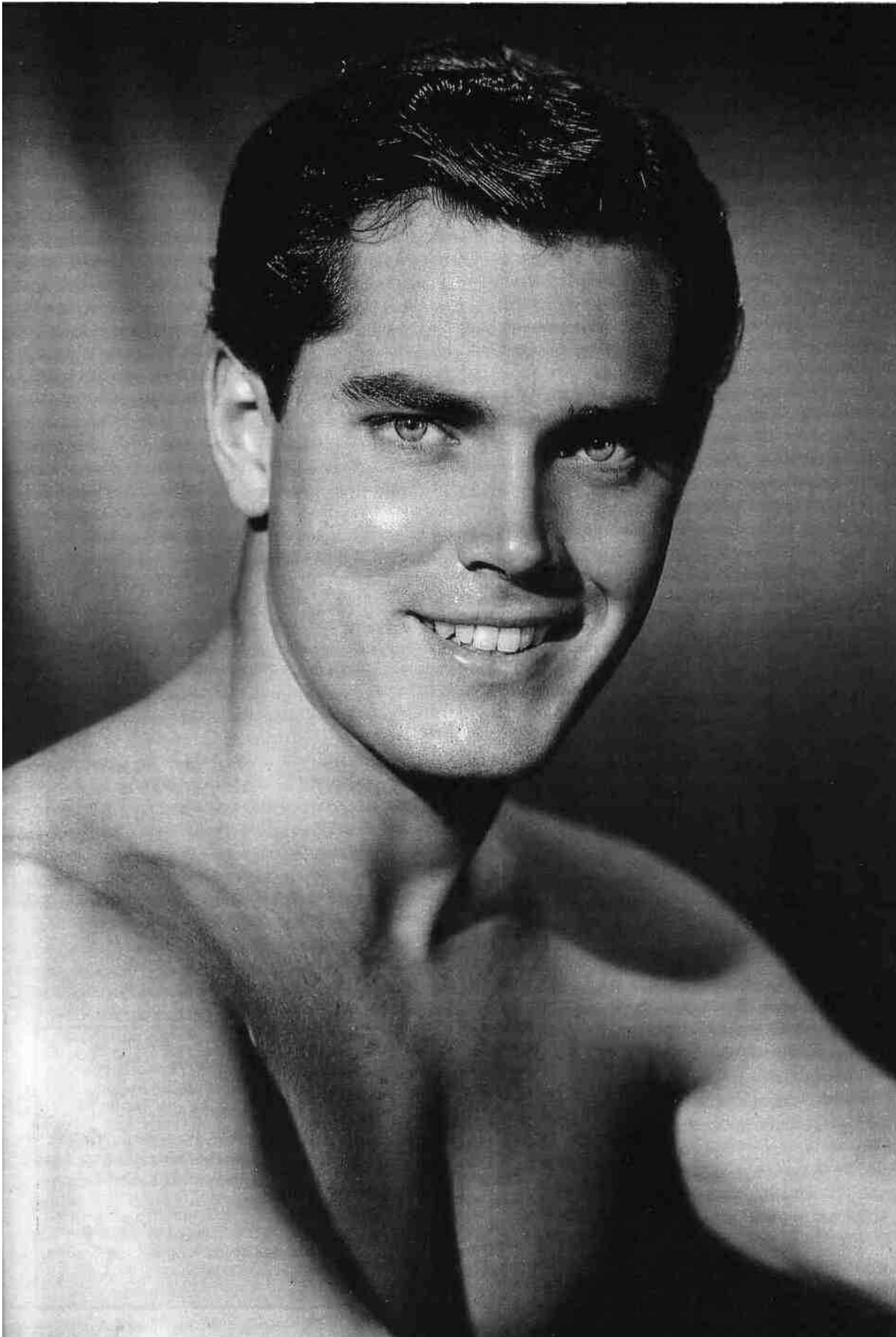




Joan Mac Trevor : my life with the stars

52. Jeffrey HUNTER was really too handsome!



For thirty-seven years, our permanent correspondent in Hollywood has shared the lives of the stars and those who have helped place them in the firmament of American cinema. She has finally resolved to publish her memoirs. Through her pen, here are the memories she shared about Jeffrey Hunter.

At first, I acted like everyone else. I wondered how it was possible to be so handsome yet to have even a small bit of talent! A superficial reaction, I must confess. My excuse for this is: you must know that at that time, Jeffrey Hunter was a kind of wonder of nature. Who could have resisted his blue, or rather blue-blue, eyes?

His exceptional physique played not only good tricks on him. On the contrary, he had to demonstrate to studios and directors that he was able to play something other than preferably silent young gods ...

Because of his eyes

For a long time, this wonderful person dragged behind him a reputation for pretention. But I, who knew him well, can tell you that he was in no way like that.

Jeffrey died accidentally about 20 years ago, but I still remember him as a charming young man, down to earth, and saddened that he wasn't always taken seriously.

Jeff Hunter: He had to show the industry that he was able to play something other than preferably silent young gods ...



Jeff Hunter with Joan Mac Trevor, who, like millions of admirers around the world, could not resist his blue eyes ...

It is true that I have known critics who were never, EVER, able to forgive him for being so handsome. Before beginning this chapter of my memories, I re-read some of the criticisms that my American colleagues published upon the release of "King of Kings", in which the beautiful Jeffrey embodied Christ.

I will remain silent about the condescending comments like "well, after all, the young man didn't do such a bad job ...". I will not dwell on the main controversy concerning a physical detail of this film's Christ:

"A Jesus with blue eyes, this has never been seen!...

"...And what emerged?" wrote the critic of "Time".

Barbara Rush and Jeffrey Hunter at a happy time: They divorced because she invoked his "mental cruelty" ...




"Incontestably the corniest, ickiest and most monstrously vulgar of all the big Bible stories Hollywood has told in the last decade... The imitation of Christ is little better than blasphemy...".

And I have kept for the end the shovelful reserved for poor Jeffrey:

Said the "sniper" of "Time", "Granted that the role is impossible to cast or play ... Whatever possessed Producer Bronston to offer the part to Jeffrey Hunter, 35, a fan-mag cover boy with a flabby face, a cute little lopsided smile, baby-blue eyes and barely enough histrionic ability to play a Hollywood marine?"

Let's be honest! Not everyone in the profession shared this brutal intransigence. For "Variety", the great American show business magazine, "King of Kings" was an interesting film that promised to have success because it sought to touch hearts. Goal achieved, by the way ...

Assessing his work

I always thought that the scorn of ill-tempered journalists sitting at their desks was excessive. I knew young Hunter for years. We spent hours alone, with me listening to him talk about his life and his career. It seems to me that I knew him well, in the long run. 

In my opinion, Jeffrey Hunter was a deserving fellow. Deserving for the reason that I explained to you at the beginning. It is difficult to forgive an actor for being ideally handsome. He was deserving because he always did his best to earn the money the studio paid him. And we know that this is an important quality. Overrated shirkers do not last long. I am therefore convinced that Jeffrey could not have, in the words of Winston Churchill, "fool(ed) all of the people all of the time"ⁱ.

This does not mean that I considered him the equal of Laurence Olivier or Louis Jouvet. He was a good, conscientious performer whose career success matched his work and his talents. When he died, stupidly, from a fall, on March 27, 1969,ⁱⁱ he had forty-seven films to his credit. Please believe that, behind the scenes in Hollywood, the battle for attention is such that an unprofessional fellow would have had no chance of making more than three or four films.

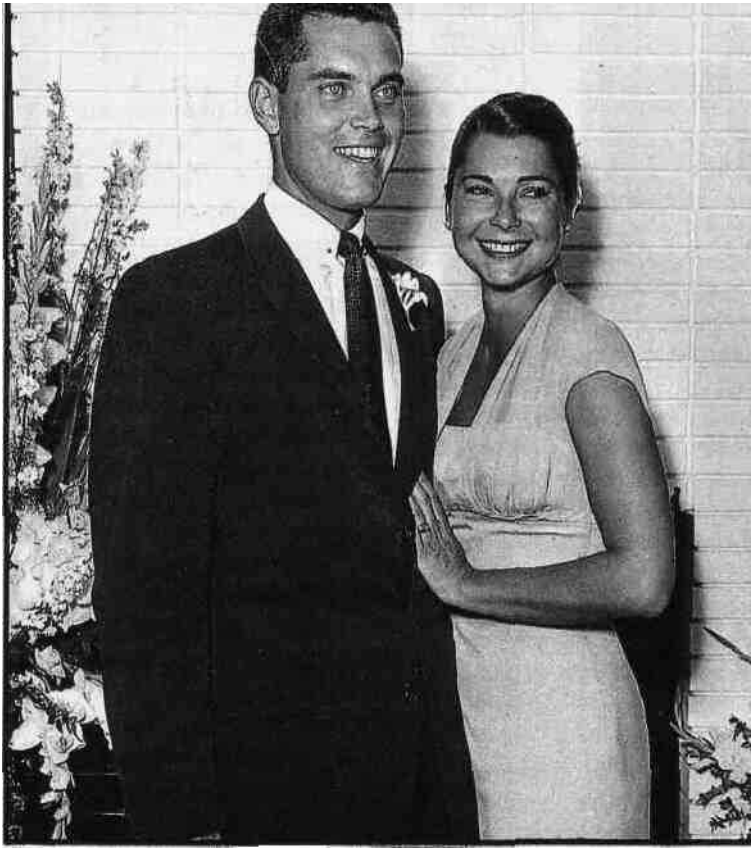
So it's not for his beautiful eyes – and God knows they were! – that filmmakers supported a film career such as his.

Even old John Ford had let himself be caught by what I will call "the anti-myth" Jeffrey Hunter. This story, which is true, I guarantee you, goes back to 1954. Ford was preparing for the first crank turns of a film that was to be titled "The Searchers". He needed to cast a second male role, the first being entrusted to John Wayne. Hunter went to visit the director:

"I am interested in the film you are starting ..."

John Ford looked at him for a moment and mumbled:

"Sorry, old man, you're not the type."



Dusty, his second wife, claimed to have been a battered woman!

Someone other than Hunter would have been "satisfied" with this final judgment and would not have persisted. Hunter visited Ford again the next day. He made up his face and hair to resemble the character. This time, the famous director did not hesitate:

"Okay, Jeff. I get it. I was wrong. I think that you will do fine."ⁱⁱⁱ

With his father and mother

Not only did Hunter shoot the film, but it was Ford himself who recommended him to Bronston, the producer of "King of Kings", for a role that, the least we can say with hindsight, was "tricky".

Often, in the crazy world of cinema work, especially in the movie business in Hollywood, personal lives can pay dearly for professional success. I agree that that is not always true, but the exceptions are those that confirm the commonly-accepted rule. Hunter did not escape.

His childhood, of which he spoke to me often, was

perfect. His adolescence too. He was born into a wealthy family on November 25, 1925, and was actually named Henry MacKinnies Jr.^{iv} I met his parents, whom he worshiped, many times on the Hollywood stages.

Very proud of their Henry, they came to see him work and support him with their presence. Mr. MacKinnies Sr.^v was a plump figure with tortoiseshell glasses and a pink bald head. His wife gave me the impression of being the perfect bourgeois American, always dressed to the nines yet a stickler for principles. As we never exchanged more than a few sentences, I cannot guarantee the validity of my judgment.

In Jeffrey's eyes, his mother had all the qualities he valued. She was even behind the first divorce of her son. I can certify that to you, having witnessed it closely.

By 1950, the handsome Jeffrey had met a starlet without much of a future^{vi} named Barbara Rush. It

was, it seems, mutual love at first sight. I wouldn't know, because at that time, I had not yet landed in the capital of American cinema. Jeff himself told me years later.

After a while, what the California courts characterized as "mutual incompatibility" came between them.

"While I had been madly in love," explained Jeff, "I realized we had nothing, but nothing at all in common."

At the same time, Barbara also took me aside:

"It's horrible, Joan. You can not know how he treats me! First, there is not a day that goes by without him trying to humiliate me. He says I do not know how to cook like his mother, that my housekeeping is bad, not like his mother's ...".

When support payments were being determined in a US court, these were the arguments that came out. Jeff had allegedly treated her with unprecedented mental cruelty. In short, it had to end one way or another – best for it to end badly.

A different song

The second love at first sight was reserved for Dusty Bartlett, a pretty, long-legged brunette who, too, had succumbed to the azure blue of Hunter's eyes. They got married and had two sons, Todd and Scott. Plus there was Steel,^{vii} the boy that the young woman had from a previous marriage.

This time, during the divorce, it was a different song.

"He drinks often, Judge," Dusty said. "And when he has one too many, he hits me. It is intolerable."

This time, the honeymoon lasted only a few months, marital hell more than seven years.

When they broke up in 1967, I invited Jeff to a sympathetic lunch, because it is in these most delicate moments that we need our true friends the most.

To describe his state of mind as greatly disenchanted would be an understatement. That day, I felt that Jeffrey Hunter was suffering from the injustice of being penalized in all areas of his life despite working so hard to do things right. He felt the greatest harm in his profession, as I told you. His private life also suffered. Women threw themselves at this extraordinary male and he, a little naive, believed that true love had arrived.

That said, I do not know whether the grievances of his two wives were well-founded, and whether he really was the domestic tyrant they described to American judges.

Twenty years later

His setbacks did not stop Jeff from marrying a third time, a few months before his death. We saw each



While filming "The man from Galveston"^{viii}, with Jack Elam, Jeffrey and Jack were photographed on the set with his parents.

other on a set, and between shots he told me:

"I think this is it, this time. You have to meet her. She is marvelous..."

Her name was Emily MacLaughlin^{ix}. I did not know her. I will never know her. They were married in early 1969. And the following March 27^x ...

How curious! Thinking back twenty years to Jeffrey Hunter in the last days of his life, I remember a saying he loved to repeat, especially after his career began to take shape:

"What is called luck, Joan, is when preparedness meets opportunity."

Tonight, alone in my office, face to face with my typewriter, I wonder if dear Jeff was actually lucky...

Joan Mac TREVOR

On this particular day, Jeffrey went to visit his wife, Barbara Rush, who was shooting "Magnificent Obsession" with Rock Hudson.



Translator's notes and comments

- i The quote “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.” is usually attributed to US President Abraham Lincoln, not to Winston Churchill.
- ii Jeff died on May 27, not in March.
- iii In the article “The Rebel With a Cause”, (Picturegoer magazine, published September 29, 1956), Jeff is directly quoted recounting this story. It differs in some particulars from the story as told above. Jeff said:

“I had read ‘The Searchers’ and right from the moment I got into the story and into its characters, I knew that the role was for me.

“First I telephoned Mr. Ford’s office. When I finally got through to him, he answered: ‘You’re not anywhere near the type!’ But I wasn’t taking such a quick brush-off. Next day I showed up at his office.

“I felt that I should at least try to look something like a half-Indian. I slicked back my black hair, wore a very open-necked sports shirt to display a healthy tan.

“When I was shown into his office, Ford was sitting smoking a big cigar. He stared at me for what seemed an endless time, then grunted: ‘Take your shirt off!’ I did just that. After another endless moment he grunted again: ‘I’ll let you know.’

“I thought this was just another of those Hollywood brush-offs. But then he said, with a most encouraging change of tone: ‘Don’t cut your hair until you hear from me.’ Somehow I felt I was in.” ...

...About two days before the final wind up of the Robert Jacks picture “A Kiss Before Dying”, Hunter received the official word that John Ford had given him the part in The Searchers.
- iv Jeff’s last name was spelled McKinnies, not MacKinnies. I wonder if Joan Mac Trevor’s seeming preference for “Mac” comes from it being a part of her own name?
- v Again, MacKinnies should be spelled McKinnies.
- vi As it turns out, Barbara Rush had a truly luminous future in both film and television!
- vii The boy’s name was actually spelled Steele.
- viii Jack Elam did not appear in “The Man from Galveston”, which was the pilot made for the TV series “Temple Houston”. Rather, Jack starred with Jeff in “Temple Houston” itself. Hence, this photo had to have been taken on the set of the TV show.
- ix Another Mac! Emily’s last name was McLaughlin, not MacLaughlin.
- x May 27, the date of Jeff’s passing.