



Portrayed by Robert Ryan (left), John the Baptist prepares to baptize Jesus and followers in the Jordan.



Jeffrey Hunter

THE ACTOR WHO WILL PLAY CHRIST

By C. GREGORY JENSEN

What happens to a Hollywood star cast in the greatest of all roles? For

HOLLYWOOD STAR Jeffrey Hunter does not exist—not at the moment. As an actor, of course, Jeff Hunter is present and accounted for—and then some. He's starring in a gigantic, \$8 million epic planned as 1961's biggest movie.

But Jeffrey Hunter, the Hollywood Movie Star—in capital letters—has simply disappeared. Not since Greta Garbo "vanted to be alone" has a big-name star dropped so completely out of the public's sight.

Since last May, Hunter has avoided publicity like the plague. His door is closed to fan-magazine writers and movie columnists. He skips parties and film festivals and the other usual haunts of movie stars abroad. In effect, he leaves his Madrid home chiefly to work; and even on the set he is aloof, apart, and unapproachable.

This is not ordinary behavior in an industry which thrives on publicity. But "King of Kings," the massive movie now being filmed in Madrid, is not an ordinary movie. And Hunter's role in it definitely is not an ordinary part.

Hunter portrays Jesus Christ.

He will appear on the screen just as any other character does. Hunter as Christ will be in full view, face to face with the audience. Thus every believing Christian will compare Hunter with his own private conception of the Son of God. And woe to Hunter if he fails to match those individual ideas.

That is what H. B. Warner learned, to his regret, more than 30 years ago. Warner played Christ in a silent film and never lived it down. Hollywood hasn't shown Christ in full view since. Not until now.

Hunter himself says it wasn't the risk to his future which forced him into seclusion during, and even beyond, the six-month filming.

"It would be impossible," he said before shooting started, "to discuss my feelings about portraying Christ with authority. So I must keep my personal life and my professional activities anonymous."

Producer Samuel Bronston says another reason for Hunter's isolation is the "tremendous strain" which the role of Christ imposes on an actor. "Hunter is striving to portray this role for an audience of a billion Christians. We must not distract him more than necessary."

At first glance, Jeffrey Hunter seems to have few qualifications for the role of Christ. His major subjects at Northwestern University were speech and radio, not theology. As an all-around athlete, his hobby is sports, not philosophy. He has been in Hollywood for 10 of his 33 years. His 26 movie roles have included everything *but* religious parts—war stories, historical dramas, Westerns. He is divorced and remarried, with a son from each marriage.

But Hunter has one particular feature which led Bronston and director Nicholas Ray to him—his eyes.

"They grip you," Bronston says, "and they hold you." In costume as Jesus, Hunter's pale blue eyes leap out at you from a bearded, sunburned face. Everyone in the cast speaks of their powerful effect.

"I was quite a long way from him in the baptism scene," says Irish actress Siobhan McKenna, who plays the Virgin Mary, "yet I could see his eyes, with a strange kind of power, penetrating right through me, over all that distance."

There were, of course, other factors involved in Hunter's choice for the part. His wide acting experience was one. Mentioning another, Bronston says, "We investigated him, and even in Hollywood he lives a quiet and peaceful life."

Siobhan McKenna gave one of the most thoughtful appraisals:

"I don't know if Jeffrey's performance is good or bad," she says, "but it is *right*." She paused, frowned, and shook her head. "I don't talk of performances in this film," she goes on. "There are people, and they are either right or not right. I think Jeffrey Hunter is right."

Siobhan McKenna plays the Virgin Mary, almost as beloved to



Thousands of actors and extras flock up hill where Jeffrey Hunter stands ready to deliver immortal words of Sermon on the Mount in "King of Kings."

Jeffrey Hunter it has meant strain, seclusion—and an uncertain future

devout Christians as Christ Himself. So Miss McKenna shares some of the risks and responsibilities Hunter faces. And her attitude toward playing Mary gives a good indication of Hunter's own approach.

"It is something that frightens me," Miss McKenna says. "I think it's an awful responsibility. I think one would be out of one's mind to try to be the Virgin Mary. I'm probably not at all like the real Mary, but I'm doing it as if she were an ordinary, everyday kind of woman. I can only play the human side. I can't play the mystery."

THERE IS, however, something mysterious about Jeffrey Hunter's performance—an atmosphere which seems to surround him on the set even when the cameras aren't turning. Perhaps this mystery showed best in the filming of the Sermon on the Mount.

This is a tremendous scene in terms of sheer scale—a fitting spectacle for a movie designed as a successor to "Ben-Hur."

Most of the film's 60 leading characters milled about the barren, sun-baked hillside near the village of Venta de Frascuela, outside Madrid, where the scene was shot. So did 7,000 extras, including a good portion of the Spanish army. Every person was costumed in hand-woven desert fabrics scoured from every corner of the Mediterranean world. Camels from the Canary Islands mingled with uncounted horses and burros. The sequence was so vast it had to be planned like a military operation. It took more than two weeks to film, and will last less than 15 minutes on the screen.

But all through the massive turmoil of this scene, Jeffrey Hunter stood quietly apart. Everyone else wore incongruous straw hats against the searing sun: Hunter stood bareheaded in the heavy woolen robes of Christ. Everyone else joked and chatted between takes: Hunter stood with his eyes closed, seldom speaking to anyone. The whole hillside crawled with chattering, raucous Spanish extras: but

when Hunter walked among them with the slow, deliberate movement he uses even off camera, the extras fell silent.

"The Spanish actors in the film really have a sort of reverence for the characters playing Christ and their beloved Virgin Mary," Miss McKenna explains.

She recalled the filming of Christ's baptism as another example. In that scene, scores of extras "had to stand around in water for hours at a stretch," Miss McKenna says. "They stood there with a kind of awe at what they were doing. And when they came out of the water, their faces—well, their faces were wonderful to see. I honestly believe that for them it was a great religious experience."

This atmosphere influences the whole making of "King of Kings," not just the crowds of extras or Hunter in his role of Christ.

"You know," says glamorous Rita Gam, who plays Herod's wife, "there is the most extraordinary harmony on this picture."

"Nobody complains," agrees Bronston. "Always, in any company, is a troublemaker or someone who is unhappy. But not here."

Miss Gam speaks in awed tones about one scene in the kitchens of Herod's palace. Everything went wrong. Thunderstorms flooded the set and knocked out the electricity. Meat which was roasting in the scenes turned fetid. Spain's summer heat was stifling. Loaded down for her role as Herodias with a wig weighing 30 pounds, plus nearly 35 pounds of Egyptian and Oriental jewelry, Miss Gam fainted. "The whole thing was horrible," she says. "Yet nobody complained."

Jeffrey Hunter makes no complaint either about the strenuous demands made on him or about the self-imposed isolation.

"He is engrossed in his job," Bronston says. "It's a tremendous moral challenge—a tremendous strain and responsibility."

And a responsibility that observers agree has already left a mark on young Hunter—and may continue to do so long into his career.