

Profile

Dennis Stanfill: He put Fox back on its feet and has it ready to run

It almost sounds pat to refer to Dennis Stanfill as a country boy who made good. But it's true.

Son of a county extension agent who served the farmers of middle Tennessee, he is today chairman and chief executive officer of the multimillion-dollar 20th Century-Fox Film Corp., one of the giants of the motion-picture industry, whose roots go back to the early days of Hollywood and whose activities today are diversely spread through entertainment and real estate.

Mr. Stanfill's rise to prominence is like a Hollywood scenario: In high school, he was captain of the football team, president of the student body and valedictorian of his senior class. At the U.S. Naval Academy, he was second in command of the brigade of midshipmen, academically in the upper 1% of his class and winner of the Class of 1897 Sword award for "officer-like quality and positive character." After graduation, he was a Rhodes scholar.

Those are the opening scenes. They are followed by roles as banker, corporate finance officer and now, at 46, chief executive of a \$216-million firm that deals in motion-picture production, TV program production and distribution, TV commercial production, ownership of a TV station, theater ownership in Australia and New Zealand, the music and record business, film processing and real estate.

Mr. Stanfill took over the top post at Fox in 1971 after a bitter proxy fight that saw the Zanuck dynasty toppled. In that year, Fox was \$125 million in debt; today under Mr. Stanfill's leadership it not only has wiped out this financial burden, it has \$16 million in cash. The turnaround is the more impressive for occurring in a time of general trouble in the film business.

The steel-blue-eyed, wavy-haired Mr. Stanfill unquestionably is a corporation executive with a strong bent toward financial management. Maybe it was his years with Lehman Bros., when he learned about banking, or his years with the Times-Mirror Co. in Los Angeles, when he played a role, as he puts it, in that company's expansion into CATV and acquisition of the *Dallas Times-Herald* and that newspaper's KDFW-TV there. Whatever it was, it has produced results in a realm that until very recently was sacrosanct to those who were considered artistic managers, rather than business managers.

Some movie makers are critical of this "hard-nosed" (Mr. Stanfill's words) attitude toward studio creation. They note



Dennis Carothers Stanfill—chairman and chief executive officer, 20th Century-Fox Film Corp.; b. April 1, 1927, Centerville, Tenn.; B.S., U.S. Naval Academy, 1949; sea duty, 1950-51 and 1954-59; resigned commission as lieutenant senior grade, 1959; M.A. in economics, Oxford University, 1953 (Rhodes scholar); corporate finance officer, Lehman Bros., New York, 1959-65; VP-finance, Times-Mirror Co., Los Angeles, 1965-69; executive vice president, 20th Century-Fox, 1969; president, chairman and chief executive, 20th Century-Fox, 1971-present; M. Therese Olivieri, June 29, 1951; children: Francesca, 20; Michael, 17; Dennis Jr., 9; member—California Club, American Art Council, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; sponsor—Music Center for Performing Arts, Otis Art Institute; trustee—Polytechnic School; director—Community Television of Southern California (KCET[TV]) Los Angeles; hobbies—snow skiing, squash tennis.

that when Fox's expenditures on the current success, "Poseidon Adventure," reached \$2.4 million, Mr. Stanfill called a halt. The film's producer, however, raised another \$2.4 million from private sources and was able to complete the picture as a joint venture. Its success at the box office has grossed over \$50 million so far—and there are some in Hollywood who shake their heads in dismay that Fox doesn't own it all.

By and large, however, his peers recognize his talents and are impressed. "It's what the movie business needs," one said recently, "particularly Fox."

Recent annual reports have brought smiles to the faces of Fox stockholders, who haven't received a dividend since 1969. In those reports Mr. Stanfill repeatedly has stressed the need for the company to diversify. Those moves principally have been in the realm of real estate, but entertainment diversification

also has played a part.

One of the things that Mr. Stanfill would like to do, and he's made no secret of it, is to acquire more TV and radio stations for the company's portfolio. Fox owns KMSF-TV Minneapolis-St. Paul, which it bought in 1959 for \$3.5 million. That station, Mr. Stanfill says, is one of the larger contributors to Fox's net profits. In the last three or four months, he said recently, he has carefully studied at least six other station properties. "And I don't mean we just were told about them," he says, "we took long, hard looks at them."

But to the hard-nosed Mr. Stanfill prices are out of line today. Still he's ready, he says, to take an initial plunge of as much as \$25 million for expansion in that field, "and that will be only the beginning. If it turns out well, there's more."

For a while, Mr. Stanfill was bullish about CATV ownership. But he has tempered this enthusiasm in recent months. The time just doesn't seem right, he says. But he continues sanguine about the potential of cable TV as a market for Fox's movies and TV production—particularly in the pay areas of CATV and hotel closed-circuit operations. Fox, he notes, is cooperating in experiments in both those areas and, he adds, they look promising.

TV production and distribution are important to the company's revenues, he says, but candidly adds the profit margin "is very thin, very thin." Fox's TV activities this year underwent a resurgence after a slim 1972-73 season that saw only two half-hour series on the networks. For the new TV season, Fox is responsible for four series, making up two and a half hours of network programming. These are *M*A*S*H* and *Room 222*, both renewed, and the *New Perry Mason Show* and *Roll Out*. It is also the distributor of such nationally syndicated series as *Return to Peyton Place*, *Orson Welles's Great Mystery Theater*, *Family Classics*, *Starlost*, and the six-part *Jack the Ripper*. It is also producing four full-length movies for TV.

That the Stanfill regime at Fox is producing results is obvious. For the six months that ended June 30, total revenues were \$126.1 million and net profits, \$8.5 million. That's a healthy improvement over the 1972 six-month figures of \$94.7 million in revenues and \$5.3 million in profits. Wall Street analysts are now talking of the possible resumption of dividends in 1974. Perhaps the best indication of Mr. Stanfill's stewardship came not long ago from the man he succeeded as chairman of Fox, Darryl Zanuck.

Asked for his comment on the Stanfill administration, Mr. Zanuck replied: "Very good."