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V.I.P.'S (Very Impossible Personalities)

*A Star Has Five Sharp Points
~ Ready to Stab You the Minute
You Steal His Thunder...*

by David Hanna

SHOW me a good fellow backstage, and I'll show you a lousy actor onstage," once growled the late W. C. Fields.

As Fields might have put it, his information came from the horse's mouth. Few kind words were said about the dyspeptic, bulb-nosed comedian by fellow actors during his lifetime; still fewer since. If anything, the fables about his war with the world, his hatred of actors, producers, dogs and children have toughened. This is exactly the way Fields would have wanted it.

In preserving his prerogatives as a star Fields made no pretensions of being anything but ruthless.

Without wincing he could toss out a radio script two hours before air time. Movie writers had to follow him around the golf course carrying his Martini pitchers while he outlined the plots of his films. Finally he wrote them himself under an assumed name.

When, in a "Ziegfeld Follies" performance of his famous pool room act, he caught Ed Wynn stealing laughs by sneaking under the table, he took his cue, conked it over Ed's head and knocked him cold. Fields never apologized.

When producers asked him to defer top billing to Mae West for the series of comedies they made to-

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Impossible Personalities

gether, Fields was reminded that ladies were always mentioned first as in "ladies and gentlemen."

Fields' answer was characteristic. "Is that so? What about Adam and Eve?" Fields' name came first.

Show business hasn't changed much since the days of Bill Fields. It is still a profession in which there is a high proportion of people who are admired for their talent but thoroughly and justifiably disliked.

Some, like Kirk Douglas, even take pride in a reputation for being disagreeable. Kirk, for instance, said: "People don't dislike me because I'm a perfectionist. They dislike me because I'm me."

Such candor is rare in show business, where shrewd publicity men try to hide the less pleasant sides of their clients' personalities.

Now and then, however, a fuss reaches the point where it slips into print, giving outsiders a devastating answer to that old question, "Now what is so-and-so *really* like?"

Kirk Douglas figured in such an incident last season on Broadway and, after it was over, there was little doubt of the star's accurate appraisal of his own personality.

It involved "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," a play by Dale Wasserman based on Ken Kesey's novel, in which Kirk elected to return to Broadway after an absence of many years. Although before leaving for Hollywood his stage credits had been minor, this foray of a movie star into the Great White Way was heralded by Kirk's press agents as a major event.

Troubles beset "Cuckoo's Nest" from the start, and the reviews were generally negative. To keep it alive for a respectable Broadway run Kirk cut his four-figure salary to the Actor's Equity minimum. He took exception to the critics' opinions and in the form of a letter to the cast posted his own review on the backstage bulletin board.

After the play closed, playwright Wasserman took to print and gave an eye-opening account of his ad-

Impossible Personalities

ventures with Kirk, whom he identified in the article as "The Star."

Wasserman described Kirk's contract as running eight pages longer than the script. He reported the hiring and firing of three directors. He described a day on which laryngitis forced Kirk to cancel rehearsals. "But," wrote Wasserman, "he was able to muster enough voice to suggest 37 script changes."

During the first out-of-town try-out performance in New Haven, Wasserman diligently noted his own changes and cuts. But at the customary post-performance conference he was not given an opportunity to present them. In one majestic sentence, Wasserman reported, Kirk took over the show: "This play is going to be rewritten my way because I have more money than any of you."

Kirk has parlayed his reputation for nastiness into a running publicity gag. When interviewers ask him about it he answers, "I don't think I'm as mean as Burt Lancaster, but I'm trying."

A more dignified but still memorable Broadway flurry occurred some seasons back when three stars representing different schools of acting assembled to perform Eugene O'Neill's "Touch of the Poet."



Helen Hayes came equipped with more than half a century of widely praised work in the American theater which led her from child parts in stock to Broadway and Hollywood stardom. From England arrived distinguished, thoroughly professional character actor Eric Portman. The Stanislavski-Actors Studio "method" contribution, in which the actor must "feel" and "live" a characterization, was in the person of the brilliant Kim Stanley.

Not long after the show opened to thunderous acclaim there were

Impossible Personalities



rumors that things were far from serene among the three stars.

The difficulties reached the point where it was discreetly discussed in the councils of Actors' Equity.

What sifted out, though, raised a few eyebrows. Miss Stanley, it appears, was troubled by Eric Portman's drinking during performances. The smell of alcohol on his breath offended her. She conceded that mild tipping during the show was customary in England and that Portman's performance had never been affected. But why couldn't he do in America as the Americans do?

It was also revealed that often, just as she was making her entrance, Miss Stanley would approach Miss Hayes and say, "Please don't touch me, I don't feel it tonight." Later, the First Lady of the American theater said, "How can you play a mother to a daughter whom you're supposed to love and not touch her? I felt like a fool sitting there with my hands in my lap."

Equity's cool heads prevailed. The matter was quietly dropped and hinted-at charges and counter-charges of unprofessionalism forgotten.

A fellow actor had this to say about Kim Stanley: "She's not easy to love but very easy to admire professionally."

Out Hollywood way, Doris Day's staying power as a top box office star is both a wonder and a green-eyed dragon to this generation. To many of them, her acting skill is negligible and her girl-next-door image a façade behind which she hides a complicated personality.

Of themselves, these facets of her character are not unusual. And Hollywood might understand them better if Doris tried a little harder to be liked. Said a press agent who

Impossible Personalities



worked with her, "She doesn't actively dislike people. She just wishes they weren't there."

Temperament of a different sort—chilliness toward her colleagues—is exhibited by Katherine Hepburn. It's said she's mellowed now, but Broadway remembers her starring debut in "The Lake." Although it was only her second show, Miss Hepburn insisted that a curtain be strung from her dressing room to the stage set in order to shield her from the prying eyes of other actors. This exercise in isolation did little good, however. As one critic observed, "Last night Katherine Hepburn stepped out onto 'The Lake' and sank."

Later in Hollywood, John Barrymore cut her down to size. Evidently frustrated by Barrymore's failing memory and repeated takes because he blew his lines, Miss Hepburn summoned her crispest diction and said, "Mr. Barrymore, I want you to know that I am an actress." Barrymore arched his famed eyebrows and replied, "Very well, young lady, I'll keep your secret."

From the days of Erich Von Stroheim there have been martinet directors capable of reducing even strong men to tears. Today's undisputed champions are Otto Preminger, John Ford and Henry Hathaway.

When questioned about his toughness, Preminger points to all the actors who have worked with him twice or more. He is correct because Preminger makes interesting movies. And, after all, they've grown accustomed to Preminger—better a devil you do know . . .

Jean Seberg, whom he discovered in "Joan of Arc," has a vivid one-line opinion of Preminger: "After 'Joan' flopped, Otto dropped me like a used Kleenex."

Impossible Personalities



Recalling her first day on the set in Africa where she co-starred with Clark Gable and Grace Kelly in "Mogambo," Ava Gardner told me, "John Ford completely ignored me. It was as though I weren't there. When I introduced myself he simply stared through me. He kept up that attitude of icy indifference for days. Eventually he got around to treating me as a human being. Until then I cried myself to sleep."

Would Ava work with Ford again? "You're damned right I would. Any time he wants me."

Henry Hathaway brought even sturdy Sophia Loren to tears during one of her early English-language pictures, "The Legend of the Lost," shot in Libya. Hathaway never talks when he can shout, never whispers when he can talk. Sophia, whose English was then imperfect, was almost frantic as she tried to understand Hathaway's instructions.

Hathaway and Kim Novak came to grips while filming "Of Human Bondage." She fled the picture after a few days' shooting and hid out in London until a new director was brought in.

But Hathaway is best known for his rough ways with a crew. It's a Hollywood legend that when he does a location picture, the studio installs a shuttle plane to bring in replacements for assistant directors, many of whom have cracked after a few hours of Hathaway's terrible temper.

When Al Jolson billed himself as "The World's Greatest Entertainer," he meant it. His contempt and jealousy of other actors was as monumental as his talent, which accounts for the fact that, despite his fame and wealth, Jolson was a lonely, unloved man.

Impossible Personalities



Eddie Cantor told me: "I can remember visiting him in a dressing room and watching him fume because he could hear a dog act on the stage getting so much applause.

"Once I was playing 'Whoopee' in San Francisco and heard that Jolson was in the theater. I thought I'd given one of my best performances and was hurt when Jolson didn't come backstage afterwards.

"Later I found out why. Jolson just couldn't bring himself to congratulate another performer. A few days later, though, he took out an advertisement in *Variety* praising me to the skies."

Hollywood's most durable series has been based on Edgar Rice Burroughs' "Tarzan the Ape Man." Almost half a century old, it has employed countless Tarzans, Janes and Cheetahs, the chimpanzee.

I worked as a publicity man on a Tarzan picture during Lex Barker's tenure. Because a Tarzan picture is so difficult to do, there's little time for temperament. Not only little time, but also an object on which to vent one's frustrations—Cheetah.

Everyone loathed him. He chased the girls, screeched and ran around the little compound he occupied. He did everything he could to break up rehearsals and make the director nervous. You couldn't remove him from the set because he was needed. And face it, Cheetah was a star. When he stepped before the camera, he was screech-perfect in his role.

Not long ago I asked Maureen O'Sullivan, who played Jane more often than any other actress, how she felt about Cheetah. "That chimpanzee!" she answered. "I hated him. He was mean and nasty to me, but he got along with Johnny Weissmuller."

I asked the same question of Enid

Impossible Personalities

Markey, the very first Jane, and still a very busy character actress. She shuddered. "He frightened me to death. I used to have nightmares about him."



Whether drunk or sober, the late Laurette Taylor possessed an acid wit that matched her reputation as one of America's greatest actresses. In the years that she withdrew from the world, she had few friends, but when she made theatrical history in "The Glass Menagerie," they flocked back into her rarified circle.

One who didn't was Jane Cowl. Leonard Sillman, the producer, recalls escorting Laurette to a theatrical party and seeing her pointedly snubbed by Miss Cowl. Asked if it were deliberate, Laurette answered, "Of course, Jane hasn't spoken to me for ten years."

"But why?" asked Sillman.

"It began," answered Laurette, "when the drama editor of one of the newspapers, having discovered that Jane and I were playing different matinee days, asked us to review each other's performances. Jane was doing 'Romeo and Juliet.' I couldn't imagine her in it. She was too old, I thought. So I tried to beg off. But friends assured me I was wrong. So I went. I couldn't have been more surprised. She was radiant, exquisite really. Quite the best Juliet I'd ever seen."

"Did you write that?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Then why doesn't Jane speak to you?"

"I can't imagine why," answered Laurette, "except that I began the review with, 'Now I believe that God walked on the water.'"

No cast of less-than-lovable show business personalities would be complete without including an actress

Impossible Personalities

I prefer to call Miss X.

She specialized in playing mean, small-town gossips and did them superbly. Her talent came naturally. She *was* mean and oozed hate from every pore of her ugly face.

She didn't have a kind word for anyone. She distrusted the make-up man, so did her own make-up. When the years caught up to her, she used her advanced age as an excuse to rehearse sitting down. It gave her a better opportunity to figure out how she might steal the scene.

Stars cordially disliked her and ran for cover when they saw her name on the call sheet.

Producers, from whom she extracted a guarantee of a week's pay for two days work, paid happily. It got rid of her that much sooner.

When she'd pack her make-up kit and drive away, they'd swear never to engage her again.

But back she came, again and again. She died a rich woman, testimony to her talent and the show business axiom, "Never hire that actor again—until we need him." ●