

THE REBEL WITH A CAUSE

by
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It's been a big year for Jeffrey Hunter —

the six feet two inches, thirteen stone

black-haired and blue-eyed actor who is

thirty-one years old on November 25.

And next year looks like being even

bigger.

The Proud Ones, The Searchers, The

Great Locomotive Chase. This is a trio of

consecutive hits of which any young

actor could be proud. Unquestionably,

Hunter's popularity this year comes from

his performance in *The Searchers* (on

release this week), one of the finest of

John Ford's many outdoor sagas.

Now sixty-ish, crusty John Ford is a

man with the reputation of being not

only a brilliant producer-director (four

Academy Awards to his credit), but

also a fire-eater.

No young actor has ever dared to

beard Ford in his den and tell him he

wants a certain role in a forthcoming

Ford movie. Ford tells *them!* No one,

that is, until Jeff Hunter did it.

Ready for His Chance

But then, ever since his first break in

1950, when he was hauled out of a

college play in Los Angeles and offered

two contracts at once, Jeff Hunter has

been a rebel from the Hollywood

conventions.

Hunter was twenty-five then. He had

been acting since he was a schoolboy, as

amateur, as semi-pro, in any play in

which he could get a speaking part or a

walk-on.

He had been aiming at just such a

solid opening as the one that greeted

him on May 7, 1950, when Twentieth

Century-Fox grabbed him from under

Paramount's nose. When it came he

was ready for it. His number-one

maxim in life has been, still is: "Luck

is when preparedness meets oppor-

tunity."

But he has also adopted another

maxim: "Don't take NO for an answer."

This is a wonderful maxim so long as

you have the gumption to stick to it.

He is No Yes-Man

In Hollywood, peopled by many yes-

men, who weakly accept that they must

bow and shudder before the big wheels if

they are to get anywhere, it is a course

that takes self-confidence to pursue.

But Hunter pursued it right from

the start. Take the time he was first

tested by Paramount and verbally

optioned. He was told he must await

the return of an executive from New

York before he could receive a signed

contract.

Most youngsters would have waited,

but not Jeffrey Hunter. Fox offered him a

deal within a few hours of the Paramount

test. He promptly told Fox he would

accept — if he could have a signed con-

tract immediately.

He got it – from Darryl Zanuck himself. Within hours, he was winging his way to New York to appear in “Fourteen Hours”.

Hunter appeared in around fifteen films, gaining experience. Then he decided to gamble on his own by going all out for *The Searchers*.

And here’s the story as Hunter told it to me

As he decided to go and see John Ford, he was loaned out by the studio for another routine assignment – this time to producer Robert Jacks for *A Kiss Before Dying*.

“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.”

A couple of days later the company of *A Kiss Before Dying* took off for Arizona, to start filming.

“I told Robert Jacks of my interview with Ford,” Hunter said, “and his instructions not to cut my hair. He was very cooperative and let me keep my hair long.

“This may explain to people who have seen me in ‘A Kiss Before Dying’ why my hair looked so awful! Fortunately, it somehow went with the character I was playing.”

About two days before the final wind up of the Robert Jacks picture, Hunter received the official word that John Ford had given him the part in *The Searchers*.

“We were due back at the studio for a couple of days’ interiors,” said Hunter. “Mr. Jacks rushed through my scenes for me. I finished at four o’clock in the afternoon, was due in the Arizona desert at 7 a.m. the next day. By train, plane and car, I made it – but only just.”

Jeff Hunter can attribute his present popularity with the fans to the fact that he rebelled against the orthodox and routine way a young actor’s career is handled.

Directly after he had finished *The Searchers*, Hunter was up and at it again. There was nothing for him at Fox. Then he heard that Disney was casting *The Great Locomotive Chase*.

Out he went on his own to Burbank and called on Disney. He had a big sales talk all fixed up in his mind. But he didn’t need it.

“The whole trouble in this profession here,” said Hunter, “is complacency. When you’re established you can afford to sit back and wait for a good part. When you’re not established you work out your contract and hope for the best.

“That’s no way to work for the future. In every other profession a man has to go out and sell himself. Why not in acting?”

So, off his own bat, Hunter added another top role to his fast-mounting list with the enormously successful Disney picture. And the result of this enterprising actor’s do-it-yourself idea? His home studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, has given him a brand new contract.

Next month he returns to star in *Jesse James*. His friend Robert Wagner will also star. (“I play the Henry Fonda role in this re-make.”)

And he now can make one feature a year under his own independent production company banner.

Thirty-one years of age and his own producer – just because he started his Hollywood career as a rebel with a cause . . . the cause of making something of himself!

On top of all this success Hunter takes a long-range view of an actor’s staying powers. When I talked with him, it was in a suite of plush, ultra-modernistic offices in Beverly Hills. The brass plate read: “Hunter Enterprises.” His partners? A lawyer and an accountant.

“I think actors and others who make big and quick money need financial counsel – otherwise they may find in a few years, when their popularity wanes, that they have nothing left.

“My two partners are experts in the tax and investment field. And I want to go in for independent production eventually, particularly documentaries filmed in all parts of the world.

“So through Hunter Enterprises and the partners I have, who are far more knowledgeable on finance than I am – I feel our organization is in good shape for the future.

“I am investing all my earnings in myself,” Jeff Hunter emphasized. “And the return I am looking for is a long-range income, rather than a quick profit in an unstable market.

“The latter aim has unfortunately proved the financial downfall of many actors my age. But it’s not going to happen to me!”