

Rock Hudson — to live and die in Hollywood

by W. C. McRae

I can imagine two reasons for reading Rock Hudson's biographies. Some readers might hope for an uplifting tale of Hudson's valor in the face of AIDS. Others, more irreverent (like me), might come looking for gossip about gay Hollywood.

Neither expectation is rewarded in Sarah Davidson's *Rock Hudson: His Story*, or in Jerry Oppenheimer and Jack Vitek's *Idol*. In these hastily written biographies, the real — and morbidly curious — story scarcely even involves Hudson. Rather, these books relate the petty intrigue, lies, and deception that surrounded Hudson. He remains a cipher floating before the friends, the house, the details and props that become the foreground in these fascinating but repellent stories.

Hudson remains a cipher because there was very little to him to begin with. Both biographies detail his "oh-gosh" boyhood in the Midwest in a single parent home, his hard work as a young actor caught within the "Studio Property" network, and his rise to international stardom in such films as *Giant* and *Pillow Talk*.

This is the stuff of fluffy Hollywood press packets, and the writers, while detailing the early years of Hudson's career, are at some pains to "deepen" the gush with vignettes dredged up from fellow actors, and in Davidson's case, from Hudson himself. But the ploy doesn't work, because the more Hudson is illuminated by his friends in recollections as a wit, hale companion, and *bon viveur*, the more relentlessly obvious it becomes that Hudson was a dork. Unwittingly, it seems, the very stories drawn from life that are meant to consolidate our evaluation of Hudson as a great guy, instead portray him as a niggardly, shallow man whose looks bought him a degree of admittance and endearment that his scant personality and talent would never allow.

No major gay scandals are revealed in the biographies, though some are alluded to. George Nader, a hunk actor from the '50s, does come out of his closet. Most interestingly, though, is seeing Hudson against a background of other swishy gay Hollywood types, and especially the gay coterie that served as Hudson's social family. Compared to the hand-flutterers around him, Hudson comes across as full-bodied, virile, and very sexual. He couldn't throw a party, he couldn't cook, he had bad taste. Hudson, to the friends



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that seemed to idolize him, must have been a fascinating anomaly, a seemingly *real* man who liked to get it off — and often — with blond, blue-eyed hunks.

The ambivalence one feels about Hudson increases to unhealthy curiosity when the chapters on AIDS begin, at which point the two biographies part company. Davidson's is the authorized version, and was written with Hudson's permission, and, however slight his participation. (He died about a month after he commissioned Davidson.) More importantly, it was completed with the aid and (one feels) supervision of Hudson's life-long handlers, including actor George Nader, secretary Mark Miller, and long-time lover Tom Clark. These authorities on Hudson's life — they were close friends for most of Hudson's 30 years in Hollywood — apparently wouldn't speak to *Idol*

authors Oppenheimer and Vitek, who went to other friends of Hudson for details, most of it — bitchy, catty stuff — concerning, and at the expense of, the team writing the authorized biography.

And herein lies the real story. The last year and a half of Hudson's life — to which Davidson devotes 27% of her book and to which *Idol* devotes 38% — becomes painful reading. And *not* because of AIDS. Hudson is anything but brave and forthright in his dealings with the disease, and as his story becomes increasingly medical in nature, the narrative is left open to bystanders. Anyone who had anything to do with Hudson while living begins jockeying to be in *just* the right position at his death. (Especially since they all know these biographies are being written.)

In both books, a sense of real suspense is developed, mostly from the horror of watching the avarice and self-advertisement of Hudson's friends.

First, Marc Christian, Hudson's last lover, sues the Hudson estate for \$14 million due to his exposure to AIDS.

Christian is portrayed by partisans Oppen-

heimer as a simple but honest student caught up in machinations only super-lawyer, Marvin Mitchelson, could rescue him from. Christian promotes himself as being profound and intelligent: however, Christian comes across as a naive and self-deluded chump. Hudson apparently never demanded intelligence — or even identity — from his sex partners.

According to Davidson, Christian was a hustler and blackmailer whom Hudson, though initially beguiled, came to fear and loathe. He endured Christian on the property (the apartment over the garage) because Christian threatened Hudson with exposure to the *National Enquirer*.

Idol, in its turn, defends Christian, claiming he and Hudson were making it in the sack until just months before Hudson's death (Christian says he didn't know about Hudson's AIDS condition until news of it was released to the media, hence his lawsuit).

Idol also reports fits of self-conscious indignation by Hudson's friends who weren't (once Hudson was ill), included in the inner sanctum. Miller, for instance, comes under attack for his somewhat Byzantine procedure of drawing up lists of acceptable sick bed visitors and posting up to three sets of guards before Hudson's hospital room.

And at the very end, Pat and Shirley Boone were summoned by one of Hudson's nurses to pray for him. The day before he died, the Boones were dressing Hudson in Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes, thumping him with Bibles, falling to the floor speaking in tongues. A servant noted that Hudson didn't "look at all comfortable."

Hudson dies as Ross Hunter collapsed of grief theatrically — and strategically — in front of the press in Hudson's driveway; Shirley Boone babbled in tongues on his floor, Elizabeth Taylor's security guards surround the house, and Marc Christian was dialing Marvin Mitchelson on the phone.

Suddenly, one experiences the sinking feeling that this *is* gay Hollywood.

Neither biography is very good, from a literary point of view. *Idol* resorts to the cheesy-most of pop-psychology to undergird its narrative, depicting Hudson throughout as a lost adolescent destined to be gay by his upbringing. Hudson, says *Idol*, exhibited "behavior that flourish[es] in the gay community — the promiscuity, the lack of commitment, the unbridled sexuality — [which] resemble nothing so much as protracted adolescence." It's no wonder the finagling which surrounded Hudson's death resembles nothing so much as a custody battle.

Davidson's authorized version is the better book, her drab, unadorned prose style often perfectly highlights the outrageousness of the celebrity comment on Hudson. She is unbelievably disingenuous about gays, however, claiming in an interview in the *Advocate* that she had "never been close to a gay person." However sympathetic she may be ("Is this book good for gays?" she asks), she tends to examine Hudson, his friends, and the politics of gay issues as if they were all moths disinterestedly circling a flame.

One leaves these books not having much of a feeling for Hudson. We become familiar with his riddles, his characters, his roles, his jokes — in short his evasions. And that, for a gay man passing as straight, was as real as Hudson ever got.

Hudson is credited with giving the AIDS epidemic a face as a sort of AIDS poster boy. However, Hudson doesn't emerge from the pages as any kind of hero. These are dark, dark stories that tell us more of ego-ridden Hollywood, a sewage dump against which Hudson is measured and found wanting — and uninteresting.

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