



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.