

BUSINESS

ARBOR OUTLOOK

Bridges, Landau and the Tucker Torpedo



Margaret McDowell

“Now the headlight was another sight ... We had two on the left and one on the right.” – from “One Piece at a Time,” as recorded by Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Three

Martin Landau, one of my favorite American actors, passed away recently. His appearance enriched a wonderful movie called “Tucker: The Man and His Dream,” starring Landau, Jeff Bridges, Joan Allen

and Christian Slater.

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola and released in 1988, the film depicts the efforts of Preston Tucker to design and produce a revolutionary car, one that would challenge the Big Three auto companies of the day. The action occurs in the halcyon post-WWII years of the late 1940’s, and is based on a true story. Some say that the storyline parallels Coppola’s efforts to challenge the existing Hollywood moguls and build his own studio.

Regardless, the film is an extraordinary ode to pure American guile, inventiveness and entrepreneurship. Working virtually round-the-clock in his own backyard shop, Tucker and his cohorts create a car with remarkable style and

impressive safety innovations. It was named the Tucker Torpedo, and carried the tagline “The Car of Tomorrow-Today.” It featured a sleek design; a third, centered headlight; disc brakes; seat belts; a pop-out windshield; a rear engine; and a padded dashboard. The Big Three resented Tucker’s criticisms of their cars’ existing safety features, and this, plus the potential loss of market share, raised the ire of the existing auto giants.

Coppola’s own father had invested \$5,000 in Tucker stock and was in line to purchase a Torpedo. But Tucker’s legal and financial issues, plus push-back from politicians preserving the power of the Big Three in the auto industry, prevented

the car’s mass production. All told, only 51 cars were ever made. Interestingly, 49 are still roadworthy, and one sits in the Smithsonian.

One review calls the film “a glorious celebration of the creative process.” Preston Tucker’s manic energy contains a dark side, and he ignores the fatigue of his employees and even potential serious injury to a long-time partner on the workshop floor, all in pursuit of success.

Do we all have to be part madman, like Tucker, to successfully create and market a new idea? No, of course not. But we do have to possess a certain intensity of effort. If 9 to 5 doesn’t produce the desired results, we may have to work nights and weekends. There are no

business hours for successful American entrepreneurs.

The marketplace has evolved since the 1940’s, and truly innovative offerings are rewarded by consumer purchases and loyalty, if entrepreneurs have the energy and chops to create and produce unique and improved products. It’s this kind of inventive enthusiasm that will allow us to compete in the new global economy.

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