

NOTES ON JEFFREY HUNTER AND HIS FILMS

by Jim Meyer

"Jeffrey Hunter is beautiful!" a girl friend gurgled to me some 15 years ago. And indeed he was, as any man not envious of Hunter's impressive 6' 1" height and blue-eyed, brown-haired handsomeness must admit.

As is well enough known, many film actors have little more to offer audiences than handsomeness. But far too many critics (men and women alike) too quickly tabbed the exceptionally handsome actor "beautiful but bland."

But teen-age girls didn't mind. Many didn't care whether he could act. In Jeffrey Hunter they saw (or thought they saw) a dream prince, a husky young god, who could fulfill their most imaginative fantasies. Less dazzled male viewers saw something else: a man who was handsome enough for them to resent, largely, one suspects, because many of them wished that his good looks belonged to them, and, not being able to measure up, consoled themselves by insisting that he couldn't act and wouldn't last long in films.

Obviously, Hunter had to work twice as hard as many another actor of his type to prove he was a good actor. I believe he succeeded although he never became a superstar.

Did Hunter's good looks make him arrogant, overbearing, and hard to work with? Possibly not, when one recalls that Jean Peters, a co-star of his, once went out of her way to observe that his courtesy toward and consideration for her would be remarkable anywhere but especially in Hollywood.

My efforts to contact two actors who had worked with Hunter more than once brought these results:

Robert Wagner replied, through his secretary, that he and Hunter had been close friends but that he preferred to make no further comment.

David Janssen replied (also through a representative) that he and Hunter had worked together in only two films and rarely saw each other socially. But Janssen remembered Hunter as "a fine actor...completely professional in his approach to his work."

Two actresses were also contacted: Anne Francis and Viveca Lindfors, with each of whom Hunter had worked in two films. Neither responded. Perhaps they never received my letters.

Jeffrey Hunter was born Henry H. McKinnies, Jr., on November 24, 1927, in New Orleans, La. His father (a sales engineer) and his mother moved with him, their only child, to Milwaukee when Hank, as the child was called, was three. Some years later, while in high school, Hank became interested in theatricals although football took much of his spare time.

Maxine Arnold in *Photoplay* (July, 1956) quotes Mrs. McKinnies: "I always expected perfection from 'Hank,' but I wasn't conscious of it at the time. What mothers are? Naturally, I wouldn't do it again. It isn't fair and I'm sure it put a great strain on him... above all, we wanted him to be a fine person."

Hank himself is quoted by Miss Arnold as saying: "I was blessed (with a happy, harmonious home life). My parents are two very devoted people."

"We had a big back yard and I was

always putting on a carnival or circus. I had a puppet show too and I also did magic tricks."

The McKinnies family resided in a suburb of Milwaukee. When the North Shore Children's Theater group there needed someone to play a 60-year-old man, Hank was induced to take the part. The youngster loved radio and soon was acting in The Children's Theater of the Air.

To quote Miss Arnold again: "The record shows that 'Hank' was president of his class, president of the student body, football hero, recipient of the Citizenship Award and a scholarship to Northwestern University (Illinois). Nor was romance neglected. ... As 'Hank' says, 'I've always gone for brunettes.' "

During World War II, Hank enlisted in the Navy. Having studied radar, he asked for sea duty but instead was sent to the Ninth Naval District at

Great Lakes. Honorably discharged in the fall of 1946, he entered Northwestern University on his scholarship and the GI Bill. He was to become president of his fraternity (Phi Delta Theta) and, reportedly, graduated in three years.

(I will now begin to intersperse a list of Hunter's films, including main credits and my own comments. I have left out of consideration any of his television appearances.)

1. JULIUS CAESAR. (Avon Production, 1950.) Directed by David Bradley. *Cast:* Charlton Heston, Harold Tasker, David Bradley, Grosvenor Glenn, William Russell, Helen Ross, Mary Darr.

A 16mm film directed and enacted by Northwestern University students among whom was Jeffrey Hunter (unbilled).



—20th Century-Fox. (Courtesy of Kenneth G. Lawrence.)

Ed (Jeffrey Hunter) vs. Cliff (Richard Widmark) in *Red Skies of Montana* (1952). This film, originally released as *Smoke Jumpers*, gave Hunter a large part.

Hunter took his master's degree at the University of California, where he spent many an evening rehearsing for his role of Chris in the university's production of *All My Sons*. The play opened May 7, 1950, and two talent scouts in the audience, one from 20th Century-Fox and one from Paramount, were impressed and wanted to screen-test him.

Things now moved very quickly for the lad who was so fond of saying, "Luck is when preparedness meets opportunity." He signed with 20th Century-Fox and on December 1, 1950, eloped with the up-and-coming Paramount starlet Barbara Rush. Hank's studio now changed his name to Jeffrey Hunter, and the newlyweds were to become popular with younger moviegoers.

(The Hunters' only child, Chris, it was said, kept them together longer than what might have been the case.

By March, 1955, Miss Rush asked for a divorce on grounds of cruelty: "He kept telling me how much better his mother could cook and keep house." A Los Angeles Superior Court judge approved an agreement whereby Miss Rush would retain the couple's home and Hunter would pay monthly for the support of Chris, who was then three.

(For publication at least, Hunter refused to criticize Miss Rush: "Barbara and I basically disagreed on everything...we rarely fought, we just disagreed...two careers and long separations never helped a marriage. Love (makes it) necessary for communication in marriage...both physically and in name.")

2. FOURTEEN HOURS. (20th Century-Fox, 1951.) Directed by Henry Hathaway. *Cast:* Paul Douglas, Richard Basehart, Barbara Bel Geddes, How-



Above the bay of a Pacific island during World War II, a British sailor (Jeffrey Hunter) has harassed a German man-of-war. (*Sailor of the King*, a 1953 release.)

ard da Silva, Agnes Moorehead, Robert Keith, Debra Paget, Jeffrey Hunter, Grace Kelly, James Warren, Frank Faylen, Jeff Corey, James Millican.

His first professional film release was a stunning drama about a would-be suicide (Basehart), who wavers 14 hours on a window ledge high above a New York street, and a kindly cop (Douglas), who tries to save him. The director's most striking accomplishment was his withering visual commentary on the morbidly cruel people who gather on the street below, many of them hoping the young man will jump. Two exceptions are two strangers (Hunter and Debra Paget) united in their sympathy and concern for the man on the ledge.

3. CALL ME MISTER. (20th Century-Fox, 1951.) Directed by Lloyd Bacon. *Cast:* Betty Grable, Dan Dailey, Danny Thomas, Dale Robertson, Benay Venuta, Richard Boone, Jeffrey Hunter, Frank Fontaine, Harry Von Zell, Dave Willock, Robert Ellis, Jerry Paris.

If you happen to catch this Technicolor musical on television, you can see Hunter in a two-minute scene as Dan Dailey's barracks buddy—if your local station doesn't edit the scene out. Hunter manages a cornpone accent remarkably well.

4. TAKE CARE OF MY LITTLE GIRL. (20th Century-Fox, 1951.) Directed by Jean Negulesco. *Cast:* Jeanne Crain, Dale Robertson, Mitzi Gaynor, Jean Peters, Jeffrey Hunter, Betty Lynn, Helen Westcott, Lenka Peterson, Carol Brannon, Natalie Schafer.

A story as silly and simpering as its title suggests. Hunter was a college fraternity snob who pins pretty sorority girl Jeanne Crain. She has to turn from his snobbishness (and that of her sorority) to the security of Dale Robertson. This color film drew protests from fraternities and sororities all over the country. None of them should have bothered.

5. THE FROGMEN. (20th Century-Fox, 1951.) Directed by Lloyd Bacon. *Cast:* Richard Widmark, Dana Andrews, Gary Merrill, Jeffrey Hunter, Warren

Stevens, Robert Wagner, Harvey Lembeck, Robert Rockwell.

A much better film for Hunter, for which he got first featured billing and the first real test of his talent, as a wounded sailor trapped below deck with a torpedo which might go off at any moment. His fine underplaying justified Fox's plans to groom him for stardom. It was the first of many films he was to do with Robert Wagner, another rising young actor, who became a good friend and, eventually, a professional rival for the title role in *Prince Valiant* (1954). (Wagner got it.)

6. RED SKIES OF MONTANA. (20th Century-Fox, 1952.) Directed by Joseph M. Newman. *Cast:* Richard Widmark, Constance Smith, Jeffrey Hunter, Richard Boone, Warren Stevens, James Griffith, Joe Sawyer, Gregory Walcott, Richard Crenna, Robert Adler.

Hunter was fine also in this. He received his first star billing (third), as a young forest ranger who nurses an unjustified grudge against smoke jumper Widmark. The conflict between the two was engrossing, and the direction excelled in the climactic forest fire scenes, stunningly photographed in excellent Technicolor.

7. BELLES ON THEIR TOES. (20th Century-Fox, 1952.) Directed by Henry Levin. *Cast:* Jeanne Crain, Myrna Loy, Debra Paget, Jeffrey Hunter, Edward Arnold, Hoagy Carmichael, Barbara Bates, Robert Arthur.

Hunter was reunited with Miss Crain in this delightful sequel to *Cheaper by the Dozen*. They played, respectively, a young doctor and the eldest of Myrna Loy's twelve children. They endure all the usual, but funny, misunderstandings before they find True Love.

8. DREAMBOAT. (20th Century-Fox, 1952.) Directed by Claude Binyon. *Cast:* Clifton Webb, Ginger Rogers, Anne Francis, Jeffrey Hunter, Elsa Lanchester, Fred Clark, Paul Harvey, Ray Collins, Helene Stanley.

Hunter merely served (though capably) as Anne Francis's love interest in this. Audiences' attention was di-

rected at Clifton Webb, as a former great lover of silent movies, and Ginger Rogers, as the flamboyant silent screen actress who tries to lure Webb out of retirement.

9. LURE OF THE WILDERNESS. (20th Century-Fox, 1952.) Directed by Jean Negulesco. *Cast:* Jean Peters, Jeffrey Hunter, Constance Smith, Walter Brennan, Tom Tully, Harry Shannon.

This was a color remake of *Swamp Water* (1941). Hunter was impressive as the swamp boy who discovers fugitive Walter Brennan and his beautiful daughter Jean Peters hiding in the wilderness. Hunter's tentative love scenes with Miss Peters were extraordinarily touching.

10. SAILOR OF THE KING. (20th Century-Fox, 1953.) Directed by Roy Boulting. *Cast:* Jeffrey Hunter, Michael Rennie, Wendy Hiller, Bernard Lee, Peter Van Eyck.

Hunter went to England for this film, based on C. S. Forester's *Brown*

on Resolution. British Actors' Equity bitterly complained that he and fellow American actor Rock Hudson (there for a different film) were given work permits to play Britishers. The Labor Ministry had the last word when it announced: "It's reasonable for male leads in films produced under Board of Trade agreements to be played by actors with box office appeal in the United States." Once the flap died down, Hunter justified Fox's confidence with an admirable enactment of seaman Brown, who courageously (and single-handedly) confines a Nazi contingent to its island quarters until the British arrive and take over. Wendy Hiller played his mother, and Michael Rennie played the naval commander who never realized that Brown (Hunter) is his illegitimate son. (Shown in England as *Single-Handed*.)

11. THREE YOUNG TEXANS. (20th Century-Fox, 1954.) Directed by Henry Levin. *Cast:* Mitzi Gaynor, Keefe Bras-



—Allied Artists. (Courtesy of Kenneth G. Lawrence.)

Seven *Angry Men* (1955) delved into American history for its theme. (John Smith, Larry Pennell, Raymond Massey, Jeffrey Hunter, and Debra Paget.)

selle, Jeffrey Hunter, Harry Stephens, Dan Riss, Michael Ansara, Aaron Spelling, Morris Ankrum.

Now that Hunter's fans (and a few critics) expected great things from him, they were to be disappointed with this banal Western. Brasselle, the bad guy, went down under a barrage of bullets, Miss Gaynor and Hunter trotted off toward the sunset, and everyone got blistering reviews—except, it seems, from *Variety*, which observed that "only Jeffrey Hunter turns in a worthwhile performance with no help from direction or screenplay."

12. **PRINCESS OF THE NILE.** (20th Century-Fox, 1954.) Directed by Harmon Jones. *Cast:* Debra Paget, Jeffrey Hunter, Michael Rennie, Donna Drake, Wally Cassell, Edgar Barrier.

Another low-budget film which would have been equally as bad as the preceding except that Hunter and co-actors played this early Egyptian hokum with tongues in cheek, giving the film the humor it needed.

13. **SEVEN ANGRY MEN.** (Allied Artists, 1955.) Directed by Charles Marquis Warren. *Cast:* Raymond Massey, Debra Paget, Jeffrey Hunter, Larry Pennell, Leo Gordon, John Smith, James Best, Dennis Weaver, Tom Irish.

Hunter's first loan-out. He played the eldest of John Brown's sons in this intelligently conceived film. Raymond Massey played the fanatic Brown, whose crusade to free the slaves (prior to the Civil War) led him and several of his sons to the gallows. Son Owen (Hunter) is spared and pairs off with Debra Paget by the fade-out.

14. **WHITE FEATHER.** (20th Century-Fox, 1955.) Directed by Robert Webb. *Cast:* Robert Wagner, John Lund, Debra Paget, Jeffrey Hunter, Eduard Franz, Noah Beery, Virginia Leith, Emil Meyer, Hugh O'Brian, Milburn Stone.

Hunter played an Indian brave who tragically resists the coming of the white man. Most of the cast got good notices, particularly Hunter and Hugh O'Brian, both of whom were practically unrecognizable behind their war paint.



—Warner Bros. (Courtesy of Jim Meyer.)

In John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Jeffrey Hunter played one of two men referred to in the title. Natalie Wood played one of two white girls who had been carried off by the Comanche.

15. **SEVEN CITIES OF GOLD.** (20th Century-Fox, 1955.) Directed by Robert D. Webb. *Cast:* Richard Egan, Anthony Quinn, Jeffrey Hunter, Michael Rennie, Rita Moreno.

Disappointing: a ponderous epic about a Catholic missionary priest who founded a mission at San Diego. One critic found some of the actors, including Hunter as a young Indian chief, absurd. The film did lack the promise some had seen in it, and, charitably speaking, it failed to advance the careers of any of its actors.

Hunter, who now (1955) felt his career was going downhill, went into production with William Hayes. The result was *The Living Swamp*, a Technicolor CinemaScope documentary short subject which took Hunter back to his *Lure of the Wilderness* locale, the Okefenokee swamp in Georgia. The 33-minute tour of the swamp featured extraordinary shots of animal



Gordon Grant (Jeffrey Hunter), Dorothy Kingship (Joanne Woodward), and Bud Corliss (Robert Wagner) in *A Kiss before Dying* (1956). When the wealthy Miss Kingship is murdered (by Bud Corliss), Grant helps to see that justice is done.

life, a highlight being the mortal combat between a black king snake and a diamondback rattler. Well directed by David DaLie, the film was narrated by Dale Robertson, a chore Hunter himself might have handled better.

Taking a long-range look at his career, Hunter told the Associated Press's Bob Thomas: "I have a certain value now as a teenage commodity, but who knows how long this will last? So I've always studied the production end of this business, spending long hours in cutting rooms and elsewhere trying to learn how pictures are made. My Fox contract permits me to produce one outside picture a year... that's the only way (to) keep any money in this business. I have only one dependent now, my son Chris." (Hunter and Barbara Rush had divorced by then.)

16. **THE SEARCHERS.** (Warner Bros., 1956.) Directed by John Ford. *Cast:* John Wayne, Jeffrey Hunter, Vera Miles, Ward Bond, Natalie Wood, John Qualen, Olive Carey, Henry Brandon, Ken Curtis, Harry Carey, Jr., Antonio Moreno, Hank Worden.

Hunter desperately wanted the role of the part-Indian lad, but director Ford brushed him off with, "You're not anywhere near the type." The next day, this time in dark make-up and slick black hair, he tackled Ford again. Ford now allowed him to test for the role and afterward gave it to him. The film got excellent reviews. It focused on the search by a tough ex-Confederate soldier (Wayne) and a half-breed (Hunter) for a white girl kidnapped by Indians. Much in evidence was the attention to detail for which Ford is famous. *The New York Times* called Hunter "wonderfully callow and courageous" as the half-breed.

17. **THE GREAT LOCOMOTIVE CHASE.** (Buena Vista, 1956.) Directed by Francis D. Lyon. *Cast:* Fess Parker, Jeffrey Hunter, Jeff York, John Lupton, Eddie Firestone, Kenneth Tobey, Claude Jarman, Jr.

Hunter got an important role after having prepared a big sales pitch for the benefit of Walt Disney, the film's executive producer. He was cast as a Confederate railroad conductor in hot pursuit after Yankee Fess Parker, who has gone south to destroy vital bridges. The film blended thrills and humor, and Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* called Hunter "positively staggering as the valiant Confederate conductor who leads the chase."

18. **THE PROUD ONES.** (20th Century Fox, 1956.) Directed by Robert D. Webb. *Cast:* Robert Ryan, Virginia Mayo, Jeffrey Hunter, Robert Middleton, Walter Brennan, Arthur O'Connell.

A good Western with Hunter as a cowboy out to avenge what he perceives as the ruthless killing of his father by the town marshal (Ryan). His emergence from callow youth into manhood was handled in three-dimensional style.

19. **A KISS BEFORE DYING.** (United Artists, 1956.) Directed by Gerd Oswald. *Cast:* Robert Wagner, Jeffrey Hunter, Virginia Leith, Joanne Woodward, Mary Astor, George Macready.

Although Hunter had completed this before he began work on films Nos. 16, 17, and 18, it remained shelved for nearly a year. One look at the final print was enough to explain why. Its basically arresting story (of a young man who murders the girl he has impregnated (Joanne Woodward) and is about to do the same to her sister (Virginia Leith)) was scuttled from the start by the miscasting of Robert Wagner as the young man, a ruthless so-



20th Century-Fox. (Courtesy of Jim Meyer.)

Hank, a young woman who works as a waitress, tries to revive Joe, a young man who has been in stir, in *The Way to the Gold* (1957). (The gold of the title refers to a stolen gold cache, and the actors are Sheree North and Jeffrey Hunter.)