



Jeffrey Hunter

Heaven on the Face

Few actors have come to the movies with Jeffrey Hunter's physical appearance and talent. Even among the best-looking young men in Hollywood, his tall physique, heart-stopping blue eyes and classic features stood out. Early on, he exhibited strong acting ability, intelligence and a willingness to take direction.

Despite all this, Jeffrey Hunter, who originally aspired to be a teacher, was by temperament a most unlikely candidate for stardom, and true stardom, in the end, eluded him. This was due to his tremendous sensitivity, inability to play the Hollywood game, and personal problems that caused him to lose sight of his career goals at a crucial point. The man who played Jesus was, after all, only human.

"Jeffrey Hunter" began life as Henry "Hank" McKinnies, Jr. in New Orleans on November 25, 1926. His parents moved to Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin when Hank was 5. There, he grew up as an only child, excelling in athletics and scholastic achievement.

He enlisted in the Navy when war came. After naval service, Hunter attended Northwestern University and UCLA, majoring at the latter in speech and radio. But he never received his Master's degree -- talent scouts from Paramount in the audience of a student production whisked him away before graduation.



With a script girl on the set of *Sailor of the King*. 20th Century Fox, 1951.

Although Paramount was going through upheaval at that time and did not sign young Hank, Twentieth Century Fox did. Fox changed his name to Jeffrey Hunter, and he joined Dale Robertson, Robert Wagner, Debra Paget and Jean Peters as "up-and-comings" there. In his first film, *Fourteen Hours* (1951), he played Debra Paget's love interest and, as he said later, had more lines to say than Grace Kelly, who also made her debut in that film.

After *Fourteen Hours*, Hunter was shuttled from film to film. Most notable in those early years were: *Lure of the Wilderness* (a remake of *Swamp Water*), in which he co-starred with Jean Peters in 1952, *Red Skies of Montana* (1952) and a British film, *Sailor of the King* (1953). He quickly became very popular with teens -- especially after they saw those blue eyes in color in *Red Skies of Montana*. He began to receive enormous amounts of fan mail.

But it didn't last long. Robert Wagner quickly became the Juvenile Prince of Fox (literally as well as figuratively, when he won the role of Prince Valiant). Hunter found himself often playing a supporting role to Wagner's lead. He

realized, finally, that he wasn't in Whitefish Bay anymore -- nothing was going to be handed to him. Frustrated and unhappy, he asked Fox to release him from his contract. The brass discouraged him from this, with promises of better things. These better things did appear, not at Fox, but in the form of loan-outs.

Young Jeffrey Hunter's career changed dramatically when he fought for, and won, the role of Martin Pawley in *The Searchers* (1956). *The Searchers* today is considered a classic film, with directors such as Spielberg and Scorsese claiming inspiration from it. Directed by the great John Ford, it starred John Wayne, along with Hunter and Natalie Wood. "I was told I had really arrived," Hunter said, "because they gave me almost as much ammunition as they gave John Wayne." But Jeffrey Hunter almost wasn't a part of the film. Ford told him, "You're not the type" to play the part-Indian Martin. The actor made himself up in darker pancake, slicked down his hair and went back to Ford, who let him test for the role.

Hunter received wonderful reviews as Wayne's sidekick. The *New York Herald Tribune* said, "Jeffrey Hunter is excellent as the boy who shares his [Wayne's] relentless search. He is far more emotional and likable, and he matures over the five years from a naive kid to a man who can take care of himself in tough situations."

"I have a certain value now as a teenage commodity," Jeffrey Hunter once said to a reporter, "but who knows how long this will last?" The time had come to move into more mature roles. John Ford used him twice more, for *The Last Hurrah* (1958) and *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960). "*Sergeant Rutledge* may not be John Ford's masterpiece," Paul Beckley of the *Herald Tribune* wrote, "but it is a sweet breeze . . . Jeffrey Hunter turns in, under Ford's influence, the best performance of his young career." He played an espionage agent in a British independent, *Count Five and Die* (1957), a Korean war vet in *No Down Payment* (1957), and a tough marine in *In Love and War* (1958). Of the successful *Hell To Eternity* (1960), the true story of marine Guy Gabaldon, Howard Thompson of *The New York Times* said, "Mr. Hunter finally comes into his own with the best acting of his career."

Then, another turn in Jeffrey Hunter's career -- *King of Kings* (1961). According to *King's* director, Nicholas Ray, Hunter's mesmerizing blue eyes and personal charisma, noted while Ray worked with him on *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), won him the role of Christ. During the filming in Spain, Hunter was often mistaken for Christ by peasants. After the film was released, his fan mail not only increased, but he received letters from people asking for solutions to their problems. It was a heavy load to carry, and he didn't bear up well under



Hunter and Joanne Woodward in a publicity pose for *A Kiss Before Dying*.
United Artists, 1956.

it, especially with the joke that circulated Hollywood that the film had been renamed *I Was a Teenage Jesus*.

Evaluating the importance of this role in Hunter's career is a difficult one, as is assessing his performance. Career-wise, playing Jesus was not an inspired choice; however, *King of Kings* is the film for which he is most remembered today, and is the reason that, long after his death, the Jeffrey Hunter Fan Club continued to exist.

As far as the film itself, a problem with the sound track meant that Hunter had to re-record his role in a sound studio. This was extremely unfortunate. His speech training had given him a beautiful speaking voice -- he had experience as a radio actor -- but his voice is not used to its best effect in *King of Kings*. Although reviews of his portrayal were mixed or downright cruel at the time, the film, and Hunter's performance, hold up very well today.

The demise of Jeff Hunter's career has often been laid at the feet of Jesus. This, strictly speaking, isn't true. He was not typecast, nor was he ever at a loss for acting work. Had he reassessed his career and obtained good advice, he could have continued to grow as an actor. But the role had scared him. The criticism had stung, and due to strong personal loyalties that kept him from seeking top-notch advisors, he basically fell off the career track, despite some good parts -- as a hen-pecked thief in *Man-Trap* (1961), *No Man Is An Island* (1962), a true World War II story, and *The Longest Day* (1962).

Hunter's best friend and college roommate, writer/director Lee Riordan, said that in the early '60s, Hunter "admitted he was disappointed with how things were going. He thought his career would have been stronger by that time. He wouldn't listen to negative things about certain people around him."

Hunter eventually found a good deal of work on television, and then in Europe. Interestingly, on television, he often played not heroes, but psychotics, indicating he could quite possibly have had a "second career" in character roles. His incredible good looks had kept him from this type of role early in his career. "This face of mine," he said to a reporter in 1965, "Shouldn't the ravages of time be doing something to it?"

Now sometimes billed as "Jeff Hunter," he was hired in 1965 by Gene Roddenberry to play the lead in a pilot, "Star Trek: The Cage." But when NBC ordered a second pilot, Hunter was not available. The rest is history -- for the "Star Trek" actors. For Hunter, it was on to another bad film. Marital problems and the ensuing financial responsibilities of alimony and child support pressured him to keep working.

The latter part of his film career is peppered with roles in sub-B films, often made in Spain, such as *Witch Without a Broom* (1966), *The Christmas Kid* (1968) and *Sexy Susan Sins Again* (1969). However, around the time of his death, it looked as if Hunter was gently but firmly re-establishing himself in the mainstream, with roles in *Guide for the Married Man* (1967), *The Private Navy of Sergeant O'Farrell* (1968) and some good television roles.

On May 26, 1969, Jeffrey Hunter was found unconscious at the bottom of some stairs in his home, where he lived with his third wife. The police surmised that he tripped over a planter and had been knocked unconscious. He died the next morning, after brain surgery. An autopsy revealed he had suffered a stroke, then fallen. The actor had been suffering dizzy spells, probably from cerebral bleeding, the result of an explosion on a film set in Spain. At the time of his death, he was 42.

Lee Riordan said of Hunter, "He was the finest, most decent man I've ever known." It may not be a Hollywood tribute, but it's sure not a bad way to be remembered.