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BILL HOLDEN

I.Q. at the Box Office

by RICHARD G. HUBLER

Hollywood's hottest leading man blends acting talent with a know-how of double-entry bookkeeping

LAST SPRING A serious-minded young businessman named William Franklin Beedle wrote a letter to a Japanese friend, Takejiro Ohtani, board chairman of a great Nipponese firm. The writer signed it with his legalized nom-de-screen: William Holden.

Holden wrote about his business: motion pictures. As an actor, he emotes in them. As a union member, he fights for them. As an employee of Paramount Pictures, he publicizes them. He is also an investor in and distributor of films.

Though he says he is "first and always" an actor, Holden wrote Ohtani: "There is no set formula for success in the American movie market... but the trend in Hollywood is... toward the hand-wrought, individually-produced pictures. Pictures

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should be made in their own national spirit, traditions and color. If each has the universal quality of truth, vivid emotion and direct aesthetic experience, one can expect the film to be successful anywhere in the world."

This is hardly the dialogue to be expected from a personality who has won an Academy Award and is popular enough at the moment to keep busy for the next ten years at a six-figure salary per picture. But the 38-year-old Holden is proud of his devotion to motion pictures. Virtually everything he does is related to them.

If he takes a trip abroad—as he does every year—he makes it a point to find out what product his studio is plugging. He drops in at the local film exchanges to see if he can help boost.

When he sits in for the Screen Actor's Guild negotiations with producers, he buys a few thousand dollars' worth of assorted movie company stocks so that no one across the table can give a false picture of the "shareholder's viewpoint."

Yet Holden is viewed most amiably by management. Y. Frank Freeman, a vice president of Paramount Studios, thinks that he is "one of the outstanding young men in the industry today."

Holden's union has repeatedly elected him to prominent offices. He has set up his own firm to produce motion pictures and films for television. His first picture, "Toward the Unknown," for Warner Brothers' release, stars Holden as a test pilot.

In a poll of Hollywood reporters

recently he was designated "the best adjusted and happiest actor around."

Holden gives the impression that he represents all phases of the movie business. This has given him the reward of a highly nervous stomach. He conceals it under an energetic exterior—except when he has to give an emotional portrayal where his inner agony gives him a look of soulful suffering.

The key to Holden's success and popularity is possibly the fact that he does not regard art as a business but business as an art. He has firmly attached his idealism and aesthetics to double-entry ledgers.

"What Holden wants is to see Hollywood become as respected, admired—and financially sound—as himself," says a producer.

Except for vacation jobs with his father and a four-year hitch in the Army, Holden has never been out of movies. His longest stint without acting was a ten-month post-Army period. Since then he has set such records as starring in ten films in two years. Today he gets about \$200,000 a picture.

He thinks this may be the result of his first movie, "Golden Boy"—where he got a raise from \$50 to \$150 a week for being an overnight success in the lead. When he read the reviews, he dashed into the Paramount front office, faced up to Freeman and demanded income commensurate with his success. Freeman turned him down cold.

Holden, baffled, backed out of the door muttering darkly: "All right, all right, you'll pay for this some day!"

Paramount has paid for it, freely

and gladly. In view of Holden's box-office appeal, they would gladly keep on paying more and more—but Holden is determined to work, not only for a corporation but for himself.

"They'll do the pictures they think will succeed," he says, "and I'll do the ones that *I* think will succeed. I think movies must be free to say anything they please. But they should say it in good taste. Good taste is universal."

If it is pointed out to him that good taste is a rare commodity, Holden is likely to rap the arm of his chair impatiently with his "relaxing glass" of Scotch. "I know it is," he says. "That's the big job of this business—to find men of good taste, artists and businessmen. There are some pictures the business would never be able to do. I want to do those myself."

Holden has proved his point by starring in such pictures as "The Moon Is Blue." This cinematic dido about a girl having an innocent affair with a self-confessed wolf was thought to be so evil by Hollywood that the Production Code seal was denied it. Holden got a lot of publicity and cash out of his role—and the additional pleasure of having the United States Supreme Court deny that anyone had the right to censor such a show.

Holden's devotion to movies is not altogether because he realizes acting is his destiny. His outside deals have included a home helicopter company, a radio transcription firm, a haberdashery, a drugstore, a gold mine and a proposition for seining carp and shipping them to

China. All came financial croppers and gave him the idea that he might better stick to what he knew.

As a boy, Holden worked for his father's testing laboratory helping get samples of the chief products—oils, feeds and fertilizers—that the elder Beedle specialized in analyzing.

Holden's father taught his sons—there were two brothers, Robert and Richard—gymnastics and the Beedles were locally famous for their daredevil stunts of tightrope walking, paddling along on their hands on the railing of a bridge or riding motorcycles no-handed—a practice which occasionally cost them cash and contusions. All this physical aplomb gave young Holden what might be called an abrupt set of mannerisms.

NOTHING MUCH impressed him. His attitude toward the world was that eventually it would come round to him—and if it never did, he still had a robust fighting temper that would bring it round. As it happened, he has never had to use his temper much. He keeps it well on the underside of his sense of humor. Fate did his work for him.

He was majoring in chemistry in South Pasadena Junior High when he happened to sing in a local choir. His quavering basso attracted the drama teacher. Holden was given the role of an 80-year-old in a local play.

Perhaps the Holden magnetism got through the brush-beard and make-up. Anyway, a Hollywood talent scout asked him to drop in at Paramount so he could see how he

When his first request for a raise was turned down cold. he muttered, "You'll pay for this some day!"

looked normally. Holden, not altogether convinced, said he would, after he took an exam.

He showed up a few days later and was offered a test on the strength of—"well, looks and poise," according to his early backers. The test was just enough to give him \$50 a week for six months—and a new name, Holden instead of Beedle, the former from a local reporter.

Meanwhile, Holden's test—roaming Hollywood as such reels do—turned up at Columbia. Again, they "liked my looks, I guess," says Holden. "It couldn't have been my experience."

Despite the fact that he could neither box nor act nor play the violin, Holden was given the lead in "Golden Boy"—where he had to simulate convincingly all three talents. Thus he was a leading actor in his first movie.

The picture returned a good profit and he was loaned out in quick succession to Warner Brothers and United Artists. "That was the first time I was discovered," says Holden. Since that time he has been rapturously hailed on at least six occasions as a find.

For nearly 14 years Holden's talents were shuttled between Columbia and Paramount, since the former had bought half his contract. "I suppose Holden is really a crusading businessman in the dis-

guise of an actor," says a fellow thespian.

During that time, he married actress Brenda Marshall. She had been re-christened from her original name of Ardis Ankerson, which Holden assured her was no more horrendous than Bill Beedle. After their wedding in July, 1941, circumstances intervened to such an extent—including location trips, illnesses and operations at about the same time on their appendices—that the honeymoon did not get started for more than two months.

During World War II, Holden held a commission in the Army Air Force but he was used mostly as a master of ceremonies. His brother Robert, a pilot, was killed in action off a carrier. Holden's first son, Wesley, was born in 1943 and his second, Scott, just after the end of the war.

By 1945-6, many Hollywood stars who had seen service had been forgotten by the public. Holden was one of them.

He started grimly back to work at Paramount to be re-discovered. He succeeded so well that within less than eight years Paramount was willing to give him a unique 14-year contract for two pictures a year—allowing him to do any number outside—that guarantees him at least \$250,000 a year until 1967.

"In the movie business," says a

director, "Holden's contract is called security with a built-in tax disposal."

Holden's tension these days comes chiefly from trying to deal with his success. He is likely to deliberate unduly such items as whether or not to install a swimming pool. He did build one. The point was not whether he could afford it but whether it would throw his private life out of kilter.

In this direction Holden has found a couple of outlets for pressure. One is raising orchids, another the collection of rare and weird objects of art from out-of-the-way places. He hoards maps and devours travel magazines.

He now indulges in trips to Europe and the Far East (where he is easily one of the most popular and best-known American actors) in what he calls "a search for authenticity and honesty, to help Hollywood get away from slickness."

He is likely to discuss the propaganda aspects of films with the governor of Hong Kong, then be off to confer with VIPs of India on the topic of Communist infiltration via the movies.

He will probably wind up in Singapore arguing on the question of intermarriage between the East and West—on which topic he did a recent film, "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing."

The legend is that Holden was so bad as an actor in his first screen test that he would never have been snapped up—if he had not smiled in a bewildered fashion. This so appealed that he got his job—and a long line of what he likes to call

"Smilin'-Jim-with-a-toothpick" roles.

Holden rebelled against these contract appearances for years and finally got his desire to be a hard-faced "Frownin' Joe" in such pictures as "Sunset Boulevard" and "Force of Arms." Now he is at the point where he feels competent to be a lover or comedian.

His appeal for movie-goers has been described as earnestness, likeableness, genuineness and a thousand other qualities. Possibly the best definition is that he presents the picture of a man who is determined to make good—and the great American habit of applauding make-gooders is responsible for his steady draw.

Varying his roles, he recently starred as a rich playboy, a stage director, a jet fighter-pilot and an ambitious businessman. This month he will be seen as a Marine Colonel in Paramount's "The Proud and the Profane" opposite Deborah Kerr. His characterizations were not notable as acting but rather as degrees of intensity: he was always Holden in a different situation, reacting with fortitude and energy.

This is not a handicap in movies. The skilled star is one who never lets his personality get overpowered by his role.

Having done almost as many pictures as he is years old, the hazel-eyed, brown-haired Holden—who is never without a tan—is not worried about his own future.

"I worry about Hollywood," he says. "This is a great business. More people of high caliber should go into it."