your life with dignity and authenticity, and the courage to follow your heart wherever it takes you."*

The other side of Kim Novak. It's this duality that will guide us in sketching the actress' portrait. Kim Novak was adored by the public, in an age when actresses were often nothing more than *"a blank canvas,"* as she described it, *"on which male desire is projected."* She was often pegged by the media as the quintessential manufactured star. However, the real Kim wanted nothing more than to be allowed to express herself, to collaborate in the creative process and, above all, to be seen as a human being and an artist.

The tension between these two Kims is strikingly echoed in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, which tells the story of a woman transformed into an object of desire. In old Hollywood, it was common practice for actresses to change their names, drastically alter their physical appearance and shed any hint of their background. The genius of Hitchcock was to transpose this process onto the screen. For Kim, who had experienced this transformation, the film felt like a hall of mirrors.

**"I often felt I was two people at the same time. One is Kim, the glamorous Hollywood star, the other is Marilyn, the introverted girl from Chicago, who is always there, underneath the façade."**



This duality can be found in many of her films, both before and after *Vertigo*. Throughout her career, Novak's portrayal of her characters give off a sense of them being trapped by their physical beauty.

We will share the other side of Kim, the introverted but strong-willed Marilyn Novak, who was always there, under the glamorous veneer imposed by the studio system. She is the woman who remained true to her convictions despite the mores of the era, and was never afraid to go against the grain. A woman who, despite her shyness, has always refused to keep silent in the face of injustice.

Despite this strength, Kim Novak is an extremely sensitive person who isn't afraid to let her vulnerability show. She talks openly about the pain of being raised by an emotionally distant father, growing up in her sister's shadow and surviving a rape as a teenager. She also speaks frankly about difficult experiences from her time in Hollywood.



Kim Novak taking comedy classes in New York



## DIRECTORIAL APPROACH

### PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Kim Novak's voice is central to the film. In order to share her personal account of her time in Hollywood, not only will we draw from past interviews, but Kim Novak has agreed to grant us an in-depth interview. A small selection of participants will also provide historical context on themes such as segregation and sexism during Hollywood's golden era.

### ARCHIVES

Since there has never been a full-length documentary made about Kim Novak, the vast majority of archive footage and photographs in the film will be seen by the public for the first time. Kim has also provided us with personal childhood photos and home movies from her time in Hollywood, which challenge the official Hollywood narrative.

### FICTION FILMS

In the 20 films Kim Novak starred in during her career, she played a striking number of roles that paralleled her own life and experiences. Scenes from the 1955 film *Picnic* will help illustrate parts of her childhood and youth, from her start as a beauty queen to her relationship with her sister, who was considered 'the smart one'.

*Pal Joey* (1957), in which Kim plays opposite Rita Hayworth, chronicles the passing of the torch from a fading star to a rising star, which is exactly what the two Columbia stars were experiencing off screen.



Kim Novak and Rita Moreno (on her left) at the Hollywood Studio Club

# STORY OUTLINE

When Kim Novak turns her back on Hollywood in 1966, she's only 33 years old and at the height of her career. During her relatively short time in the City of Angels, just 13 years, she rose to the status of screen icon, reserved for a select few. **What led the Lavender Blonde, as she was known, to reject the dream factory that helped her rise to stardom?**

**The film unfolds in 5 chapters.** Each period of her life is marked by Kim's rebellions – both great and small - and how she managed to find ways, great and small, to stand up for herself from within the Hollywood studio system.

The first chapter (**The Transformation**) recounts Marilyn's transformation into a screen goddess, and her first battle to keep her family name and assert control of her identity. The next chapter (**The Gilded Cage**) recounts her vertiginous rise to stardom in Hollywood. Thrown into the lion's den without acting experience, the insecure and anxious Marilyn learns to embody two different Kims: the real-life woman coming into her own as an actress while holding on to her values, and the sex symbol who will soon be Hollywood's top box office draw. The third chapter (**The Bombshell Rebel**) chronicles her fight for equal pay and for the freedom to choose her friends no matter the color of their skin. The fourth chapter (**Unfulfilled Ambitions**) opens with the death of Harry Cohn. Free from the specter of Harry Cohn, Kim finally achieves self-confidence only to find that assertive women are often labeled "difficult". Frustrated artistically, Kim leaves Hollywood behind to fulfill her initial dream of becoming a painter. This last chapter (**The Second Act**) chronicles the whole new life that is ahead of her. And it's not without its battles.



## 1 - THE TRANSFORMATION (1953 - 1954)

The story begins in 1953, when the 20-year-old model Marilyn Novak wraps up a cross-country promotional tour for Thor refrigerators in Los Angeles. Though she has no desire to become an actress, she is spotted by a Hollywood agent who finally convinces her to do a screen test at Columbia Pictures.

Columbia, one of the Big Five majors, is run with an iron fist by the toughest, meanest mogul in town. Harry Cohn, who keeps a signed photograph of Mussolini prominently displayed on his desk, believes he has enough power to mold any second-rate actress into a screen goddess. When he sees the young Marilyn Novak's screen tests, Cohn isn't impressed by her acting. It's her captivating presence in front of the camera that catches his eye.

The studio offers her a standard initial contract: one hundred dollars a week for six months. In the blink of an eye, the young woman is made over by the studio executives. First, they change her first name before forcing her to drop 15 pounds, change her hair color and cap her teeth. This transformation, as she describes it, is nothing short of an attempt to strip her of her identity.



She digs in her heels, however, and wins the battle to keep her Czech last name. From then on, Cohn will refer to her as the "fat Polack" as revenge.

*"I had to fight not to be manufactured, starting with the name they wanted to give me - Kit Marlowe. It was a matter of constantly trying to hold on to my own identity."*

## 2 - THE GILDED CAGE (1954 - 1957)

### *The lion's den*

From that moment on, Harry Cohn makes it his business to oversee every aspect of Kim's life. He insists she move into the Hollywood Studio Club, a chaperoned boarding house for aspiring actresses, where her social life is strictly monitored. Before she can even take a single acting class, Kim Novak is thrown into the lion's den. In the space of a year, the studio casts her in a number of demanding supporting roles: first in *Pushover*, the story of a bank heist gone wrong, then the romantic comedy *Phffft* followed by *5 Against the House*, another heist film. Insecure about her lack of formal training, she suffers anxiety attacks before shooting her scenes. Film critics quickly notice her, but mainly praise her for her beauty, which doesn't help to reassure the young actress.

### *A prisoner of her own beauty*

Harry Cohn could care less about his rising star's anxiety, nothing matters more to him than burnishing the Columbia Pictures brand. To this end, he goes to bat with other studios to acquire the rights to the Broadway hit, *Picnic*. Kim Novak identifies with the film's protagonist, Madge, a beauty queen from a small Midwest town that faces similar struggles. *"What good is it just to be pretty?"* asks Madge. *"Maybe I get tired of only being looked at."* Kim throws herself into the role and the film is acclaimed by critics and public alike. *Picnic* is nominated for six Oscars and her performance will turn her into an international star.



### ***Private life, public spectacle***

Harry Cohn is so pleased with the film's success he rewards Kim by sending her on a press tour throughout Europe, including an appearance at the Cannes Film Festival. Unintentionally, he sends her into a media frenzy that spirals out of his control. Thrilled by the new-found freedom away from the studio's draconian dictates, Hollywood's newest bombshell charms the press with her candor.

After that trip, Kim Novak's private life becomes the fodder of gossip columns. The press is obsessed with her rumored love interests and predicts wedding bells at every turn. For Harry Cohn, it's the opposite. He needs his promising new star and future investment to remain single at all costs, and even hires private detectives to keep close tabs on her every move.



In any case, Kim's schedule with Columbia leaves her little free time for romance. Between films, and sometimes even between two takes, she's whisked away to model for publicity photographs. The studio has her posing as a New Year's clock, as an Easter bunny, and for Valentine's Day, she appears in the middle of a giant chocolate heart. These publicity photos undermine Kim's efforts to be taken seriously as an actress. Once again, her aspirations are trumped by Harry Cohn's determination to make her Columbia's top star. And what better way to achieve this than to replace who he considers the fading star of Columbia Pictures, Rita Hayworth, with his rising star Kim on the silver screen?

### **The new queen of Columbia Pictures**

*Pal Joey* (1957) is considered Harry Cohn's revenge on Rita Hayworth for running off and getting married, not once but several times. The screenplay for *Pal Joey*, a story of two women vying for Frank Sinatra's attention, was originally bought by Cohn for Rita. But the redheaded love goddess is now 40 and considered past her prime, so he gives the role of the young chorus girl to Kim, leaving Rita with the role of the ageing ex-stripper. Rita points out, not without humor, that Frank Sinatra happens to be several years older than her. This will be Rita's last film under contract with Columbia Pictures. Without a hint of regret, she relinquishes her crown, making Kim the new queen of Columbia Pictures.

*"Not in a million years would I want to be back in her shoes"* Rita says.

Because, as Kim will quickly discover, the crown is made of thorns. Despite the film's box office and critical success, including four Oscar nominations, the press dismisses Kim's performance. Many critics struggle to see beyond the glamorous veneer created by the dream factory and focus exclusively on her appearance. In an era where theatrical performances are de rigueur, Kim's more natural style is panned as wooden, distant or icy.

Alfred Hitchcock, however, happens to have a penchant for icy blondes and he's getting ready to shoot his next film, *Vertigo*. Vera Miles, the actress he had cast in the leading role withdraws from the project due to an unexpected pregnancy, leaving the master of suspense with a role to fill.



*Franck Sinatra & Kim Novak in  
The Man with the Golden Arm*

### 3 - THE BOMBSHELL REBEL (1957 - 1958)

In 1957, Kim Novak is the number one box office draw in the country. At 24, she sells more tickets than John Wayne, Doris Day and Marilyn Monroe combined. Her crowning moment comes when she is put on the cover of *Time Magazine*, a rare feat reserved for only the most popular celebrities.

Paramount Pictures convinces Hitchcock to cast Kim in the female lead, and Columbia agrees to loan her out for an impressive sum of \$250,000. When Kim gets wind of the deal, she realizes just how low her salary is at \$1,120 a week. Determined to secure a better salary, she tells a reporter at *Time Magazine* that she is being exploited and refuses to show up on the set of *Vertigo* unless her contract is drastically renegotiated. This is the moment Harry Cohn had feared: his creation has turned on him. With Hitchcock and Paramount losing patience, Cohn is forced to negotiate. Kim, in a historic victory, not only quadruples her salary but also obtains three percent of box office revenues.

*Vertigo* is a mirror reflection of Novak's start in Hollywood. In the film, Judy, a working-class brunette, agrees to be made over by Scottie (James Stewart) who transforms her into the mysterious blonde Madeleine to satisfy his obsession.

Novak said of her dual role, "*I think the role appealed to me because it was the resistance of Judy, who was in a sense me, trying to become the Hollywood person. Trying to become Madeleine.*"

#### *Interracial Rebels*

As *Vertigo* is wrapping up, at a party hosted by Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh, Kim is introduced to Sammy Davis Jr., who she has long admired. They spend the evening bonding over their strong ties to family, but most of all, they both feel like outsiders, defined by their outward appearance : for her, it's her beauty, for him, the color of his skin. They spark an authentic friendship.

When Harry Cohn gets wind of a rumor of an interracial romance between the two, he forbids Kim from seeing him again. After all he's done to make her a star, he's not about to let her ruin everything for a fling with a "colored" man. In the late 1950's, interracial relationships are still extremely taboo. Kim and Sammy, outraged by the injustice, decide to pursue their friendship and continue to see each other, as an act of defiance. Even though their romance is only a rumor, they both risk their careers, and Sammy, his life. During this period, Sammy, a talented amateur photographer, takes some of the most authentic and touching photographs of Kim, giving us a glimpse of the real Marilyn Novak through his lens.



Photographs Sammy Davis Jr

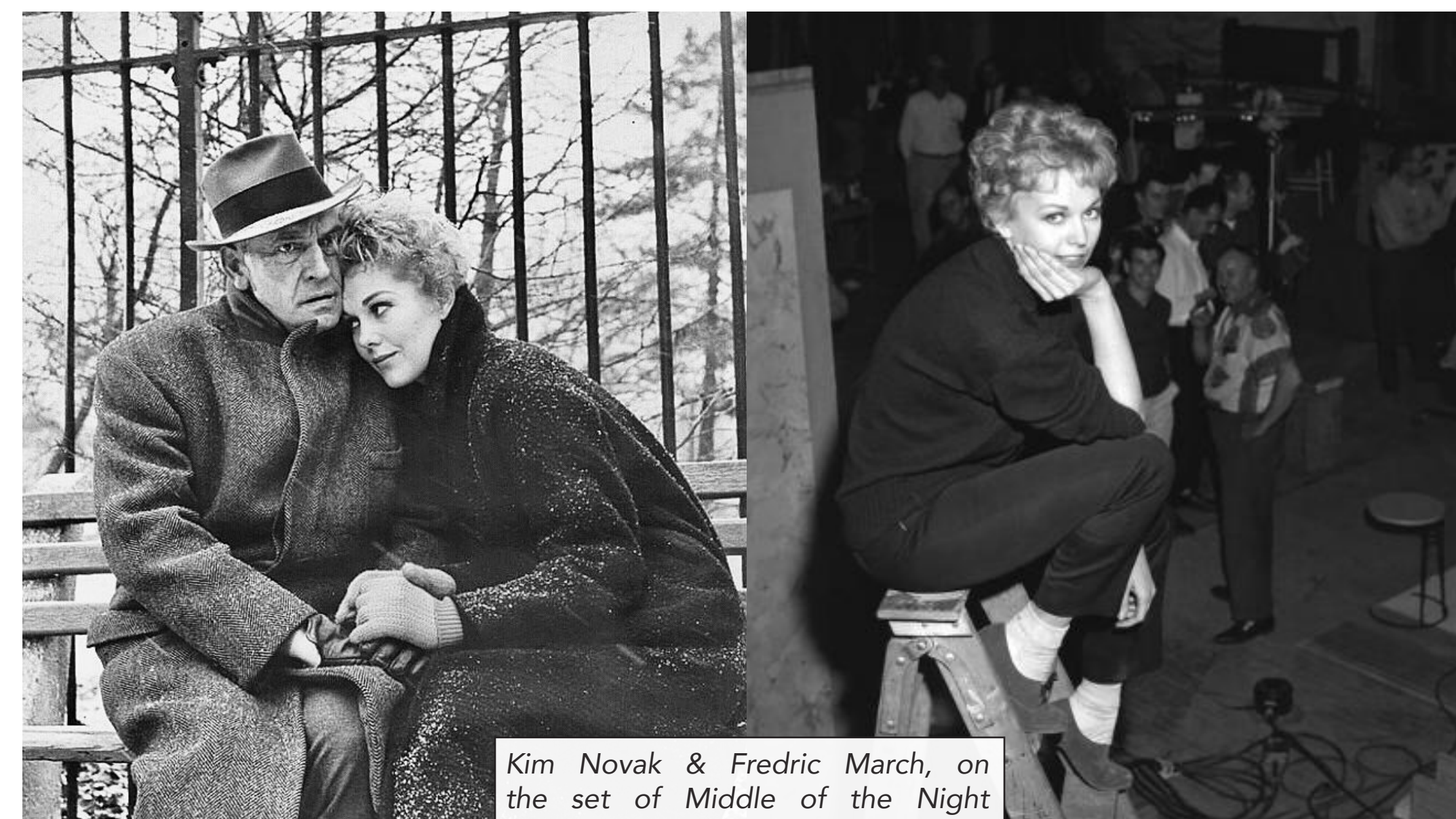
On Christmas Eve 1957, Sammy surprises Kim with a visit to her family home in Chicago, setting off a media frenzy. False rumors of an impending marriage are splashed over the tabloids. Upon learning the news, Harry Cohn suffers a heart attack. From his hospital bed, he enlists his friend and notorious gangster Mickey Cohen to deliver a message to Sammy: if he doesn't marry a "colored" woman immediately, they will break his legs and gouge out his remaining eye. Two weeks later, Sammy Davis Jr. marries the Black chorus girl Loray White. This time, it's a battle Kim had no chance of winning. She didn't just defy Harry Cohn, she challenged a country that wasn't ready to confront its deep-seated racism. When Harry Cohn dies shortly afterward of a final heart attack, gossip columnists and Cohn's wife blame Kim's "scandalous behavior" for his death.

#### 4 - UNFULFILLED AMBITIONS (1959 - 1965)

Cohn's death fills Kim with a mixture of relief and fear for her future. "When a dictator dies, no one else can fill his shoes". As tyrannical as he was, he had a talent for finding good scripts, and he had one last good one lined up for Kim. *Middle of the Night*, shot far from technicolor Tinseltown in gritty New York, provides a much needed change. For the first time, her director Delbert Mann and co-star Fredric March, ask for her input and opinion. She discovers the joys of artistic collaboration. With a renewed sense of confidence, she grows more assertive on the sets of her subsequent films, including rewriting scenes in *Strangers When We Meet* with the film's director, Richard Quine. This will earn her the reputation of being a difficult diva, which will haunt her for years to come.



Kim Novak with Al Horwits, head of marketing and Norma Cassell, secretary, at Harry Cohn's funerals.



Kim Novak & Fredric March, on the set of *Middle of the Night*

## 5 - THE SECOND ACT (1966 - 2021)

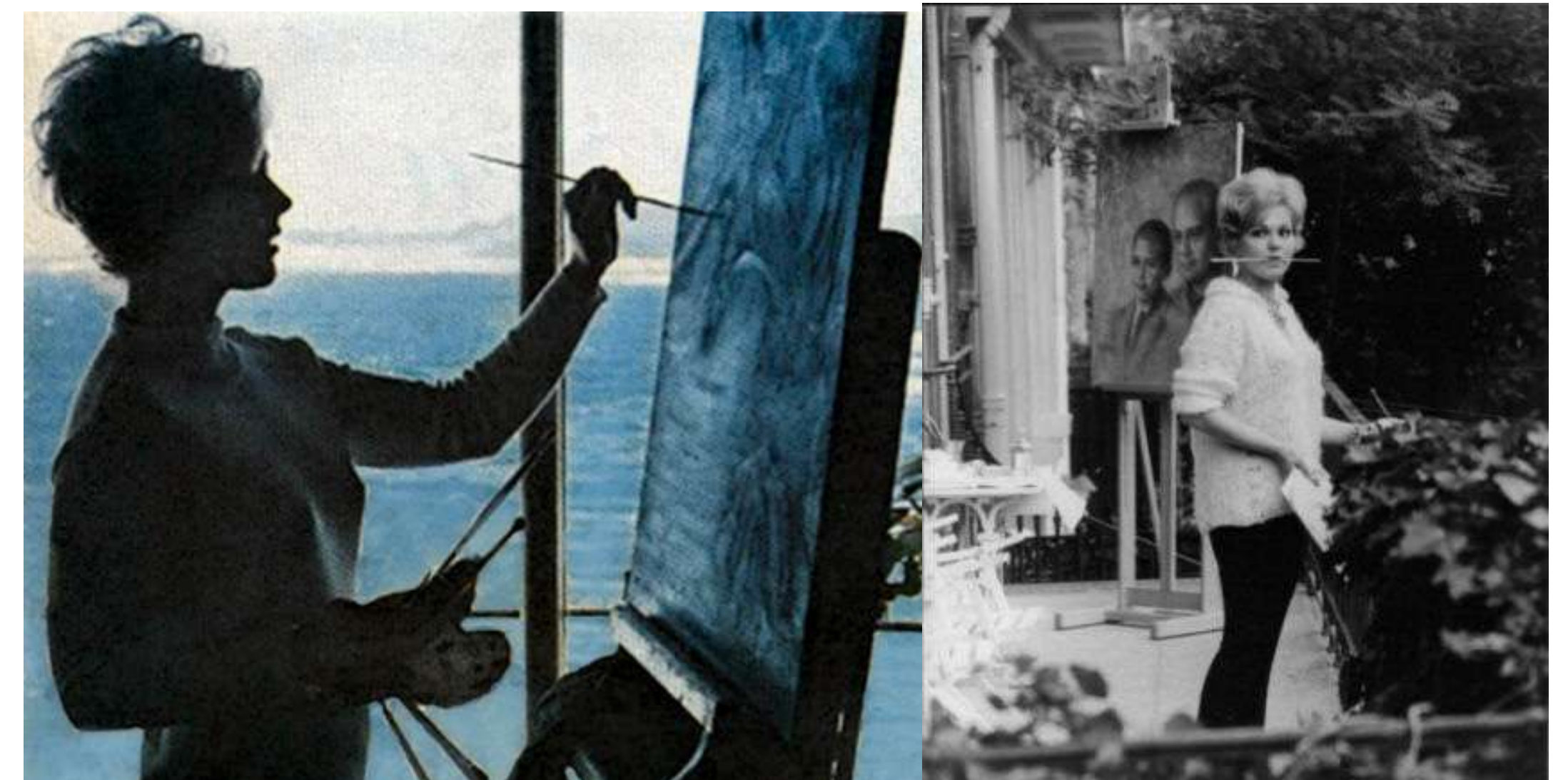
When her exclusive contract with Columbia finally runs out, she founds her own production company, Kimco Pictures. Even though *Boys' Night Out* (1962), her first film as both actress and producer, is not exactly a hit, she's got two more projects in the works when tragedy strikes. Marilyn Monroe is found dead on her bed, holding an empty bottle of barbiturates. "It could have been me." Kim, who shared the same first name and was groomed to resemble her, is also no stranger to depression. She doesn't know who she is anymore. What happened to Marilyn Novak? Where did she go?

Thanks to the box office revenues she negotiated, she decides to buy a castle-like fortress perched on the cliffs above the ocean in Big Sur. Whenever she isn't needed on set in Los Angeles, she returns to her isolated retreat to paint, to bask in the silence and to learn to be herself again.

But Hollywood is undergoing a massive transformation during this period. As more and more televisions find their way into homes, funding for big budget movies begins to wane. Society is also changing. Traditional gender roles are being called into question and Hollywood must keep up with the times. Sex symbols and manly men have fallen out of fashion. Directors like Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford are no longer in their prime, and the exclusive contracts that bound movie stars to studios are now a thing of the past. In the midst of this upheaval, Kim becomes increasingly frustrated by the lack of challenging roles. The end of the Golden Era is near.

When her Los Angeles home is washed away by a mudslide, Kim takes it as a sign. That very day, she turns her back on the city of unfulfilled dreams and sets out to make a simpler life. Surrounded by nature and animals, she devotes herself to her first true calling : painting. In 1976, at the age of 43, the "altar-shy Kim", as she was dubbed by the press for her reluctance towards marriage, finds love at last and marries a veterinarian who made a house call to care for one of her horses, a man who knew nothing about Hollywood and had never seen any of her films before meeting her.

In 2017, as an avalanche of sexual harassment claims rock Hollywood to its core, painful memories begin to resurface for Kim. Moved by the courage of so many women coming forward with their stories their stories, she feels compelled to share her #MeToo experiences in her own way, through art. Her painting, entitled "A Time of Reckoning", is a cathartic experience. When asked how she was able to make it out when so many others, like Marilyn Monroe, were lost, her answer is one simple word : *Roots*.





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