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All night  *Jeff Hunter*
wrestled with his soul

DARE I,

A SINNER,

PLAY

CHRIST?

- Has an ordinary human being the right to portray Jesus Christ? In the past, movie makers have avoided showing the face of Christ on the screen. But, in *King of Kings* the producers are going to show His face and body.

And Jeffrey Hunter is taking the greatest risk of his life. Many people may say, "How dare he, a divorced man, a man not only born with the taint of original sin but also a man who has led a

man's life - how dare he portray the Son of God?"

I am sure that Jeffrey Hunter spent sleepless nights wrestling with his conscience before he decided to play Jesus of Nazareth. Though I was not with him, I know what he must have gone through because I once faced a similar soul-searching with another actor.

I have had the privilege of being one of Charlton Heston's spiritual advisers. Several years ago he said to me, "When I accepted the role of Moses in

The Ten Commandments I did so only after a great deal of thought. I asked myself, ‘Dare I play this great spiritual leader? Will the Jewish people resent a Gentile playing this role?’”

I told Mr. Heston that I believed the Jewish people would be grateful if he gave a fine portrayal of their great prophet. His own personal faith had nothing to do with his giving the world a dynamic portrait of Moses.



AS A MINISTER who has had the privilege of serving some of Hollywood's well-known actors, I think I can answer some of the questions that were in Jeff's mind the night he wrestled with his soul.

There may be some Christian churchmen who will avoid the picture because a man from Hollywood dared to play the role of the Lord Jesus.

If that is the way they feel, they will be doing a most un-Christian thing. Christians have no right to judge one another. Jesus Christ Himself constantly warned us that we must not judge - that judgment was reserved only to God Himself.

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

(Matthew 7:1-13)

If the right to play Jesus depended on the worthiness of the man chosen, no man could play it. Because of the defects in our own personalities, none of us is worthy.

Jesus was the exemplification of the perfection of God's love. God loves not as people do. God loves us regardless of how much we have sinned. Jesus, as the Son of god, loved not merely in relation to how

others treated Him, but perfectly - as God does. And because of that perfection of love, He was able to cry out, even as He was nailed to the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Against this perfection of love - the highest the world has ever known on earth - what actor could possibly be considered worthy of the role of Jesus?

But Jesus Himself, when there was a great task to be done, never questioned the worthiness of the individual He chose. Among His followers He chose Mary Magdalene, a former prostitute; Thomas, a

doubter; Peter, the tempestuous; and Paul, who had been one of the most hard-hearted persecutors of Christians. To say nothing of Judas, a chosen apostle, who betrayed Christ. Was any of these persons worthy of the role he was chosen to play?

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Since Jesus Himself represented the highest manifestation of love - love that lasted beyond death - the act of portraying Jesus dramatically and spiritually is an act of love. An act of love does not depend on the personality of the man who performs it. If your child was drowning, wouldn't it be all right with you if

the man who jumped in to save your child was a hoodlum? Actually, Jeffrey Hunter has been no more sinful than any of us. But if he had been the worst sinner of all, and sincerely put out a good presentation of Christ, he would have performed an act that Jesus would have blessed.

However, members of my church who know Jeff Hunter have the most favorable things to say about him personally. I have been told that he is a family man, that he doesn't carouse, that he is moderately religious. He is humble, sincere and well-liked. He was chosen for the role because the producer felt that he was the actor who could best portray Jesus Christ. "But by accepting this role," a friend of his told me, "he put himself on trial."

ONE THING I KNOW. In undertaking the part, Jeff couldn't play it without being deeply moved by it, without having the role affect his personal life. In playing Jesus, he had to take Jesus into his personality, become a part of the great web of love that Christ represented.

To do this took a powerful emotional experience.

And that experience occurred, as God would have it, early in the picture.

Jeff and the company of *King of Kings* were on location in Spain for the scene depicting the Sermon on the Mount. The director had chosen a mountainous area in a remote region outside of Madrid. To play the people of Jesus' time, the peasants of the region were hired.

These peasants have the wonderful faces that express the simplicity and the piety of those who heard and believed Jesus' message.

These Spanish peasants are truly devout. In order to be certain that they would not become confused by the sudden appearance of Jeffrey in the robes of Jesus, the assistant director announced in Spanish over the loudspeakers: "An actor playing Jesus will appear among you in the likeness of Christ. He will walk down the hills among you. Be eager to touch him, as the people of old did. Remember, *he is an actor* even though he is costumed as Christ."

When the time for the scene came, Jeff began to walk, as Christ did centuries ago, among the people. When the peasants looked into his

face, saw his luminous eyes, they were so overcome they forgot the director's words and knelt before Jeff, crossing themselves.

The scene was ruined. But until this happened, Jeff Hunter - although aware of the enormous responsibility of his role, had no idea how great the impact might be. Tears came to his eyes. More than ever before, he realized that he owed a great obligation to this greatest of all roles.

Dusty, his wife, told Terry Davidson of Modern Screen, who visited the location in Madrid, "It takes Jeffrey at least three hours after he comes home from the studio to get back to everyday living."

This does not surprise me, for when Charlton Heston played Moses, he lived the part so completely that

Lydia, his wife, once said to him, "Do you think you can come out of the role of Moses long enough to eat dinner?"

When Heston played Moses, he wouldn't take phone calls, drink coffee from paper cups, drink cokes or relax between takes while in costume - for he did not want to destroy the illusion of the extras who might have to bow to him in the role of Moses later on.

AS JESUS CHRIST, Jeffrey Hunter also made up his mind that while he wore the costume of Jesus, he would do nothing inconsistent with the role.

Before the picture started, he said, "I can approach this undertaking with only two guideposts - absolute humility and a willingness to accept the

emotional and spiritual leadership of my director, Nicholas Ray, and the religious advisers of this film. It will be impossible for me to discuss my feelings and attitudes about portraying Christ with authority, so during the five months I will be dedicated to this role, I must keep my personal activities completely anonymous. I will be unable to grant interviews or photographs off the set and I further intend to give up my public life for the duration of the production.”

Jeffrey was as good as his word. He and Dusty and his stepson Steele (Dusty's son by a previous marriage) took an apartment in Madrid. Steele went to a country day school, and Jeff and Dusty lived quietly at home.

When Jeffrey gave an interview to

Modern Screen's Terry Davidson, it was with the understanding that she would not question him about his role. They talked, but it was only about general subjects.

When Terry asked Jeffrey, "Do the kids ask your son to bring them home to meet the man who played Christ?" Jeffrey avoided a direct answer. The question wasn't considered cricket.

Terry reported: "It is genuinely startling to see Jeffrey in costume, moving with a kind of masculine grace. He is very believable. In the Sermon on the Mount scene, he walks through the multitude down a hill, addressing a word or two to several of the people. When he was through, he retreated to his dressing room and wouldn't let anyone see him."

Because Jeffrey would not talk about his role, the English interviewers crucified him. They mocked the idea that a former Hollywood cowboy actor - a divorced man - dared play the role.

Why, actually, was Jeffrey chosen for it? Though no man is without sin, if worthiness were the test, some more exemplary citizen might have been chosen, according to these reporters.

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As I have said, worthiness is not the test. The test was the ability of an actor to look the role and portray it spiritually.

We come to the question: *What should Jesus look like?*

Actually, we have no specific physical description of Jesus in the

Bible. Each of the great medieval painters who painted Jesus gave us his own image of Christ. Because these painters were often emaciated men themselves, they believed that to be holy was to be thin, emaciated, almost effeminate in appearance.

BUT THE TRUTH IS that everything in the Bible points to the fact that Jesus was a strong, young, robust man. He must have been tanned, with hair blowing in the wind. He went through any number of ordeals such as only a young, strong man could have endured.

We know that he was a carpenter, and carpenters in those days were as sturdy as blacksmiths. They had no pulleys, joists or beams, and had to hew out the lumber from the trees

and carry it around themselves. No carpenter in Jesus' day could be weak or puny.

Even after fasting forty days, Jesus could walk into the synagogue and confront a group of men who wanted to throw Him off a cliff. He was stronger than most of them, not only spiritually but also physically.

Jeff Hunter was chosen because of his robustness, his masculine grace, his peaceful visage - and his eyes.

Nicholas Ray, the director, said, "It is possible to do almost anything with makeup, but only Jeff Hunter has those eyes."

They are, I am told, eyes that have a penetrating depth, eyes that have a mystical effect. No man can truly comprehend the beauty and strength

of Jesus' visage; it is beyond the understanding of man - but only a man whose eyes are luminous and filled with kindness could portray the Saviour.

Another reason Mr. Ray chose Jeff Hunter was that he was impressed by his quality of never pushing himself, a sign of humility. In this respect, Jeffrey reflects the spirit of love, which never vaunteth itself or coerces others.

What sort of life has Jeff Hunter lived, before he played his great role?

He is a man who has lived and suffered and grown. A few short years ago he was one of the loneliest of men. You may remember Jeff Hunter as he was then - or you may have forgotten him entirely. After

all, who was he, really? Another of the good-looking youngsters swarming over Hollywood. He had a pretty actress wife, Barbara Rush, a young son, Christopher. He made a few movies - played a few not very important roles. From time to time his face appeared in fan magazines, usually at a house-party or among a group at a swimming pool

And then, all of a sudden, he felt as if he had nothing. His wife told him she wanted a divorce. She went out of his life and took his son with her. And at the same time, the phone stopped ringing, the scripts stopped coming in, the studios seemed to lose interest in him.

Both halves of his life collapsed at once - his marriage and his career.

He could have quit pictures and found himself a job, teaching, acting. Only he didn't. He told himself, "All right. For the first time in your life, you're alone. Find out what it's like. Do the things people do when there's no one else around. Be alone. It won't kill you."

It didn't. He learned to be self-sufficient. He took up skin diving. He stopped wanting to call someone up in the evening. He read a great deal. He learned to enjoy savoring his day's experiences to himself. There were advantages to loneliness, he thought. At least, that's what he tried to believe.

Then, mysteriously, offers started coming in again.

HE ACCEPTED ONE - and on the

set of the picture met Joan Bartlett, who was acting as a double for the leading lady. He learned that Joan had been married previously and had a son just the age of Jeff's Chris. She wanted to know about him, too. Had he been able to maintain a good relationship with his boy? How had he adjusted?

They began to date - and fell in love. He began to call this beautiful dark haired girl with the ready smile by her nickname, "Dusty."

When they finished the picture, he felt almost relieved. He'd been so badly hurt, he didn't want to take a chance on being hurt again.

Dusty left town - and he went back to loneliness.

But he couldn't forget her. One day he received a letter from Dusty. She

had been offered a job in Hollywood, modeling for Don Loper. She would be coming to Hollywood again, and Jeff was the only person she really knew. Did he have any advice to offer?

He not only had advice to offer - he had his love to offer her, too. And so they were married.

Two weeks later they were in Europe so that Jeff could make a movie there. Three months later they were on their way home. But they were so exhausted they didn't notice a sign over the bathroom sink on the ship steaming away from Italy. The sign said: **DON'T DRINK THIS WATER.**

Jeff and Dusty drank so much of it they both became ill. Dusty recovered quickly from the symptoms; Jeff collapsed with a bad case of hepatitis. Dusty had to become housekeeper,

nurse and mother to two boys, her own and Jeff's who was with him while Barbara was away on a picture location. Having just gotten off a sick bed herself, Dusty wasn't strong enough to prepare and serve half a dozen meals a day and hand-feed them to an invalid husband. But she did it just the same.

On the morning he woke up feeling good again, Jeff looked at his wife and said, "I've loved you for a long time. Now it's more than that. I also owe you a great debt of gratitude."

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Later, when Jeff was in Okinawa making *Hell to Eternity* and Dusty was alone in their home in Santa Monica, she lost their expected baby

in miscarriage. This time it was Jeffrey who, rushing home as soon as shooting would permit, comforted Dusty.

So without judging, we see in Jeffrey a man who has been through many emotional experiences, a man who has tried to live according to the laws of love.

But regardless of what his private life has been like, there will still be those who say: "But isn't it wrong for an ordinary mortal sinner to play Jesus, who was without sin? Isn't letting such a man play the role an attempt to achieve a religious effect through irreligious means?"

MY ANSWER IS THIS: If your house were burning down, would you ask the firemen who came to put

out the flames, "What manner of men are you? Have you sinned?"

The idea is ridiculous.

The world today is in the same condition as a burning house. Never have we needed to return to Jesus' principles as much as we do today.

Jesus came to show the world the perfection of God's love. Where love is great enough, all problems can be solved. If men, regardless of creed and ecclesiastical routine, can learn the great message of Jesus, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," it would solve all the world's problems.

Jesus made His sacrifice in the interest of peace; He chose to be a Man of peace and not of violence.

The pagans and Romans wanted to enslave the world. The King of

Kings triumphed above hatred by rising to the heights of love. He was crucified, but His message - that God is Love - lives on in the hearts of men. Only we need to be reminded of it hour after hour, day after day.

If Jeffrey Hunter can give a great portrayal of Christ, he is performing an act of love.

And our Saviour Himself gave the answer to the question being asked today: Is it right for a sinful man to perform an act of love in the name of Jesus?

John came to Him and said: "Master, we saw one casting out devils in Thy name; and we forbade him, because he followeth not with us."

And Jesus said unto him: "Forbid him not; for he that is not against us is for us."

Jesus would have approved of anyone who brought men the message of His love. And in bringing the world that message, Jeffrey Hunter is the ally of Jesus Christ, the perfect Exemplification of love.

A great poet once said, "God fulfills Himself in many ways."

One of the ways in which God may fulfill Himself is through the human instrumentality of a fine actor in a great motion picture. To destroy the good that can be done by a picture like *King of Kings* through

un-Christian censure and judgment of the man who plays the role of Jesus would cause immeasurable harm to the Christian religion itself.

All men - Christians and non-Christians alike - have their own image of Jesus. A good motion picture will not destroy, but enhance that image.

And in a wanton world that plays with atom bombs and hydrogen bombs, any man who can bring us the great message of the Sermon on the Mount is helping show us the Way, the Truth and the Life.

END

Jeffrey stars in King of Kings, for MGM, and Hell to Eternity, UA.