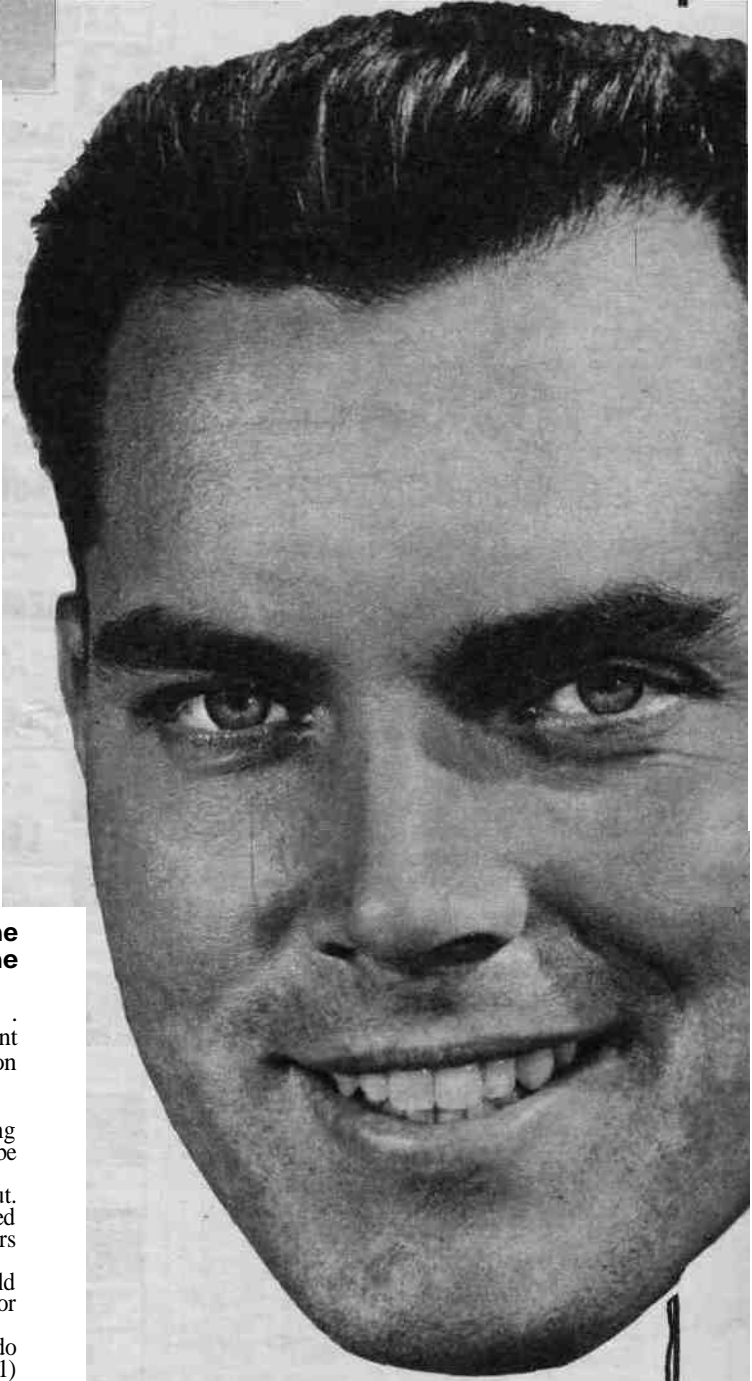


Hunter: In one of his Western roles

A blue-eyed, all-American boy, his career needed a boost

THE MAN
WHO PLAYS
JESUS



THese are anxious times for Jeffrey Hunter—the actor who accepted the role of Christ in the new £4,000,000 production, *King of Kings*.

Back in Hollywood, after completing the film, he waits . . . waits while the film is being edited . . . waits for the moment when it will be seen and people will coldly pass judgment on his performance.

He's tired. And nervous.

"It's this waiting that's getting me down," he says. "It's like living on a tight-rope. I haven't a clue how my portrayal of Christ will be received."

Of course, Hollywood people have predicted how it will turn out. From the moment Hunter was cast there were those who decided he was the wrong actor for the job. But there were just as many others who said he was as good a choice as anyone.

The fact is no one can say any actor—even the greatest in the world—is *right* for such a unique role. No one can *act* Christ—an actor can only portray him.

And it depends on what kind of man you are as to whether you do it well or badly.

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The Man who plays Jesus

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If Hunter is a success in *King of Kings* some of the credit must go to Producer Samuel Bronston who picked him out, simply because he was taking a bigger risk than he need have.

Hunter has not had a distinguished or even exciting career.

He has made only a few good pictures—*The Searchers* and *The Proud Ones* are two of them—and his clean-cut features and tooth-paste smile have labelled him as a carbon-copy of the typical Hollywood hero: a blue-eyed, all-American boy whose career, after some 25 films, needed a real boost.

"He's got to make a fresh impact on the public if he wants to get anywhere," said one producer not long ago.

What does Hunter think ?

He thinks *Kings of Kings* has started a new life for him.

"I've broken my shackles at last," he said, "although I'll be on edge until the film comes out. However, everything seems to be jelling perfectly, both in my private and professional life. And it has happened because I accepted the challenge of playing the role of Jesus.

"Right after I returned from Spain, where I made the film," he continued, "I had six firm offers to play top film roles. I accepted only one, in which I portrayed an unwilling accomplice to a plot by a Latin American dictator to ship money outside the country.

"The role," admits Hunter, "was just about as far removed from the role of Jesus as I could get. However, I was a little dubious about doing anything wrong in a film so soon after portraying such a responsible role. I agreed only after I was assured that no guilt would be placed on me and that I was to be purely a naive participant in the plot."

After producer Bronston finally signed Hunter to play Jesus in his picture, he spent hours one day telling him what he should and should not do.

"He gave me a long lecture," explained Hunter. "He told me, 'Jeff, this is the most important role a man was ever given. Your private life must be kept as clean as a pin. You cannot be involved in any scandal—not even a traffic violation—until the film is finished and released in the world's theatres.' I did even better," added Hunter. "I cut out smoking."

Hunter is a religious man—but not deeply religious—although, since he was given the role, he has read almost every book that was written about Christ—maybe just as any actor given the role of a great man would study his life.

"My wife, Dusty, and I are not regular church-goers," he said. "I am Presbyterian myself and Dusty just thinks of herself as a Christian. We are God-fearing people and are training our children the same way."

It will be some months before *King of Kings* is ready for release.

But however the critics and the public react to his portrayal Bronston is delighted.

"Jeff is fantastic," he said.

Whatever the result, Hunter must be applauded for his courage in taking the part and the determination and concentration he showed while playing it.

I know better actors than he who would have shirked the responsibility that goes with such a role.

Pip Evans