

JOAN CRAWFORD, by Bob Thomas, Simon & Schuster, 315 pp., \$10.95.

MOMMIE DEAREST, by Christina Crawford. William Morrow, 286 pp., \$9.95.

THE ACTOR'S LIFE: Journals 1956-1976, by Charlton Heston. Dutton, 482 pp., \$12.95.

LAUREN BACALL BY MYSELF, by Lauren Bacall. Knopf, 377 pp., \$10.95.

Christina's world

STEPHEN HARVEY

A FEW YEARS AGO, I WROTE a short book about Joan Crawford's film career. What had most intrigued me about her was the fact that an actress of less than prodigal gifts had managed to sustain a 40-year career as a star thanks largely to her chameleonic instinct to adapt her colors to suit the tenor of the times—from her early days as Hollywood's glorified Jazz Baby to her forays into grand guignol in the 1960s. In the book, I charted her various incarnations, starting with the Dangerous Diana of *Our Dancing Daughters*, through Mildred Pierce, to Blanche Hudson. But it never occurred to me that for a lot of people, my dogged emphasis on her professional life would be no more than an exercise in pedantry. They wanted answers to different questions: whether Crawford had actually lent her talents to that rumored blue movie in her pre-MGM days; whether her treatment of her real-life progeny was a better preparation for the role of the batty sadist in *Baby Jane* than for that of the whining martyr.

Having little affinity for the Louella Parsons school of journalism, I found all this curiosity about Crawford's private activities a little morbid, but there was a certain logic to it all the same. What exalts the genuine star above the numberless hordes of mere

SAG cardholders is the projection of a personality greater than the sum of his or her filmography. "Katharine Hepburn" or "John Wayne" or "Barbra Streisand" or "Burt Reynolds" isn't just a performer, but a metaphor as well. Their identities in the public's mind are forged both from aspects of their fictional roles and from the factoids concerning their private lives that they, the press, and the audience see as consistent with their movie personae.

Consciously or not, the films of such stars become an idealized form of autobiography. One of the reasons Crawford herself engendered such idolatry among a Depression-bred generation of working-class women was that her movie roles confirmed what they already knew about her: namely that their Joan had used her jungle red talons to claw her way up from the ranks of women just like them, determined to wrest for herself a fair share of glamor, romance, and material comfort—the birthright of every American girl with enough pluck to pursue them. Conversely, by the fifties her steely imperiousness in the likes of *Queen Bee* and *Johnny Guitar* was rampant, and moviegoers began to wonder whether these films revealed a new and rather unsettling facet of the offscreen Joan—a suspicion which, as it happens, was amply justified.

Hence it's no wonder that the public's appetite for the movie-star biography is so voracious—particularly when the subjects are, for obvious reasons, no longer capable of defending themselves. Book-length accounts of

the living tend to be a rather bland, decorous lot, the libel statutes being what they are. Meanwhile, biographies of performers fortunate enough to expire at or near the peak of their celebrity (James Dean, Elvis) lean much more toward hagiography than character assassination, lest they alienate their natural market among the mourning admirers of the star in question. Yet woe betide that ill-fated celebrity who passes on having already outlived the members of his or her fan club.

Of the two current examples of Crawfordiana, Bob Thomas's *JOAN CRAWFORD* has been largely overlooked by both press and public—mainly, I think, because it resolutely disdains to apply Crawford's own little hatchet from *Strait-Jacket* to its subject. Previously the Boswell of Hollywood celebrities ranging from Bing Crosby and Debbie Reynolds to Harry Cohn and Irving Thalberg, Thomas has composed a coolly reasoned, well-documented account of Crawford's rise from a laundry room in Kansas City to the soundstages of MGM and beyond, to her self-imposed Elba in a New York co-op. In the process, he neither canonizes nor pillories her. If the book is a little skimpy in terms of interpretation and gives rather short shrift to her film

[" Their Joan had used her jungle red talons to claw her way up through the ranks of women just like them. "]

work, it does provide a comprehensive overview of her life, hinting that her real tragedy was that she continued to believe in Joan Crawford long after the rest of the world had become agnostic.

From the start, however, *MOMMIE DEAREST* was destined to incite panting attention, and neither media hype nor the ring of truth of Christina Crawford's book entirely explains this phenomenon. What this book is really selling is the vicarious smashing of an outmoded idol. Those stars of Crawford's generation who are still in vogue (Hepburn, Davis, Bogart, and so forth) are revered as mavericks, figures believed to have transcended the tinselly bushwa of Hollywood's heyday by dint of their own unswerving integrity. Crawford, on the other hand, was the embodiment of a kind of "phony" glamor

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that nobody now wants to admit having ever been susceptible to. The "truth" about Joan Crawford may well be no more or less unsavory than that about any of her contemporaries—it's just that her irrelevance as a role model for the seventies has marked her as a likely target for iconoclasm.

CHRISTINA CRAWFORD IS not the first to parlay her status as a hapless scion of Hollywood into best-sellerdom; no fewer than two Chaplin sons have penned accounts of how doleful it was to be raised in the shadow of the world's most celebrated clown, and Brooke Hayward's *Haywire* eloquently described the travails of life *chez* Margaret Sullavan. Christina, however, has the most gothic story of all to tell, an endless litany of neglect and outright abuse. It commenced the moment Mommie decided to compensate for various romantic and professional reverses in midlife by adopting a brood of orphans whose function was to adore her more unstintingly than any husband or fan ever could. Fueled by ferocious insecurities and occasional sieges of alcoholism, Crawford retaliated with a vengeance whenever her wards threatened, however meekly, to rebel at being typecast as Sunday Supplement cherubs eternally encircling the Queen Mother.

Christina Crawford's tales of affection abruptly withdrawn, humiliation, bondage, and even incarceration are all the more convincing for the artlessness of her prose: that breathless, you'll-never-believe-this air with which she relates the more horrible episodes of her childhood. I don't question for a second the unsettling facts of her report, but there remains something faintly nauseating about

the air of rectitude hanging like incense over every page. This holds also for the massive publicity job accorded this property by the publisher, as well as the tongue-clucking sympathy with which, by and large, it has been greeted by the media.

Everyone concerned has taken enormous pains to stress *Mommie Dearest's* socially redeeming qualities as a cautionary tale of familial horror, which is rather like praising *The Exorcist* as a tract on the dangers of demon worship. This saga of parental cruelty has no universal message precisely because of Joan Crawford's celebrity status: It's the very fact that, for good or ill, a Hollywood childhood is not at all like yours or mine ever was that makes this book titillating and salable. Christina Crawford, herself a failed actress, seems to resent a life spent in the reflected glory of her mother, and yet at the same time to be more than willing to capitalize on the potency of that name. (Surely she can't believe that there would have been a market for her memoirs had Mommie been merely some anonymous suburban Medusa.)

Throughout, Christina purports to have forgiven her mother's trespasses, yet the underlying tone is almost gleefully vengeful, so clouding the book that even the figure of the author herself is obscured. Mommie comes through with the clarity of a fairy tale witch, while our Snow White heroine emerges as a featureless martyr, with little identity save that of victim of her mother's irrational rages. The need for catharsis is a more than understandable motivation under the circumstances, but one can't help wondering if the book would have been any different (or indeed, whether it would have been written at all) had La Crawford not elected in the end to leave Christina out of her will. In a perverse twist on the MGM happy fadeouts of yore, Christina is destined to earn far more extravagant sums from the proceeds of this book than she ever could have received from a cut of Mommie's relatively modest estate. The relentless hardsell of this chronicle, with the eager complicity of its author, smacks of a motive other than the quest for belated justice.

Memoirs penned by movie stars themselves operate according to different ground rules entirely, since the celebrity in question is presumably in control of the image being presented to his readers. The best examples come

from those performers who can convey their public personalities in print with an added note of intimacy and candor. The problem is that the image these actor/authors think they're giving us and the impressions we're actually left with are often radically different. For reasons I don't quite understand, actresses tend to produce more interesting accounts of their lives than do their male counterparts. Apart from David Niven's effervescent, if factually capricious, *The Moon's a Balloon*, no actors have recently matched the charm of Lilli Palmer's *Change Lobsters and Dance*, the abrasive narrative sense of Hildegard Knef's *The Gift Horse*, or the keenly observant eye and rich style Anne Baxter displayed in *Intermission*.

EVEN SO, CHARLTON Heston's *THE ACTOR'S LIFE* really lets the team down. This collection of excerpts from 20 years of his private journals pretends to give an inside view of the toils and satisfactions in the frantic life of a working professional, but what really comes through is the ego of someone who's taken his messianic roles a bit too seriously. From his delight at DeMille's decision to use him as the voice of God as well as the on-screen Moses, on through his ascension to the roles of official state artist abroad and national institution at home, this collection of windy pronouncements is practically unprecedented. "Celebrity has its drawbacks for shy people," he exclaims, as he duly records his umpteen publicity junkets, State Department tours, and appearances before Congress, and tenures as mayor of Hollywood, president of the Screen Actors Guild, board member of the American Film Institute, etc. ad infinitum. His comments on the political scene ("things are going better" in Vietnam, he concluded in 1967, four days into his second visit there), the classics ("Shakespeare *never* gets great notices," after his *Antony and Cleopatra* film flopped), and human mortality ("the sun goes down and the sun also rises" after his father's death) are all about equally illuminating.

Most unctuous of all is his Hallmark vision of himself as folksy paterfamilias whose smiling dependents (wife Lydia, otherwise known as "my girl"; stalwart son Fraser; and angelic daughter Holly) are forever rapturously waving hail or farewell to Daddy at the airport. Though Heston apparently spends more time in the air than your aver-

age Pan Am stewardess, back home, from what we're told, the Heston household spends all *its* time coming up with cute sayings while the breadwinner is away racing chariots or parting seas. When late in this account Mrs. Heston starts getting inexplicable migraines, Heston seems temporarily nonplussed, but her symptoms don't come as a complete surprise to the attentive reader. To be fair, Heston does furnish valuable accounts of the genesis of various movie projects from first outline through production and final cut, and the book gives ample testimony to his taxing sense of discipline and dedication to his craft. However, you have to wade through some ponderous prose in order to retrieve these nuggets.

LAUREN BACALL BY MYSELF just misses being a first-class example of the genre, but the self-portrait that emerges, unlike Heston's, is so matter-of-fact and likable that her book is a pleasure to read. Unlike far too many film celebrities, she doesn't view her rise from lower-middle-class obscurity to screen prominence as a matter of manifest destiny. Without a tinge of false modesty, she describes her overnight metamorphosis from a shy, well-raised Jewish girl to the nineteen-year-old siren of *To Have and Have Not* as a phenomenon created in equal parts by ambition, luck, the ability to follow orders, and the kindness and help of many people. Among the most notable are Diana Vreeland, who started her on her modeling career; Howard Hawks, who brought her to Hollywood and molded her screen image; Bacall's affectionate, strong-willed mother; and, of course, Bogart. Bacall recalls her dazed first years in Hollywood with a welcome note of self-deprecating irony: The Look that launched a thou-

sand magazine covers was a method of hiding the trembling chin of a teenager out of her element, and her first meeting with Bogart didn't exactly cleave the heavens asunder either. Their furtive affair (her mother didn't approve of her consorting with a man who drank, was more than twice her age, and was already married) and the mutual adjustments they had to make during their marriage are delineated with succinct honesty. Never for a moment does Bacall descend into bathos, even during her description of Bogart's bout with the cancer that killed him in 1957.

Although awed by the chance her profession granted her to mingle with some of the world's most interesting people, Bacall displays a healthy sense of her own worth, and a canny instinct for self-analysis; she's an astute

judge of the sum total of her own career, tolerably proud of her accomplishments, and aware of the limitations of her talents. The whole book is refreshingly free of the acrid, self-justifying note that marred the likes of Joan Fontaine's recent autobiography. Its only real failure is one of language. Friends, family, and other notables pass through the book limned with only the vaguest of phrases—from Diana Vreeland, who, we are told, is "definitely an original"; to Cole Porter, whose parties were "incredibly good fun"; to Edward G. Robinson, "a marvelous actor." No matter, really—Bacall herself comes through with grace and clarity, and she turns out to have dimensions of which that sullen drifter who once taught Bogey how to whistle gave barely a glimmer. □

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Crisis in Iran

I WOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE the author of "Political upheaval in Iran" [INQUIRY, Nov. 13, 1978] for writing an excellent article on the present crisis. It is extremely rare to find a perceptive article on the Iranian crisis.

ERVAND ABRAHAMIAN
City University of New York
New York, N.Y.

Settlements

CONGRATULATIONS FOR printing the well-researched article "Israeli settlements" by Edmund R. Hanauer [INQUIRY, Oct. 30, 1978].

Having recently returned from Israel, and with eight such trips in as many years, I can substantiate Hanauer's claim that the human rights of the Palestinians are being violated by the establishment of Israeli settlements. These settlements are causing a grave shortage of water for the Arabs, as Hanauer points out. This water shortage, I might add, is even more serious than Hanauer indicated.

MIRIAM WARD
Trinity College
Burlington, Vt.

The roots of repression

AS AN OLD "LATIN AMERICAN hand" with many years experience "south of the border," I was intrigued by Penny Lernoux's articles, "Fascism in Brazil" and "Trading in repression: Brazil" [INQUIRY, Nov. 27, Dec. 11, 1978].

Lernoux points up well the discouraging drift toward hard-line regimes in Latin America. What she scarcely mentions is the age-old struggle between order and chaos; wealth and poverty; slow economic growth coupled with ballooning birth rates—all of which have periodically led Latin America to the point of despair.

Military regimes become despotic; democratic regimes pander to the low-

est common denominator. Corruption spreads and the economies choke on do-gooder socialist schemes. The historic reasons for the present predicament are rooted deeply in the Latins' own particular history. I think Lernoux sells it short. She describes only the evils of the military in Brazil, and spends but no time on *why* they came to power. A long story at best, but it certainly deserves a few paragraphs.

Lernoux says nothing of the millions who thronged the streets of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in 1964, demanding that the army depose Goulart and his crumbling regime. The magnitude of the uneasiness Brazilians felt about the Goulart government was little recognized here in the United States. Those were years of despair for Brazil. The resignation of President Janio Quadros one year after his election in 1960, left Brazilians in a state of nearly total incredulity. By 1964 they were ready for another "state of order." For several years thereafter, Brazil grew and prospered. But power corrupts. Today Brazil wants change, there is no doubt.

In spite of all apologies to the contrary, any honest observer of the Latin American scene knows that the reasons for the demise of democracy in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile go far deeper than mere military malevolence. The Spanish/Portuguese tradition of strong central government; the psychological dependence on the concept of the patron-saviour; economies that have basically been on the wrong track (import substitution) since the 1930s—to mention only a few—are the real roots of the problem.

How *does* one move toward the foundations for order and human respect on which to evolve a libertarian society in areas of the world like Latin America when military regimes violate those very foundations? But on the other hand, how do you build those same foundations in an atmosphere of chaos, economic disintegration, corruption, even murder and violence, wrought by truly inept politicians such as Peron, Allende, and Goulart?

GERRIT P. VANDER ENDE
Oakland, Calif.

Coercing youth

FRANKLY, I SEE NOTHING wrong with John Connally's Youth Service Program [INQUIRY, Jan. 8 & 22, 1979]. It seems little different from the requirements of the State of Israel that every youth spend one year working on their settlement farms. I think the Youth Service Program would be good for both this country and the youth.

DAVID A. MCPHERSON
Oklahoma City, Okla.

Israel has no general law that young people spend one year in settlements, though some kibbutzim require this of their youth. There is instead universal military conscription for both men and women.

Frankly, we don't think that a government that loses the mail and spends billions on cost overruns ought to be telling our children what they should do with their lives.

—EDITORS

Illegal Acts

ALEKSANDR GINSBURG'S ORdeal [INQUIRY, Dec. 25, 1978] is not an isolated case in the Soviet Union. For according to V.M. Chkhikvadze, an associate member of the USSR Academy of Sciences and director of its Institute of State and Law, Soviet law forbids agitation and propaganda that undermine the Soviet system.

In an article in *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* (Winter 1977-78) Chkhikvadze argues that citizens in a socialist society must have discipline, duties, and responsibilities, and he criticizes those who distort people's socialist social consciences and undermine their ideological convictions. Responding to charges that dissidents were being persecuted in the Soviet Union, Chkhikvadze crudely states dissidents are not punished for their beliefs, only their actions. And these actions include "disseminating, preparing, or storing literature" damaging to the Soviet government or social system. In other words, it's not illegal to have antisocial thoughts as long as you don't write them down.

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Pittsburgh, Penn.