

THE MAN WHO PLAYED “KING OF KINGS”

A tribute to Jeffrey Hunter

Written by Victoria Helen Turner

This is not a biographical article, though certain facts of his life will be mentioned, but is a tribute to a great actor, who died in the prime of his life, but in my opinion performed the best portrayal of Jesus Christ of all time.

I have chosen this movie because I believe it will be the film he is best remembered for, and destiny itself seems to have chosen him for this particular role. We must also remember it was the first major sound film where the face of the actor portraying Christ was seen. It was a natural follow on from the great Charlton Heston playing Moses. I am not deriding Max von Sydow, nor most recently Robert Powell, who though good, did not give the great performance

of Jeffrey Hunter who towered above both of them by striking the right balance. I also must give credit to actress Siobhan McKenna, who got the role of Mary exactly right and looked the part.

Jeffrey Hunter was born Henry Herman McKinnies, Jr. in New Orleans on November 25th 1926, which by strange coincidence I believe was the American Thanksgiving Day. His father, a sales engineer, and his mother moved to Milwaukee in 1930 with young Hank, who was to be their only child; he was reared in Wisconsin. While still in high school, Jeffrey acted on a Milwaukee radio station; this led to summer stock work and then to Chicago activity.

His very distinct, attractive and clear voice is reminiscent of his near-contemporary and similarly gifted actor, Tyrone Power. They also possessed the same incredible eyes, though a different color, which to me mirrored their souls.

Tyrone also, like Jeffrey, worked in radio; this would be a great help to their clear diction.

Jeffrey served in the US Navy from 1945-46. He then attended Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he received a Bachelor's Degree in speech.

He appeared in the 1949 film of Julius Caesar, which starred Charlton Heston.

Attending UCLA on a scholarship, Jeffrey was spotted by a Hollywood talent scout while appearing in the production of "All My Sons" in 1950. He was eventually hired by 20th Century Fox, where he made his first major film appearance in "Fourteen Hours".

Over the next two decades, Jeffrey would show his versatility as an actor by appearing in a wide variety of film roles. He married actress Barbara Rush in 1950. They had one son, Christopher. The marriage ended in 1955.

To quote Jeffrey on being an actor,

“Be natural, sincere and honest on and off screen...a good acting job must come from the mind and heart”. His friend Lee Riordan said, “He was the finest, most decent man I've ever known”.

In 1961 Jeffrey was cast in the challenging, and probably the most difficult role for any actor, of Jesus Christ in “King of Kings”. This, to me, incredible performance by Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus always leaves me with a sense of awe at his amazing understanding and sensitivity in this portrayal of what we believe from the Bible and other sources to be the real Jesus.

Although Jeffrey was an actor, he lived that role not only in his dialogue, but also in those incredible eyes, which mirrored every thought. Although this actor, like all of us, was a human being, there was a quality of great goodness in him, which made him fit to play the role; and for those of us who believe in the

Man he portrayed, he made millions who saw the film have a glimpse, as it were, through a glass darkly, but a darkness full of brilliant and awesome light. According to director Nicholas Ray's biography, the script was approved by the Vatican before filming began.

In my opinion, he has never received the great recognition which he deserves by critics or other members of the industry. What I am trying to do, apart from my own praise of his portrayal, is to bring justice and recognition for a gifted actor, who like certain other actors of his era, was dismissed by hateful and jealous critics who could never aspire to his talent.

Whilst he was filming in Spain in 1969, also newly married, he suffered an injury which led to a brain haemorrhage, from which he died. He was 42 years of age; however, though dying young and because of his role in "King of Kings", as

they say in the song, “They can’t take that away from me”; and here’s hoping that, like the thief, he is now in paradise with the Person he portrayed so wonderfully.