



Jack Lemmon— The Actor Who Mystifies Hollywood

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

JACK LEMMON and I were having lunch at a Malibu Beach restaurant and not enjoying it as much as we usually did.

Our purpose for getting together was not social this time. Because he seemed a good bet to win his second Oscar Monday night for his performance opposite Shirley MacLaine in Billy Wilder's "The Apartment," I had instructions to do a story on the young actor whom I consider one of my closest friends.

I have known Jack since he and his ex-wife, the former Cynthia Stone, settled in California seven years ago. His son Christopher, now six, plays with my children. I know Jack's mother and father and most of his friends. Yet I had the feeling I didn't know Jack at all.

Twice before I had started to write an article about Jack and both times I destroyed it.

"Why is it so difficult to do a good story on you?" I asked. "You're intelligent, you've had an interesting life, you're popular . . ."

"But I don't have an 'angle,' and that's what every writer wants," Jack replied. "I'm just not good copy."

He Is Impetuous

Ridiculous, I thought to myself. I considered the reams of anecdotes I had heard about Jack. Like when he was in Hawaii, sunning himself on a reef. Suddenly a pal spotted a shark about 20 feet down in the water and dared Jack to dive in and punch the shark in the nose.

From where Jack sat, the shark looked about three feet long. Figuring it was a sand shark, which is not nearly as dangerous as the tiger shark, Jack obligingly dove into the water. When he came face to face with the shark, he realized it wasn't as helpless as it had appeared from above. Nevertheless, he clouted it—and sped for shore.

If such incidents, characteristic of Jack's impetuosity, wouldn't make enough good copy, a writer could review the highlights of his career: radio soap operas, television appearances, and Broadway plays such as his debut in 1953 in a revival of "Room Service," all of which led to stardom.

And, of course, there was Jack's early history: an only son of well-to-do parents, he was born in Boston, attended some of the finest New Eng-

land schools, including Harvard, where he was president of the Hasty Pudding Club. After Naval ROTC, he went into the Navy and served on an aircraft carrier as communications officer.

But this was just part of a description of Jack. It was like saying, "Jack is 35"—which he is. It tells something but doesn't give the full picture.

So I considered the Jack his friends and acquaintances see. For example, I've never been at a party with him where he wasn't the most popular guest. Everyone has a word for him, and he has a comeback joke and a big grin. But then, all at once, he'll find a piano and run his fingers over the keys as if listening to someone else play. He'll get a faraway look in his eyes, while his fingers drum out the rhythm. His feet can't keep still. Then he doesn't know if you are with him or if he's alone on the moon.

This is the Jack no one knows, maybe not even Jack himself. He seems to be living in an indestructible bubble far removed from reality.

And when Jack isn't in front of the camera or on stage, he has to have something to do. Either he plays the piano, sometimes composing melodies as he goes along—he calls himself a "frustrated composer," although he has several published albums—reads, studies scripts, or putters around the garden—and not necessarily his own garden.

On one occasion, a neighbor of Jack's admired the beautiful fuchsia bushes in his yard. Jack assured him that it wasn't any trouble to make them look good if they were fed and pruned properly. One Sunday morning before the neighbor was out of bed, Jack pruned his bushes, explaining to the astonished friend who had rushed out to see what the noise was: "This is the time of year for it."

Jack's Divorce Surprised Everyone

Although after his divorce Jack moved to a secluded area so he could have some time to himself, he can't stand being alone. Unless he's working, he goes out every night with friends.

Jack and Cynthia Lemmon's divorce four years ago came as a shock to everyone. None of their friends was prepared for it. They seemed like the happiest couple in Hollywood.

There was much speculation at the time as to what brought about the split-up. Neither Jack nor

Cynthia would ever discuss the reason. Possibly Jack himself didn't know.

One night, about six months after their separation, Jack and I had dinner together, and he confessed that he would go back to Cynthia the next day if she would have him.

They have stayed on the best of terms, not only for their son Chris' sake, but because they are still fond of each other. Also, there's the chance that Jack's own parents might have set the pattern.

Jack's father, a self-made business executive, and his wife Millie were separated when Jack was in his late teens. But they never went through with a divorce and today are still good friends.

Three years ago, on the spur of the moment and uncharacteristic of her usual carefully thought-out actions, Cynthia married actor Cliff Robertson, who told me he'd been in love with her before she married Jack. The marriage broke up a year ago, after a bitter divorce. They have one child, a daughter Stephanie.

Will Jack Marry Again?

Lately, there have been hints of a reconciliation between Jack and Cynthia, which might be based primarily on wishful thinking of those who still feel they are, or could be, the ideal couple. Jack himself inadvertently threw fuel on the fire when he talked about making a film in England this summer. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if Cinnie and Chris could come over and visit me? I just couldn't stand being separated from Chris for so many months."

Maybe he won't admit it to himself, but I had the feeling he couldn't be separated from Cynthia for long, either.

Still, after the divorce Jack started to date a talented and beautiful actress, Felicia Farr. Columnists have had them eloping a dozen times, but I frankly doubt that Jack seriously considered the possibility. When I asked him during our lunch if he might get married again, he replied, "Definitely not for the time being."

Since Jack continued to insist that his work is the most important thing in his life, I asked him about the Academy Awards. "Do you feel the Awards are voted strictly for performance or are they popularity contests as well?"

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Fond memento is photo taken when Jack won an Oscar for best supporting actor in "Mister Roberts."

A top candidate for an Academy Award, he's the life of the party who becomes suddenly pensive, the popular bachelor who seems to think mostly about his ex-wife