

Canonizing the Superficial

By JOSEPH N. BELL

THE HOLLYWOOD INTERVIEW is a peculiarly parochial Southern California tribal rite with daily repercussions in the press all over the world. For better or worse, it probably produces more yards of newspaper and magazine copy, read by more people, than any other single journalistic gambit. And, oddly enough, the results of the Hollywood interview are more likely to show up in *The New York Times* or the *Christian Science Monitor* than in *Pasionate Screen Romances* or similar publications seen most commonly on coffee tables in beauty shops.

"Fan magazines" make up the nether world of the Hollywood interview, and, at best, are peripheral to it, often cadging their interview material from old newspaper clippings. At the heart of the system are the representatives of the substantial newspapers, magazines, and wire services of the world—including several dozen established Hollywood reporters-in-residence, as well as visiting motion picture and TV editors who usually make an annual peregrination from Oshkosh or Macon or Amarillo to do a "round of studio interviews."

These troops can be seen during almost any cocktail hour at the Beverly Hills Hotel or any lunch hour at studio commissaries, pencils poised, listening intently to bosomy young actresses of low décolletage and uncertain IQ, or long-haired young men in cowboy garb. From such interviews comes the grist of the entertainment page for the folks back home.

One facet in particular sets the Hollywood interview apart from other types of journalistic research: The interviewee doesn't *have* to say something profound for it to be newsworthy. Sometimes, the mere reporting of a face-to-face meeting between writer and star is enough. Sometimes—but certainly not always. I have, for example, a fistful of interview notes from three lengthy sessions with Doris Day that have never made it into print. The reasons are complicated, but they illustrate the hazards to the journalist of the Hollywood interview.

Miss Day is a formidable subject to tackle in Hollywood. She has earned

several "Sour Apple" awards for her lack of cooperation with the press. She demands copy clearance as a prerequisite for an interview. And even with this safeguard, certain subjects—for example, her previous marriages, her religion, her views on contemporary issues that might be controversial (or, worse, nonexistent)—are *verboten*.

I confronted these ground rules when I was asked to interview Miss Day for a large national magazine. Ordinarily, this publication would have balked at copy clearance, but when Miss Day agreed to sign the article, the editor agreed to let her censor it. Arrangements for me to see her were made through Miss Day's husband, Martin Melcher, who is also her business manager.

She was working on a film at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer at the time, and I was escorted to her studio suite—a three-room throwback to the days of the Big Stars at MGM—where her secretary entertained me with stories of her employer's humanitarianism while we awaited Miss Day. She burst in finally, all healthy, suntanned and vigorous, clad in Bermuda shorts and palpably nervous about the prospect of talking with a stranger. She wasn't used to this sort of thing, she told me, having granted her last interview two years earlier. Her opening gambit was a little disconcerting to a visitor who hadn't yet uttered a word. Fixing me with an uneasy eye, she asked brusquely: "Now, how long do you have to have?"

She relaxed a little, but not much, when I told her I thought it would take several sessions of talk to get acquainted and dig down to some feelings that would give readers insight into Miss Day. As we lunched on chopped steak in her dressing room, she came back repeatedly—usually at a moment when I thought we were at least establishing some sort of empathy—to the question of how much more time I would need.

In my three interview sessions with her, we talked endlessly of baseball, health food, the importance of exercise (which she demonstrated delightfully for me), the joys of America, and the need for upbeat entertainment. Every effort to steer conversation into more provocative areas was turned away with, "Oh, now, we don't want to get into that, do we?"

When it became clear that she would approve nothing of even mild substance for publication, I reported this to my editor. We washed out the project and



chalked up the lost time to experience. Oddly enough, during these interviews with Miss Day, in spite of the superficial nature of the talk, I learned a great deal that would have humanized her. But the peculiar circumstances of the interview arrangements prevented me from using it, and I am now one of the world's foremost unpublished authorities on Doris Day.

Turn the coin over, however, and you are likely to find an Eva Marie Saint, a bright and blithe spirit little concerned with public images. Within the strictures of a single two-hour lunch with Miss Saint, it was possible to scratch below a façade and find a person. She talked easily about the vicissitudes of her business, the idiosyncracies of her associates—and herself—and the childhood drives that had made her an actress. When I asked her if she was recognized when she appeared on the street, she allowed as how she didn't really know and was curious to find out herself. Whereupon she paraded through a crowded hotel lobby looking for signs of recognition, got none, shrugged, and returned undaunted to the restaurant booth from which her foray had been launched.

EVEN with the Eva Marie Saints of the movie business, however, a semblance of rapport frequently substitutes for substance in the Hollywood interview. The principal reason is obvious. The average length of the "in-depth" interview (as opposed to the production-line, thirty-minute variety) is two hours, the ground rules are clear and specific, and behavior is generally impeccable.

The impressario of the Hollywood interview is the press agent, who is trained to assess the writer and publication and thus cut off at the pass embarrassing situations (for his client) whenever possible. If the press agent feels the interview will be, on balance, of ultimate benefit to his client—or, conversely, that it can't be avoided without ultimate damage to his client—he arranges it. When he assesses the situation wrongly or the client doesn't like the end result, the press agent usually suffers for it.

The frequency with which interviews

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are arranged depends on the extent to which the star involved wants publicity or is willing to go along with press agents seeking to use the star to publicize a current studio product. During the active promotion of a film or a new television show, a star may be asked to do a week-long series of interviews, often involving endless repetition of the same questions. And, frequently, the people doing the interviewing are remarkably inept or haven't bothered to do research in advance about the person they are interviewing.

I caught Rex Harrison for a scheduled interview when he was in a black mood immediately after finishing work on *My Fair Lady*. The press agent who took me to Mr. Harrison's dressing room on the Warner Brothers lot was decidedly uneasy. He told me that Harrison had just suffered through an interview by a female who wanted to talk only about his ex-wives, and a radio disc jockey who obviously hadn't read the studio biography and asked him such questions as: "What was your last picture?" and "Have you ever done any stage work before?" Harrison was so irritated by the latter interview that he took to replying in monosyllables, and the whole affair turned into a shambles.

The press agent told me grimly that I'd better have some good questions, and, en route, I grubbed about in my notes for a clue. Immediately after our introduction, I asked Harrison if he thought George Bernard Shaw would have approved of the ending of *My Fair Lady*. The question intrigued him, he relaxed, and we were able to establish some measure of rapport. His dressing room was pandemonium—phones ringing constantly, mercenaries moving in and out on such missions as the selection of booze for a closing party and travel arrangements for the Harrison family,

scheduled to depart posthaste. Harrison moved through all this confusion with great aplomb, directing his platoons without passion as he fielded a succession of questions from me with grace, wit, and style. It was an impressive performance.

THE site of the Hollywood interview depends on the current employment status of the interviewee. If the star is working, the interview usually takes place over lunch in a studio commissary or the star's dressing room. (Interviews on the set are not very satisfactory because the performer is constantly being called away in mid-sentence, resulting in rather disjointed quotes.) If the star isn't working, the interview is usually scheduled for one of three places: the star's home in late afternoon, a posh hotel lounge (the Zebra Room of the Beverly Hills Hotel is a favorite spot) at the cocktail hour, or one of a half-dozen plush restaurants (the Beverly Hills Brown Derby rates high on the interview circuit) over the lunch hour.

In the latter case, the star and press agent—who almost always sits in on an interview—arrive first and are morosely sipping a cocktail when the writer appears. Performers generally don't enjoy this activity. They endure it as a necessary concession to the commercial end of their profession. They prefer to look on an interview in advance as a mild social disaster. They would rather be pleasantly surprised by a writer with fresh questions or an easy rapport than disappointed by one who is banal, breathless, arrogant, or just plain dull.

Often it takes the entire interview period to break down a performer's defenses—if, indeed, they are broken down at all. Sometimes, too, the interviewer finds that once the ramparts are penetrated, there's nothing behind them.

Actors and actresses can always be found in one of two conditions: "on" or "off." Almost inevitably, they are "on" for an interview. If it is their common practice to brush off small and idolatrous children, insult waiters, and saucer their coffee, they desist during the interview. Thus, the interviewer can only deal in fleeting impressions, many of which are based on an image that a performer, highly skilled in his trade, wants to project.

Extra research time to try to get "inside" a performer doesn't by any means guarantee such a result. Last year, for example, I followed a Danny Kaye television show from first script-reading to airing. I requested as much interview time as possible with Mr. Kaye and was told to be patient and I would be worked in as quickly and as often as his schedule permitted.

I was underfoot for a week, watching the show evolve and looking hopefully in Kaye's direction for a sign that he was ready to talk with me. No sign was forthcoming. When I queried the harried press agent with increasing frequency and irritation, he told me that Kaye was aware of my presence and desires (indeed he was; he reacted instantly to a strange face around the set) and would work me in as soon as possible.

SO it went all week. I had reams of background data and no interview with Danny Kaye. At last, late on the afternoon of the fifth day, he gave the first overt sign that he recognized that I was around. He looked toward the chair from which I had been watching a rehearsal, nodded almost imperceptibly at me, wagged his head slightly in a gesture I interpreted as a demand to follow him, then disappeared through a rear door.

I trailed him obediently to his studio penthouse, with doors swinging shut in my face all the way. Inside the sanctum, I was told by a secretary to enter a vast living room that contained a grand piano, a bar, a large coffee table, and numerous couches and easy chairs. I expected to find Kaye alone and awaiting me there. Instead, I found a half-dozen singers who were doing several numbers with Kaye on the show I was following. They eyed me uneasily, and when Kaye entered a few minutes later, he ignored me, plunging instead into a lengthy rehearsal with the singers.

When Kaye finally dismissed the singers, they filed out quickly, examining me curiously on the way out. That left Kaye and me alone in his living room. He lit a pipe and looked at me pensively. There wasn't anything else breathing for him to look at. For a few seconds, I fully expected the band to come bursting through the back door for another rehearsal. But it didn't. Instead Kaye in-

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"Listen, Eddie. I want you to forget about the convertible we gave you, your allowance, your scholarship. Go in and give it the good college try."

News from Home

By M. C. BLACKMAN

THE MOST NOSTALGIC people in the world live in and visit New York City. Hundreds of thousands of residents born elsewhere make monthly, weekly, and even daily visits to the famed newspaper and magazine stands and shops in the Times Square area, to libraries, and to many other sources of information in the metropolis to find out what is going on in their native lands and home towns. Their number is augmented by uncounted thousands among the city's 15,000,000 annual visitors — roughly twice the permanent population. To provide these homesick people with news from home, communications media all over the world spend huge sums and use a surprising number of correspondents for special coverage of happenings in New York City.

The out-of-town newspaper stand recessed under a shelter in front of the Allied Chemical Tower (the old Times Tower) at the south end of Times Square, which purveys dailies from 350 American cities, is operated by Hotaling's News Agency. This unique concern, devoted exclusively to satisfying the home-news hunger of the uprooted, also operates a small shop in the Tower and a much larger one at 142 West 42nd Street, both stocked with foreign-language newspapers and periodicals.

The exact total of customers who patronize these stands is a trade secret. But attendants note that of the hundreds of thousands of people who call each year at the Times Square Information Center, 90 per cent of those who identify themselves as American-born continue around south of it to buy a hometown paper.

It would be possible, of course, for anyone determined to pry a trade secret from the Hotaling agency to take a position nearby from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. and actually count the number of buyers as they arrive continuously in groups of two to six at a time, hour after hour. However, the patronage varies from day to day, from season to season, and from event to event in New York City and elsewhere in the nation.

One observer recently noted that most of the buyers had one characteristic in common. They were not exactly furtive,

but they spoke to the attendant in low tones, transacted their business, and departed in a hurry, as though wishing to avoid being identified as hicks with straw showing in their hair. Typical of one group of patrons was a native of Arkansas now living in New York who bought a Little Rock paper to learn in detail about the primary elections just held in that state. Another group was represented by a Chicagoan attending a convention in New York City who got a hometown paper (the only one on the stand arriving by air on the day of publication) to read a more complete report of his organization's meetings in the metropolis than was available in the New York papers.

The atmosphere and the attitude of patrons are far different in the foreign-

publication shop on West 42nd Street. There, dozens of persons, most of them men, browse all day and part of the night among the labeled compartments of shelves in a sort of dreamy state of recollection, with long-ago-and-far-away expressions on their faces. They skim through a few publications, make a choice, pay at the cashier's desk up front, and depart, their mood seeming to vanish as they do so, perhaps to be revived later as they read in detail their native-land newspapers and magazines.

The statistics that Mr. Hotaling does not consider to be strictly his own business show that the firm regularly sells varying numbers of copies of about 2,000 periodicals and 600 newspapers from fifty foreign countries at prices high enough above the home cost to pay for transportation and provide a modest profit. Periodicals come by ship and arrive a week to a month after publication. Most daily newspapers come by air from England, Germany, France, Italy, and Ireland, the majority of them a day after the date of issue. Hotaling sells 2,500 copies each week of papers published in all six counties of North Ireland



"I must say, that is a mighty original line, Mr. Revere."

M. C. Blackman, now retired, was for a quarter of a century a noted member of the New York *Herald Tribune's* rewrite staff, one of the world's best.