

HOLLYWOOD
LIVES

MOVIE STARS *in the* GOLDEN AGE,
their own stories

HOLLYWOOD
LIVES

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Bannock*

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Prologue

An Autograph Hunter Meets Miss Lizabeth Scott



Lizabeth Scott, Finler/Paramount

I CAUGHT THE movie bug in my early teens and it has never left me. The English town we lived in had three cinemas: the Central or 'flea pit' which had wooden benches like church pews for the cheapest seats; the Gaumont and the Odeon. The Odeon is still there, though divided into several smaller cinemas, the big cream-white tiles decorating the exterior apparently untouched by time. The Odeon was my favourite, as I recall. It did

not, like the Gaumont, have an electric organ which rose out of the front apron, but it did have layers of rich curtains, very deep carpets, and variable lighting which could illuminate the dimpled interior walls in an infinite variety of shades.

I particularly remember one summer afternoon in the late 1940s going to see *Desert Fury* (1947), which billed Lizabeth Scott, Wendell Corey, Burt Lancaster and John Hodiak, all studio-nurtured young stars on the way up. Mary Astor was also in it but she was nearing the end of a career that had started in the silent movies of the 1920s. I was not aware of these finer points at the time, nor did I know that the film had been panned by the critics. Halliwell (2006) says that it is a confused melodrama with 'unconvincing characters mouth-ing unspeakable lines in an airless tedium'.¹ I loved it, but could remember only a few scenes including one in which Burt Lancaster, whom I believe was the sheriff, was belting along a road across the Nevada desert with siren howling and red light flashing on his way to rescue Lizabeth Scott from a murderer's grasp. I do remember coming out of the cinema into the sunshine, past the bicycle racks and into reality (always a let-down). I was thinking that the fascinating larger-than-life-sized characters on the big screen were as remote, and would remain as remote, from my life as the Greek gods I was reading about at school.



Over fifty years – and thousands of films – later, I was fortunate enough to attend an award ceremony in London at

1 Halliwell's judgements are often not to my taste, especially where they concern films notable for their entertainment and production values, rather than artistic merit or moral purpose. *Desert Fury*, not having been screened for sixty-five years or so, was reissued on DVD in 2008. A second viewing confirmed my youthful judgement, though in my innocence I had not noticed the homosexual sub-theme in the plot.

which a lot of movie stars were present in person.² As on all great Hollywood occasions – for that is what it was, despite the location and the presence of several famous British stars and television personalities – cars disgorged the glittering famous onto a red carpet before crowds of fans. Unlike today, security was minimal; in fact, the London usherettes were so busy gawking at the stars we were not even asked to show our tickets. The theatre on that winter’s night was cold, a cold mitigated only a little by the human warmth of a packed house. This was because all the doors were left wide open, presumably whoever was responsible for that was also star-gazing.³

The Master of Ceremonies, Robert Wagner, introduced a number of acts. The one I liked best was Ann Miller, who vigorously tap-danced in a skirt slashed to the thigh, showing off her undiminished legs and looking much as she did in *On the Town* (1949). The actual award-winners included Diana Rigg and Anthony Quinn. Quinn and Alan Bates did their *Zorba the Greek* (1964) dance. In his acceptance speech Quinn said something, undoubtedly true but somewhat undiplomatic I thought in a theatre packed with fans, to the effect that fans were important but it was the esteem of one’s colleagues that mattered most. Douglas Fairbanks Jnr, who at eighty-five looked frail, but spoke in a powerful voice, introduced Ginger Rogers; sadly she was in a wheelchair. She said, among other things that she trod on Fred Astaire’s feet sometimes but he never trod on hers and that she had had a wonderful life. One of the 200 in the audience who stood up and bowed as

2 The International Arts Achievements Awards Ceremony at the Dominion Theatre, London, on 18 December 1994.

3 The programme did list some 200 stars and apart from the ones mentioned below I came close enough to them to recognise the following: June Allyson, Eddie Bracken, Kathryn Grayson, June Haver, Roddy McDowall, Jane Powell, Cliff Robertson, Jane Russell and Esther Williams, as well as two British stars, John Mills (who received an award) and Tommy Steele.

Wagner introduced him, was an upright gentleman who was described as the first boy in the Tarzan series.⁴ Shirley Bassey outshone and certainly outshouted a contemporary company of dancers and singers.



The night of 200 stars, 1994, Ginger Rogers, Anthony Quinn, Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Anthony Hopkins on stage: photograph courtesy David Koppell.

At the urinal in the men's room, I found myself sandwiched between Robert Wagner and Alan Bates, but it did not seem appropriate to ask for autographs in there. During

⁴ This was Johnny Sheffield (1931–2010). He died after falling off a ladder while trimming a palm tree at his home in California.

the intermission, the stars mingled with the audience and Quinn, who seemed bad-tempered and tense, merely nodded when I asked for his autograph. Sir Anthony Hopkins was bumped into me by the crowd and also gave me his with little grace, though perhaps he was confused by the crush. Patrick Macnee (*The Avengers*) was standing in a corner on his own and was cheerful and welcoming, as was Van Johnson (*The Caine Mutiny*, 1954). I knew that Johnson had been a dancer in vaudeville early on and I asked him if he was still a 'hooper'. He took my pen (none of them had a pen), replied 'Sure!' with his wry smile, and pumped my hand vigorously. He seemed pleased but did not prolong the conversation. I waited while Petula Clark talked to an acquaintance but she turned towards me with that familiar way some celebrities have of talking to you as if they know you well. She was exceptionally warm and friendly and was most concerned not to write over someone else's signature.

Then I saw Lizabeth Scott, her bright eyes and blonde hair across her cheekbones instantly recognisable. She was embracing a lady who said that Scott was her favourite star. I could not in all honesty say the same, but I murmured something about *Desert Fury* and how I would never forget her in it and we chatted about that for a moment. When I asked for her autograph, she grasped my pen with the fingers in unexpected places, her hand stiff, I supposed, with arthritis. She leaned against me in the crowd, small and lightness itself, and wrote her name with extreme care. That done, she gave me a peck on the cheek. Surprised, I thanked her and began to turn shyly away. To my further astonishment I heard her calling out 'Goodbye' in that unmistakable husky, lisping voice. I turned and we exchanged smiles and the crowd closed around her. That was enough, you could not beat that:

a three-minute emotional relationship with a Hollywood Great.⁵ It was easy, really, autograph-hunting, until you met screen goddess Lizabeth Scott and realised she was a warm, vulnerable person, like you and me.

It was about the time of the 200-star show that I first turned to reading movie autobiographies. Most of these books were very readable and a few were arrestingly well written. This is not really surprising since actors are, after all, story-tellers, even if usually of other people's stories. Some, of course, were boring or egotistic or both, but the books run the gamut of human experience. Some actors, such as Charles Chaplin or Anthony Quinn, started off in acute poverty, others in well-to-do families (Raymond Massey, Robert Stack); and some ended in relative, if contented, deprivation (Veronica Lake). Some of these books are lively and amusing and grippingly readable (Evelyn Keyes); some almost continuously funny (Peter Ustinov); others rather serious and informative (Charlton Heston). Some deal with discrimination (Ricardo Montalbán, Sidney Poitier); some are sad, even tragic (Eva Bartok, Frances Farmer). Some stars, like Alan Ladd and Gail Russell, were completely destroyed by Hollywood. Others were given not only wealth but real creative opportunities, and a few, even in writing their

5 Lizabeth (also Lisabeth) Scott was born of Slovakian immigrant parents in 1922 and therefore must have been about seventy-two when I met her. She made only twenty-three films, mostly from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Originally a stage actress, her film debut was in 1945 in *You Came Along* with Robert Cummings. Her beauty and acting ability led to immediate popular success. She was not at all overshadowed by Barbara Stanwyck and Kirk Douglas (which is saying something) in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), although she had a much smaller part, and appeared with Humphrey Bogart as a femme fatale in *Dead Reckoning* (1947). Other leading men she appeared with in mostly noirish films, including Charlton Heston, Edmond O'Brien, Dick Powell, Robert Ryan, Robert Mitchum and, in a Western, Alan Ladd. She virtually retired after the 1950s and never married. Her valedictory appearance was in *Pulp* (1972) with Michael Caine and Mickey Rooney.

books, contributed to literature and history. I hope that this celebration of movie autobiographies will encourage new generations to read these books, which, despite the unending flow of stuff on Hollywood, remain a neglected genre.

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS about Hollywood in the Golden Age (1930–50), the people who made the movies and those who starred in them. That period was golden because it was the time when the big studios ruled film-making, prospered (with ups and downs), and produced many memorable films. The best of these films have stood the test of time and fortunately more and more of them are now available on DVD for anyone to see. There is a perennial fascination with the Golden Age. In 1970, MGM sold off many thousands of items of memorabilia which now change hands at high prices. It was recently reported that the ruby-red shoes worn by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) are now valued at over \$5 million. The appearance of more and more biographies of their parents by sons and daughters of Golden Age stars is further evidence of the enduring interest in the period. Fairly recent examples are from the families of Humphrey Bogart, Errol Flynn, Cary Grant, Glenn Ford, Lana Turner, Johnny Weissmuller and Loretta Young, many of whose parents did not write autobiographies of their own. These books are all affectionate and sympathetic, though there are also biographies by sons and

daughters which denigrate their parents (for example, those about Joan Crawford, Bing Crosby and Bette Davis).

There have, of course, been many books about the stars and studios of that time. This one is unique because it is largely based on the autobiographies of the stars themselves, on their own stories. Perhaps half of the bigger stars of the period have written their personal record of the time and these books seem to be a somewhat neglected resource. Certainly no one has ever written at length about screen autobiographies as a genre and they have received little or no academic attention. Mostly available for a few pounds or dollars in the used book trade, the autobiographies of the movie stars of the past are now rarely read.

Screen actors do not see all aspects of film-making, of course, because, though insiders, as they certainly were, they worked only near the front end of the production process. There is not much in the books about the anti-trust suits, finance and organisation which concerned the actor's bosses. I have tried to fill in these gaps from other sources, mostly in Chapters 1, 10 and 13. The autobiographers, however, did say a lot about things which impinged directly upon them or their colleagues: the anti-Communist witch-hunt of the 1940s; their essays into politics (where they made any); their relationships with the studio bosses; the nature of acting and film-making; and the high and low points of their personal lives. Their lives, in many cases, included stage experience and jobs in various professions prior to their discovery and, for some, war service – a richer mixture than most film actors of today have had. Quite a number of the actors came from abroad and some experienced racial or other social discrimination. Some found being a Hollywood film star acutely stressful – or at best unsatisfying – while for others

it was everything they had dreamed it would be. For only a very few was it just a job of work.

Film-making was, and still is, a business. The people who governed the studios (and indeed most of the actors), however much they loved the movies, were also in it for the large amounts of money that could be made. The stars who wrote the books considered here were enormously important to the studios. Their presence helped the public to choose which films to see and helped to reduce the considerable risks in making them. Nevertheless, overheads were high – actors under contract were paid whether they were used or not – and, their costs, like those of technicians and distribution systems, were fixed. The studios invested heavily in nurturing, training and developing their stars. These considerations were not fully appreciated by our actor-writers who, for example, often deeply resented being loaned out to other studios, often at a profit.

On the whole, the actors, perhaps not surprisingly, did not fully understand the implications of the profit motive from the studio's point of view, for example the discipline that the profit motive exerted and which necessitated the decisions taken on story selection and development, casting, hiring and firing and loan-outs which the actors might not necessarily agree with. One thread that runs through most of the autobiographies is a sense of dissatisfaction with the roles the actors were selected for. These decisions were made by studio heads and producers, often ruthlessly. Of course, the bosses were not always right about what the public would want, but it is pretty clear that their judgements were, on the whole, better than those of the actors and there is ample evidence for that in this book. The studio bosses were often tyrannical, but also rational; loan-outs for example, reduced the costs of

maintaining a stable of stars, widened their experience and allowed the industry to share scarce talent.

One of the fascinating features of the movie business is that it is so difficult to predict what will please the public, whose ticket-buying decisions then drive the whole process (today cinema box-office is only a minor part of the total). The wishes of the public had to be followed, however, even if they were sometimes led a little by adventurous producers and directors. A key economic characteristic of film-making is that producers never know for sure whether or not a film will be successful until all the expense in its production has been incurred and the film shown. Another key factor in the economics and organisation of movie production is the fact that, unlike the makers of motor cars or TV sets, for film producers each product is different. Finished films are the result of a collaborative, creative effort and mass production methods cannot be used. The tensions between the executives in New York who looked after distribution and financial matters and the creative producers at the studios on the West Coast are rooted in these conflicts between art and business. William Goldman, the screenwriter, said that, in Hollywood 'No one knows anything'. This does not mean that producers were stupid; their judgement and experience eliminated many potential errors before production. Because the camera sees things on the set that the human eye does not fully perceive, however, even as a film is being made, you cannot be sure exactly how it will look on the screen. This is one reason why, every afternoon, the producers watched 'the dailies', the unedited batches of the takes. But the fact remains that even when the film is edited and put together, it is still not at all easy to judge whether it will succeed with the public. This is why 'sneak previews' were held in suburban cinemas before

release to gauge audience reaction. Previews allowed essential changes to be made, though at heavy cost, if necessary. Even then there could be uncertainties: members of the public do not know what they want until they have seen it.

Things were not easy for the actors, either. Often final scripts were only ready on the day shooting began and not infrequently just for the portion that would be shot that day. Long stays on location could turn out to be very uncomfortable and even dangerous. The actors rarely knew what film they would be working on next. Brian Aherne compared being an actor with taxi drivers on the rank: waiting for the next assignment to an unknown destination. Shooting films was also made difficult for the actors by the fact that, for economic reasons, the films are rarely shot in sequence. Unlike live theatre, there is no immediate audience reaction. Acting on the stage is very different from filming, for example, more exaggerated gestures and voice projection are necessary – but where they have had experience of both our actor-writers are virtually unanimous: they prefer working on the stage to the film set.

The neglect of star autobiographies may result from preconceived ideas that movie stars are either untruthful or perhaps simply vacuous. In fact, with a few exceptions, these books seem to be remarkably truthful. Many are very well written, even when professional help or ghost writers have not been employed – after all, actors are essentially story-tellers. The range of the experiences revealed is amazing – who would have expected glamour girl Hedy Lamarr to have patented the basic technology of wifi communications and the mobile telephone, or that Errol Flynn shot a man in New Guinea in self-defence, or that the day Virginia Mayo's thirty-year career ended there were no goodbyes, no party, and she just drove home alone?

The stars had a wide range of interests too, for example, MacDonald Carey was a published poet, George Sanders the chairman of a sausage manufacturing business and John Loder owned a pickle factory in Germany. The social backgrounds of such stars was immensely varied: some (Charlie Chaplin, Anthony Quinn) grew up in acute poverty, while Gene Tierney went to a finishing school in Switzerland and Robert Stack also came from a very wealthy family. Though writers of individual biographies in the past have used a few of these books, no one has looked at them systematically. There is not even a list, or a bibliography, available, something I attempt to rectify, though the reader is warned that the list of references is not complete, especially for books by stars of the 1930s.

At any time in the period there were about 200–300 significant stars at work. At least half that number wrote autobiographies, for which there was a ready market, though most were soon forgotten. The listing at the end of the book includes over 170 books, some of them novels or non-fiction works by the autobiographers, and encompasses mainly the stars who made films in the Golden Age, especially in the period 1935–50. I have limited my coverage to books by actors in America, not necessarily American-born but whose careers were predominantly with US studios, or, like Maurice Chevalier, whose international reputation was the result of his work in Hollywood. This meant excluding the numerous British performers who divided their time between Europe and the US, such as Laurence Olivier, Peter Ustinov, Stewart Granger and James Mason. Other Britons, such as Brian Aherne, Ray Milland, George Sanders and David Niven, settled in the American industry, even though David Niven in particular was ‘terribly British’ and some of these performers, including Niven, did not live in America all the time.

But the criteria for inclusion is fairly flexible: for example I have included a book by a child actor who grew up to be a director (Robert Parrish), books by stuntmen and stuntwomen, and others by Robert Vaughan and Leslie Caron whose films fall mostly outside the Golden Age – simply because their books are so good. In the text I have concentrated on the best books – the most readable or the most informative – but most of them get a mention at some point. The focus is mainly on the 1940s and early 1950s because this was a period of technological maturity and also happens to be the time I was growing up. The space devoted to particular actors is also partly as a result of personal preference – but is also because of their popularity and the quality of their books.

Many of the actor-writers have commented that acting, for them, was easier than writing. For that reason many had professional help, mainly to impose some structure on dictated recollections, a process which still allowed the actor's own voice to come through. It is interesting, however, that many of the best books were written without professional assistance. Some of the autobiographers found they had a facility for writing and found it so satisfying that they went on to write other non-fiction books and quite a few wrote novels as well, though with or two exceptions (Errol Flynn, Sterling Hayden), the novels did not endure. David Niven, for example, wrote books about the Hollywood scene that sold in millions while his novels were simply awful.

Of course, not all the stars wrote their autobiographies, for example Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable, Robert Mitchum, Marilyn Monroe and James Stewart. The reasons were not necessarily lack of literacy: Bogart, for instance, was well educated whereas several who did write had left school early and still produced very good books unaided (Joan Crawford,

Edward Arnold). Some, perhaps, did not have big enough egos to write at length about themselves; for others, sheer indifference was an overriding factor (undoubtedly this was the case with Robert Mitchum). One motive for writing a book was a desire to set the record straight or as an exercise in self-examination in sorting out a past which had been a bewildering mixture of success, failure and guilt (see, for example, the lives of Lena Horne, Kirk Douglas and Anthony Quinn). However, vanity or a desire to make money may have also been fairly common motives, as well as the need for something constructive to do towards the end of a career.



Chapter 1, the longest in the book, attempts to summarise the history of the studio system in America and describes some of the vivid characters of the moguls who drove it – something the autobiographies are quite fluent about. The following eleven chapters concentrate on the lives of one or more of the actor-writers, as portrayed by themselves and supplemented by research. Chapter 3 pauses to enquire about the completeness and truthfulness of the autobiographies, an issue which arises again and again in later chapters. Each of Chapters 2 – 12 focuses on an important theme or a major star – for example, the influx of European actors and others to Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, the conflicts which arose between the studios and their actors, and the impact of personal, political and racial issues on two actors who wrote especially fine books. Finally, the last chapter draws some conclusions and explains why the studio system broke down and highlights the differences between Hollywood then and now.

Sources, in addition to autobiographies of stars, include autobiographies of directors and executives, biographies,

histories of the studios and reference books. These sources are referenced within parentheses in the text and listed at the back of the book and are acknowledged gratefully here. The author also has viewed or reviewed very many films from the Golden Age: no hardship that.