



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