



Boyd won fame in "Ben-Hur," but he's equally good as a song-and-dance man in new "Jumbo."

Stephen Boyd: IRISHMAN IN A TOGA

The handsome villain of "Ben-Hur" is slated for a second Roman epic—but he's proving he can handle other kinds of roles, too

By PEER J. OPPENHEIMER

STEPHEN BOYD thundered into the movie spotlight as the villainous chariot driver Messala in "Ben-Hur."

But, to the distress of himself and his newly won fans, he thundered right out again in a series of unspectaculars that gave him little chance to prove his acting ability.

There was new hope for stardom when the handsome Irishman landed another Roman role, that of Marc Antony in "Cleopatra." But the production of that picture dragged out endlessly, and when the film was finally made, Richard Burton—as everyone knows by now—played the starring role opposite Liz Taylor.

Now, however, Steve's career looks promising again. He is about to don a toga to portray the lead in a multi-million-dollar production of "The Fall of the Roman Empire" opposite Sophia Loren. After that he will return to Hollywood to make "The San Franciscans."

The latter will be his second film for Joe Pasternak. The first is the newly released "Jumbo," a circus musical in which Steve shows talent as a song-and-dance man.

Actually, his musical accomplishments came as no surprise to those who remembered that he is a skilled guitar player who once sang for his meals!

"When I was broke, I used to walk along the queues outside the theaters in London singing folk songs to my own accompaniment and then pass around my cap to collect coins. We call this 'busking' at home. I did all right till the buskers' union caught up with me and chased me away from my favorite spot—thus cutting short my musical career!" Steve's trying years in London began when he arrived there at 20, fresh from his native Belfast in Northern Ireland. Life had been difficult at home for the youngest of nine children of a poor truck driver—but it turned out to be even more difficult in the big, impersonal British capital.

Steve wanted to find theatrical work, but it wasn't to be had, so he took whatever odd jobs he could get. At one time his income was so low that he became ill from malnutrition. Yet it was one of his odd jobs that finally got him a break as an actor.

He was working as an usher at the theater where the British Film Annual Awards were presented. When he helped Sir Michael Redgrave on stage, the well-known

British star smiled and said, "I'm not sure that you aren't one of the best actors on the stage tonight..."

"I am an actor," Steve replied promptly.

"So what are you doing as an usher?" Redgrave asked.

Steve told him he was out of work. For the first time in his life, Redgrave backed a hunch by recommending someone for a job whom he had never seen act. The result was several weeks of work with a theatrical stock company, which soon was followed by bit parts in movies and tv plays.

The turning point of Steve's career came in 1958 when he won the part of Messala in "Ben-Hur"—a role that almost cost his life when he insisted on doing 90 percent of the chariot racing himself rather than use a stunt man. "I did my own dragging, and at one point I had the chariot right on top of me. We were going about 30 miles an hour at the time. A good part of the skin came off my back."

BUT AFTER "BEN-HUR," the parts that followed did not live up to expectations. "So when Joe Pasternak offered me the lead in 'Jumbo' opposite Doris Day, I jumped at the opportunity—particularly since it was a musical and offered me a change of pace," Steve said.

Steve is not bitter about his struggle in Hollywood. His life has conditioned him to hard work and patience.

He likes to tell of his first visit home after his success in "Ben-Hur." When he arrived at the Belfast airport, his father approached him, held out his hand, and said simply, "Nice to see you." Steve leaned over to kiss his mother. "From then on," he recalled, "everything was back to normal, just as if I'd never left home."

"To an outsider this may seem formal," Stephen admitted. "But it's a characteristic of the Irish. We don't believe in a show of emotion, but affection is there and open to you when you want it and need it. I prefer this kind of attitude to that which I feel is so typical of Hollywood. Putting up a front to impress others can never have any meaning to me. Not the way I was raised!"

The 34-year-old bachelor puts into practice the philosophy he inherited from his parents. In spite of his success, he lives in a modest home, drives a rented compact car, associates primarily with non-movie people, and shows a disinterest in worldly goods that is particularly surprising considering the poverty he knew as a youth.

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