

Strange Days

JEFFREY HUNTER

THE EXCRUCIATING, QUADRUPLE-WHAMMY DEATH THAT BEFELL CINEMA'S 'ROCK'N'ROLL JESUS' AND *STAR TREK*'S ORIGINAL CAPTAIN

When filming 1961's *King Of Kings*, the life of Christ as interpreted by *Rebel Without A Cause* director Nicholas Ray (cynically dubbed "Rebel Without A Cross" by its wavier critics), Jeffrey Hunter, as Jesus, was ordered to shave his armpits for his final crucifixion scene. Apparently, while Hollywood was prepared to subject its audience to the messiah's long, lingering death nailed to a Roman cross, it wasn't about to do so with excessive body hair in the frame.

That the film provided Hunter with his most famous role goes without saying, even if followers of that other religion, *Star Trek*, prefer to recognise him as Captain Pike, the original pre-Kirk Enterprise

'Events of the previous month, bombs and karate chops included, had displaced a vertebrae in his neck'

commander in the TV show's 1966 pilot episode "The Cage" (unsatisfied with the result, his lack of commitment opened the door for William Shatner to fill his moon boots from thereon in).

But, tragically, eight years after playing Jesus, Hunter himself would be dead at the age of 42. Though nowhere near as barbaric as crucifixion, his fate proved every bit as torturous following a series of minor accidents, each exacerbating the next until on May 27, 1969, Hunter lay dead at home having suffered a fatal cerebral hemorrhage.

The absurd chain of calamities commenced the night before he was due to fly to Spain to begin shooting what turned out to be his last movie, *Viva America!* His third wife, actress Emily McLaughlin (the couple had only been married two months before he passed away) had asked him to pick up

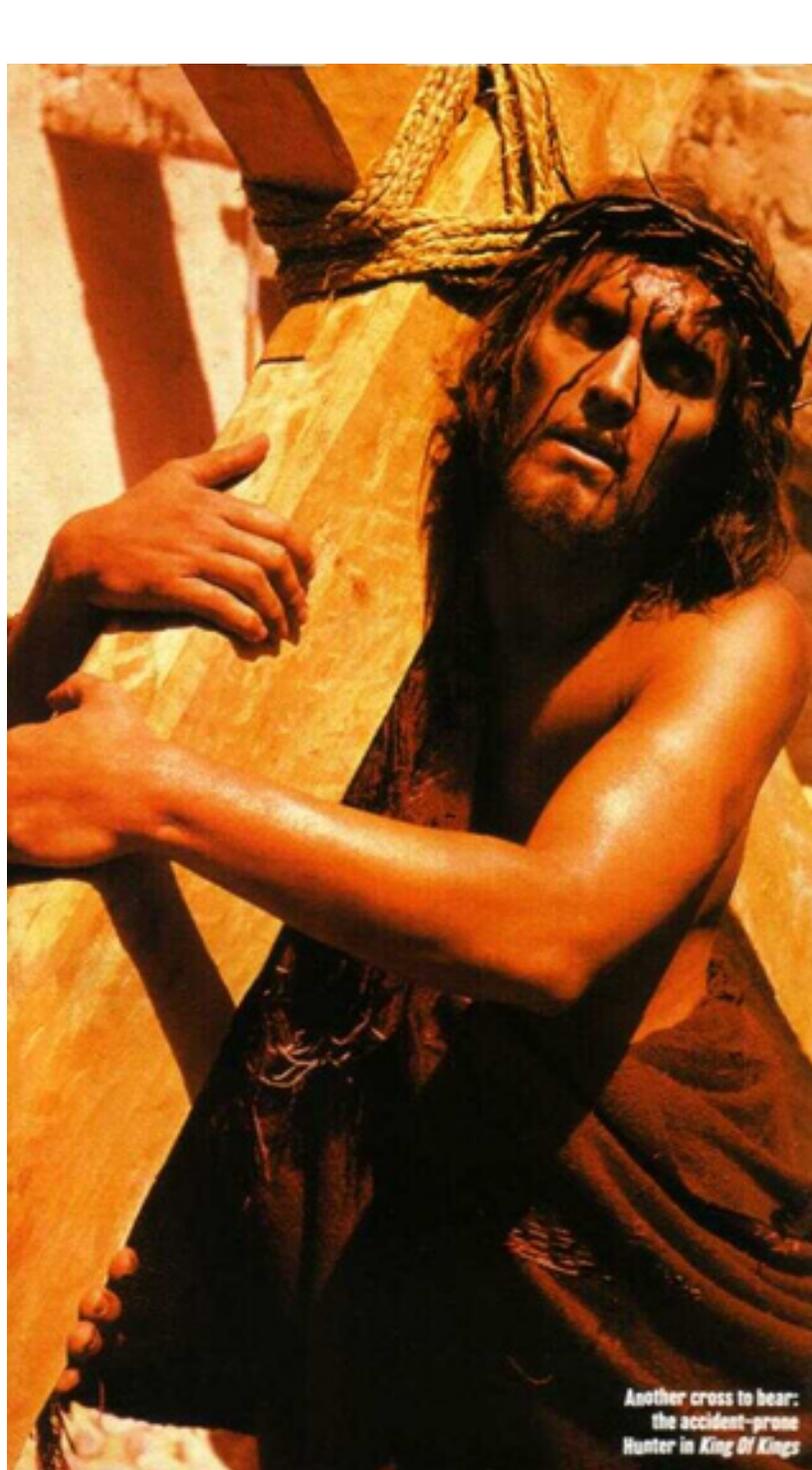
a roast turkey from their butcher for that evening's farewell supper. Unbeknown to Jeff, the cooked fowl came with its own scalding hot gravy, which leaked, giving him third degree burns. It wasn't until the following day, on the aeroplane, that the injuries sent Hunter into shock so severe that his first week of filming was postponed while he recuperated in a Spanish hospital.

Once on the set, all was well until the time came to film his character's death scene in a car explosion. A hapless technician wrong-wired the required effect, so instead of blasting the vehicle's window away from Hunter, it sent shards of glass and burning powder directly into the actor's face. Then, after a second spell in hospital, Jeff made the further mistake of engaging in a little male horseplay with an old British Commando friend who thought it amusing to strike his actor chum with a 'joke' karate chop. But when Hunter was returned to the infirmary diagnosed with a stretched nerve and mild concussion, neither man was laughing.

Honouring his contract, Jeff finished the picture in spite of his ailments only to undergo a seizure on his return flight to America. The atmospheric cabin pressure caused him to first lose his speech before paralysing his right arm and both his legs. Upon landing safely, he was hospitalised for the fourth time in as many weeks, at which time it was revealed that the events of the previous month, bombs and karate chops included, had displaced a vertebrae in his neck.

After a brief observation period, Jeff was discharged, purporting to be on the mend and fighting fit. Just days later, however, his unconscious body was discovered at the base of a flight of steps in his Hollywood home. He died during surgery that same afternoon, his skull irreparably fractured.

Simon Goddard



Another cross to bear:
the accident-prone
Hunter in *King Of Kings*