

The Myth About Marilyn

By BEN HECHT

■ Newspaper reporter, dramatist, novelist, screen writer, biographer, critic—over the past 50 years Ben Hecht has displayed his versatile writing talent as each of these. His best-remembered works include "The Front Page," "Twentieth Century," "A Child of the Century," "Perfidy," and "Charlie." His many notable screenplays include "The Scoundrel," "Wuthering Heights," "Viva Villa," "Scarface," "Gunga Din," "Notorious," and "Spellbound." Often an outspoken critic of Hollywood, Hecht here presents a surprising appraisal of the movie industry and the part it played in the tragic life and death of Marilyn Monroe.

THE LEGEND of Marilyn Monroe will keep growing for many years. It will end up, as legends usually do, with all the facts upside down. Just weeks after her death, eager tales of Marilyn's life already are filled with moony misconceptions—and these from people who knew her well. Wait till the historians take over her legend-building.

The legend basis, already solidly laid down, is that Marilyn Monroe was a movie star "wrecked" by Hollywood, driven to despair by the obliterating glare of fame, and by fear that this glare was vanishing; and who was further stricken by the failure of her last two marriages.

It wasn't that way.

I spent 10 days in 1954 interviewing Miss Monroe in San Francisco. A publishing house had asked me to write a book about the new glamour girl ablaze on the cinema horizon. Her marriage to Joe DiMaggio interrupted the interview, and the book never was finished.

Marilyn told me hundreds of stories of her first 28 years, stories that will never be part of the growing Monroe legends because they revealed that Marilyn had been wrecked by the circumstances of her life since the age of five; by the disturbed character she had inherited; by a string of evil events that would have crushed a half-dozen "ordinary" girls. Twice in her prefame days she had tried suicide, each time

because a man she loved abandoned her.

"That wasn't really the reason for my trying to kill myself," Marilyn told me. "The full reason was that I didn't want to live. There was too much pain in living."

There's the truth about Marilyn Monroe—she was saved by Hollywood. Fame saved her. The spotlight beating on her 24 hours a day made the world seem livable to her. And her last two marriages gave her years of important human relationships which she had never known in her days of prefame vagabonding.

Marilyn embraced her fame as her greatest love. After her return from her Korean honeymoon with Joe DiMaggio, I asked her, "What's the happiest time you've ever had?"

"It was the time last month when I sang to the soldiers in Korea," she answered. "There were thousands of them. It was a very cold afternoon, and it was snowing. All the soldiers sat in their winter uniforms. I appeared in a décolleté evening gown, bare back, bare arms. And I was so happy and so excited that I didn't know it was cold or snowing. In fact, the snow never fell on me. It melted away almost before it touched my skin. That was my happiest time—when the thousands of soldiers all yelled my name over and over."

Reign of the Sex Goddess

The reprieve of fame had begun before Korea. Marilyn continued to enjoy the "snowfall that never touched her," the pole-to-pole huzzahs that sounded for the world's No. 1 Sex Goddess.

It was all more or less unreal. Marilyn told me before her second marriage: "I've never liked sex. I don't think I ever will. It seems just the opposite of love."

Disliking sex didn't interfere with Marilyn's emergence as a world sex symbol. In fact, her dislike of it helped. It added a note of childlike innocence to her siren face.

The truth about Marilyn was that she was a sort of evangelist. She peddled a dream to a preoccupied atom age. Her fervor was that of the missionary with happy tidings. Her happy tidings were her luscious figure, her inviting mouth. She looked for no romance for herself. Her happiness lay in her missionary work for others. She lived in the midst of her fame as if she were more a poster than a woman.

The unreality never hurt Marilyn. Unreality

Monroe's Death

was the only world in which she could thrive. The real world held only hobgoblins for her, terrors that harried her nights, confusions that kept a dust storm going in her heart.

Then why did all the "bad things" happen to Marilyn during her last spotty years? Nothing happened! The trouble was that things stopped happening. The spotlight of fame dimmed. Age began its realistic work on her face and beauty.

For some seven years, Marilyn had found health in Monroe billboards and magazine layouts, in the spate of anecdotes, gossip, curiosity, and excitement that her name evoked. She seldom went after publicity because she was a bright girl who knew that renown is not a thing to be solicited.

Marilyn's heart wasn't broken by the dimming of her fame. I have nothing factual to report of her last years, but the important fact of those years was in the stories Marilyn had told me in San Francisco. The Marilyn of the past started coming back. Loneliness, fear, and an old desperation returned. Marilyn found herself slipping back into the realistic world from which Hollywood and fame had rescued her. Bolstered by friends more confused than herself, she started talking of doing "finer things" in the movies and even on the stage. Art was going to save her, help her find herself, was the verdict of her friends.

This was nonsense. Art could never bring back the wildly enthusiastic cries of the soldiers in the Korean snowstorm. At best, art could earn her a small living and the benediction of a small coterie. No, art was not for Marilyn any more than hopscotch is for a high jumper.

The Myth Exploded

I know why the Monroe myth will have it that fame "and all that goes with it" destroyed Marilyn. Why? Simply because it makes a better myth. People like to think that there is something sinister in success. It helps them accept their own unspotlighted existence. But there seldom is anything unpleasant about success.

In San Francisco, Marilyn told me: "When they restored me to life after my second suicide attempt, I felt very angry for some time. I thought people have no right making you live when you don't want to. But now I'm glad it happened the way it did. I'm glad I'm alive. I hope to stay glad for a long time."

In one of the last photos taken of her, MM strikes classic pose on set of ill-fated "Something's Got to Give."

I remember one of Marilyn's stories. It bears telling as a curious epitaph. When Marilyn was 10 years old, her mother was discharged from an institution in which she had been treated for drug addiction. She got back her old job at the Columbia studio as a movie cutter, saved her money for several months, then triumphantly removed her daughter from the orphanage.

Marilyn's mother had made a down payment on a house. For the first time in her life, Marilyn moved into a home where she was a daughter, not an orphan servant.

"It was a pretty little house," Marilyn told me, "with quite a few rooms. But there was no furniture in it, except for two cots that we slept on, a small kitchen table, and two kitchen chairs. The living room was entirely empty, but I didn't mind. It was a very pretty room."

"A White Piano I Couldn't Play"

"After several weeks, my mother came home from work in a truck. I watched two men carry in the first furniture she had bought for our house. It was a wonderful-looking white piano. It was put in the living room. There wasn't any piano bench. It just stood there by itself. Neither my mother nor I could play it. But it looked very beautiful to me."

"Shortly afterward, my mother became upset again and had to be taken back to the institution. And I had to go back to the orphanage. I always remembered the white piano. I saw it in my mind every night as I grew up."

"Finally, I got my first good part in 'The Asphalt Jungle,' and I had enough money to do what I'd always dreamed of doing. I started looking for that white piano. I went to all the warehouses and old auction rooms in Los Angeles. And after a month, I found it. It was just as white and beautiful as ever. I knew it was the same piano because Fredric March's name was engraved on it. I bought it for \$100 and took it home. It stood in my room for several years without a piano bench—just a white piano I couldn't play."

The laughter-wreathed face of Marilyn Monroe, the happy baby stare as the wind blew her skirts sky high—these are memories the movies gave us. The movies did not destroy Marilyn; they gave her a long and joyous reprieve from the devils which hounded her in earlier years and which came back to hound her in the end.

There were many moments in Marilyn's life when fame couldn't blot out the ghosts of her childhood.

Legend already claims that Hollywood killed writer; the extraordinary stories she once

her; not so, says this noted told him reveal the real truth

