



**Hunter gets crowned with thorns in Ray's 'King of Kings'. But his next part is bed of roses**

## Actor's Choice

By **JEFFREY HUNTER\***

I saw an article in a British newspaper recently, written by someone who categorised me as a Western star. Western star indeed! I was dumbfounded because I think out of the thirty-seven pictures I've made, maybe five of them have been Westerns.

Western veteran John Ford is one of the most wonderfully inspirational men I've worked with. He's a master in every sense of the word.

There was *The Last Hurrah* in which I played in a small part with Spencer Tracy. Ford gives a certain electrical thing on the set ... like the experience that actors have on the stage when they walk on. The play has begun and the audience begins to become part of the play and part of what the actors are, and they blend with the audience. There're those wonderful moments in the theatre when the audience catches fire and the play catches fire. This one feels when working with Ford, because he sits there and he's the whole audience himself.

\*In a recorded interview

I think Ford's success with the Western is because he has great feeling, first of all for the majesty of space and colour, that we do have in the south-western part of the United States; and he has always been an enthusiastic student of the type of drama that takes place within that setting. He has, too, a great feeling for the movement of people within that framework.

*The True Story of Jesse James* was one of my Westerns and it brought me under the influence of Nicholas Ray. (In spite of what some of the critics may have thought, Ray's *King of Kings* was not a Western.)

Ray is a man who, like Ford, has a great ability to communicate ideas concisely. He's a quiet man; he's not bombastic on the set and if he has something that he wants to tell you he tells you alone. Consequently the many observers who sit in the audience of his daily work of film-making miss, I'd say, ninety percent of *his* performance.

I graduated from Northwestern University in 1949, went to graduate school at U.C.L.A. from '49 to '50. I had been a professional radio actor, and what work I had done was principally in the field of character voices. I thought on my completion of graduate studies that I would accept a position, a teaching position, in the east, and more as an exercise than anything else I was cast in the university theatre production of Arthur Miller's *All my Sons*. I did the role of Chris. And as a result I was asked to go to Paramount for a reading. They made a screen test which had been based on two scenes from the play and it was shown at 20th-Fox. Sol Siegel saw it and he said "I have a part for this fellow in *Fourteen Hours*" which had already been cast. It started in New York and I was put under contract to Fox and stayed there for nine years.

I really had very little choice over anything. John Ford asked for me on his pictures because evidently I had something he could work with. I have been freelancing now for two years. The nine years at Fox was more or less a finisher course and now I have an opportunity to be more selective, perhaps I can find material that will be a greater challenge.

*Man-trap* was experimental. Edmund O'Brien was assuming the responsibilities and tasks of a director in a new field. Our script was not the finest by any means. It was the first time I had worked with an actor-director, and I feel that I'm an actor who needs all the help he can possibly get from a director. I lean heavily on the director for his ability to communicate to me my failings or my strong points.

Eddie, being a very strong performer, interprets each character himself; and at times this can be very helpful, and at other times it can be terribly frustrating, only because the actor likes to feel that he is an individual and not a parrot. It was an early stumbling block, because Eddie would act it all out, play the play, play the individual scenes, and play the characters. At times it's great fun to watch but then it does become a little troubling in terms of your own stream of consciousness, or your self-conscious reaction.

Nicholas Ray, on the other hand, doesn't try to act out the part for you. He watches you act it out and he reacts to what you do. Eddie is extremely resourceful; he's a good sport, he accepts suggestions, and I think he has all the makings of being a very fine director.



**Stella Stevens faces a well-tailored Jeffrey Hunter in Edmund O'Brien's 'Man-Trap'**

I'm at a disadvantage in making any further comment about *Mantrap* ... because I haven't seen the picture, I never had an opportunity to see it.

What *does* make a director? I think it depends on the individual, his own talent, and his own experience.

I've just done a *Checkmate* which is an hour long TV series, working under the direction of a young man named Don Taylor who acted for many years – in fact I saw him in a spectacular performance of *The Egg*, a French play translated into English and performed at U.C.L.A. – he is incredible in his stamina, in his ability to sustain the part, in his control of the dialogue and ideas. As I worked with him I became fascinated by his knowledge of the medium. He knew exactly what he wanted; he knew what he wanted from the writer; he knew what he wanted from me; he knew where he wanted his cameras; he knew what he wanted from all of the people. That gives the play impetus, if the director has a very strong very firm and has a very precise idea himself ... it may not be right in all cases to have this kind of precision, but at the same time chances are it will work to the good of everyone

because it is positive thinking. It infuses a certain energy to all the people working with and around the director. It's like a quarter back in a football team ... he knows what the play's going to be.

I haven't done too much TV, for two reasons. First, the nine years I was under contract my availability to television was controlled by the studio. Secondly, there is not much superior material to be found on TV. The man hours and the talent needed to turn this material out is far exceeded by the total numbers of hours that must be programmed to fill time. Consequently so many areas fall short of a superior kind of work.

TV is nonetheless the finest training ground for directors and actors, especially young performers who are seeking experience. How can we really improve as performers except by the practical experience of actually performing? And especially under duress at a highly-organised professional level.

The director in TV must exercise split-second judgment. This seasons them. We have a whole new school of young men who are veterans because they 'cut' in the control room and line-up their shots in preparation and execute their shots and edit the film all in one fell swoop; they have, I think, a wonderfully complete knowledge of all the many aspects of film-making as a result.

The one thing that film can do that live TV cannot do – it can forgive. When a mistake is made, whether it be technical or artistic, you can forgive that mistake and do it over again.

And most of us would prefer to work in a medium that forgives our transgressions.