

'TEN PUSH-UPS AND I SIMMER DOWN'

Jeffrey Hunter is one actor who can't be taken at face value

When Jeffrey Hunter was a senior at Northwestern University, some 14 years before being tapped for his present role of Temple Houston in the NBC Western series of the same name, he was quite suddenly felled by an ulcer. "A friend of mine," Hunter recalled recently, "gave me this long, doubtful look. 'An ulcer?' he said. 'You — of all people. I can't believe it.' Frankly, I couldn't believe it myself." Hunter adds, "I didn't know myself then as well as I do now."

Outwardly, Jeffrey Hunter — or, as he was born in New Orleans 30-some years ago, Henry H. McKinnies Jr. — is a seemingly uncomplicated, rather phlegmatic (some say bland), gentlemanly young man with sweeping good manners. Hope Lange, for instance, recalls working with Jeff in two pictures. Both times she happened to be *enceinte*. "Jeff," she says, "was always there slipping a chair under me, and so unobtrusively, not drawing attention to himself."

Says Dick Berg, who produced "Seven Miles of Bad Road," a Bob Hope dramatic show in which Hunter starred last October: "Sure, he has the physical inventory, so you tend to underestimate his other qualities. But this is a vastly underrated actor and an intelligent man who's growing as a human being." A long-time Hollywood publicist, who knows Hunter only from hearsay, puts in: "I've never yet heard a bad word about Jeff. This has to be a record for leading men in this town."

Jeff attempts to dab some dissent into this portrait of the all-American boy scout. "Never mind this baby face of mine — I've got a healthy actor's ego," he says, "even though I don't go around putting it on display. I don't throw things. I don't yell at people. I just turn to — and I *function*. And then when I get off alone I'll work off the rage that's boiling inside — I'll go for a long walk alone or I'll do push-ups or chin-ups on a door. Ten push-ups, 20 pull-ups and I simmer down."

These moments of self-examination are highly unusual, for Jeff Hunter is not one to indulge in either brooding introspection or the first person pronoun. Rarer yet, as one scriptwriter mentioned after working with Jeff: "He's the first good-looking actor I've ever met who wasn't hopelessly in love with himself. I don't think he even realizes how handsome he is."

Handsome is clearly the word for Hunter. An athletic-looking 175-pounder, he stretches an inch over 6 feet; his features have an even, boyish precision along with a "prettiness" that has limited his roles; his hair is dark, wavy brown; his teeth are lined in gleaming perfection; his pale, ice-blue eyes have been aptly described as "hypnotic" and "burning."

It was Jeff's eyes, in fact, that as much as anything won for him the role of the Saviour in the 1961 film "King of Kings." "I try not to be too conscious of my eyes," Hunter says. "But the eyes are, after all, the main bond of energy between people. An actor uses what he has."

According to Douglas Heyes, who wrote and directed the aforementioned Bob Hope play, Hunter sometimes uses what he doesn't know he has. "Jeff has a lot of hidden inner resources that can easily go untapped," Heyes contends. "By nature he wants to be liked and he'll go to any length to please. He has the equipment to do whatever a director asks of him — but you have to make your wishes known."

The master of the outdoor epic, John Ford, who directed Hunter in three pictures, agrees: "No matter what the demands, Jeff will dig in and draw from his reserve of talent." A prominent television actress demurs. "This boy could be very good," she says, "if he would only let himself go. But he's too tightly wound, too constricted. He holds back." However the estimates vary, Hunter has enjoyed acceptance and popularity virtually from the start of his career.



Jeffrey Hunter (left) with Jack Elam, who co-stars with him in the Temple Houston series.

In 1950 talent scout Milt Lewis spotted him in a UCLA campus production of "All My Sons" — Jeff was then gunning for his Master's degree in radio — and signed him to a long-term contract at 20th Century-Fox.

Shortly thereafter Hunter married another rising player, Barbara Rush, their short-lived union producing one son, Christopher, now 11. Hunter is now married to Dusty Killian, a bright, one-time model from Arizona. After working in 33 pictures, he began to spread out with a scattering of TV dramas — and for a reason: "Television always offered me a change from the cotton-candy, college-sophomore things they gave me in pictures."

Last summer Jeff, through his own production company, put together a pilot film based on the life of Temple Houston, Sam Houston's lawyer son, with a series projected for 1964-65. This leisurely approach was disrupted, however, when NBC canceled another series and *Temple Houston* was rushed quickly into the gap.

Jeff finds a singular appropriateness in being garbed Western-style for his first series, since his initial leaning toward acting stemmed from, of all things, a Tom Mix makeup kit. Jeff is the only child of a well-to-do manufacturer. The McKinnies family moved from New Orleans to the Milwaukee suburb of Whitefish Bay when he was 4.

About age 9, his imagination stirred by a breakfast-food ad, Jeff dispatched a quarter and one box top and received in return a "Tom Mix Makeup Box." Hunter recalls, "When that kit came in the mail, I went wild — I'd put clown white and nose putty on my face and make up stories and play all the characters. I'd act out the comic strips. I had a dream world in my room ..."

Despite his burgeoning success, Hunter concedes that frustrations and unfocused ambitions still burn deeply within him. He has restlessly involved himself in a number of side-line enterprises. At the moment, among his other interests, he is immersed in a documentary-film company, a business-management firm and the development of a ski lodge in the High Sierras. "If I didn't have to work, I'd be a ski and sail bum," Jeff likes to say. But his friends doubt that he could ever divorce himself from the stimulation of competing in business where, significantly, good looks are a negligible asset.

Jeff Hunter plays the piano, skis superbly on snow or water, has a private pilot's license, is a skilled skin diver, golfer, and tennis player.

All this, and those delicately shaped features — they seem almost too much. But then Hunter studies himself in his dressing-room mirror and shakes his head. "This face of mine," he says. "Shouldn't the ravages of time be doing *something* to it?"