



The Time Machine brought Taylor into battle with the beastly Morlocks, actually stuntmen wearing rubber suits. They "had a hell of a time," notes the actor.



Stepping into *The Time Machine*, Rod Taylor tried to subtly indicate that the time traveler was actually H.G. Wells.

By STEVE SWIRES

Rod Taylor Time-Traveling Hero

The Australian actor steps out of "The Time Machine" to remember a "Twilight Zone" tale and the terror of "The Birds."

Two decades before Mel (*Mad Max*) Gibson and Bryan (*F/X*) Brown made it fashionable to be Australian, Rod Taylor was the first Aussie actor to become a major Hollywood star since Errol Flynn. His rugged good looks and uncanny ability to perfect an authentic American accent quickly established Taylor as a popular leading man, with starring roles in such entertaining adventure sagas as *Seven Seas to Calais*, *The Liquidator*, *Chuka*, *Dark of the Sun* and *The High Commissioner*.

Usually cast as a fearless macho man, he demonstrated an impressive versatility in the light comedy *Sunday in New York* and the romantic drama *Hotel*, and even received a Best Actor Academy Award nomination as Irish playwright Sean O'Casey in John Ford's *Young Cassidy*. Equally adept at portraying pirates, spies, cowboys, mercenaries and detectives, Taylor earned a permanent place in the pantheon of science-fiction heroes for his thoughtful performances in two genuine genre classics, George Pal's wondrous *The Time Machine* and Alfred Hitchcock's chilling *The Birds*.

"I've been such a phony American for so many years, that most people have forgotten I'm really Australian," the outspoken 57-year-old actor acknowledges, relaxing in his Palm Springs home. "I must have a lucky imitative ear. It certainly has nothing to do with talent. I just fell in love with the States as soon as I stepped off the airplane, and set out to become a real American."

Born in Sydney, Australia on January 11, 1929, Taylor originally trained to become a painter, attending Sydney Technical and Fine Arts College, where he won several technical awards as a student engineer. Inspired by a

performance by Sir Laurence Olivier, who was touring Australia with his Old Vic repertory company, Taylor dabbled in amateur dramatics while working for a department store, creating and painting backdrops for fashion displays.

"There I was in a smock, surrounded by all the other window dressers," he remembers. "I used to listen to these awful Australian soap operas on the radio. I thought: 'I bet I

STEVE SWIRES, senior STARLOG correspondent, profiled Leonard Nimoy in issue #106.



ALL TIME MACHINE PHOTOS: COPYRIGHT 1960 MGM

The Eloi welcome the time traveler (Taylor) to their era with a feast of over-sized fruit, part of director Pal's *Time Machine* vision. "George Pal was a genius," says Taylor.

could do that.' So, I went in and auditioned for a soap opera, and was quite well received. I slowly gave up my painting and sketching, and started hanging around coffee shops and pubs pretending I was an actor. Before I knew it, I was."

The Tweed Suit

A busy radio player, Taylor made his domestic screen debut in *The Sturt Expedition*, and played supporting roles in two more



Sulky and innocent, Yvette Mimieux won the part of the Eloi *Time Machine* maiden Weena—even though, Taylor says, "she couldn't act at all."

Australian films, *King of the Coral Sea* and the Hollywood-financed *Long John Silver*. Anxious to expand his career, he willingly left his native country—and its limited acting opportunities—in 1954.

"Fortunately, *Long John Silver* gave me the break I needed," he explains. "I played the 85-year-old, blind Israel Hands, and I was a little *too* convincing. A message came through from the distributor, Warner Bros.: 'You must get that old man over to Hollywood. He'll be nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar.' Coincidentally, I had won the Rola Award for Best Radio Actor of the Year, and with it went a free trip to England and some money—of which I had very little at the time.

"Instead of going to England, I accepted Warner Bros.' invitation to come to Hollywood. The studio sent some people to meet the man at the airport, but when they saw this 25-year-old, broken-nosed ex-pug get off the plane, wearing a tight tweed suit, their faces fell. I told them: 'Well, screw you. I'm going to stick around, and see if I can *act* my way into this business.'"

Undaunted by this embarrassing case of mistaken identity, Taylor persevered until he made his American film debut with a bit part in 1955's *The Virgin Queen*. After small roles in *Hell on Frisco Bay* and *Giant*, he secured

his first significant supporting part in Edward (Queen of Outer Space) Bernds' grade B science fiction flick *World Without End* in 1956. Foreshadowing his fate in *The Time Machine*, Taylor portrayed an astronaut accidentally thrust into Earth's 26th Century, where he and the top-billed Hugh (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*) Marlowe aided the peaceful human survivors of nuclear holocaust in their war against killer mutants.

"I was so thrilled to have a sizable role in an American movie," Taylor says. "It gave me the confidence to know that I could work with established Hollywood professionals and come out maybe equally as well. I would have taken *any* part, as long as it was in an American movie. I thought being in an American movie was the pinnacle of acting success. I would have doubled as the *monster*, just to get into the picture." Eager to please, Taylor bravely battled a pathetically phony giant spider nesting in a cave. "It was a *ridiculous* looking thing," he laughs. "But I dove into it, and wrestled with it for all I was worth. I even made a major creative contribution to that scene. I ad libbed that I was *vomiting* when I came out of the cave, because it was such a horrific experience with that bunch of rubber and felt."

Screen tested by MGM for the role of boxer Rocky Graziano in *Somebody Up There*

Likes Me, Taylor lost out to Paul Newman, but was signed to a long-term studio contract. Groomed for stardom, he played increasingly important parts in such prestige productions as *The Catered Affair*, *Raintree County*, *Separate Tables*, *Ask Any Girl* and—ironically—*Step Down to Terror*, a bland remake of Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*.

"Being under contract to MGM was an immense opportunity for me," Taylor notes, "but I wasn't completely overwhelmed. I was still brat enough to stick up for my rights. Dore Schary was then head of the studio, and he wanted to change my name. He said: 'We've already got Robert Taylor and Elizabeth Taylor under contract. You *can't* be Rod Taylor.' I told him: 'OK in that case, I'll be Rod Schary.'"

As part of his contractual commitment with MGM, Taylor made a rare TV guest appearance on *The Twilight Zone* in 1959. In the frightening episode "And When the Sky Was Opened," written by Rod Serling from a short story by Richard Matheson (STARLOG #100), he portrayed one of three doomed astronauts who return from the first manned space flight to discover that their existence has been irrevocably extinguished.

"It was an excellent little episode," Taylor states. "It was beautifully written, and it flowed perfectly. I didn't get to meet Rod Serling while I was shooting it, though. I finally met him about 10 years later, when I was a fairly big movie star. He was a dear, sweet guy, and we became good social friends. Naturally, he liked to remind me that I had once done one of his TV shows."

The Time Crew

His servitude as a supporting actor completed, Taylor advanced to leading man status in George Pal's adaptation of H.G. Wells' cautionary science-fiction novel *The Time Machine* (STARLOG #10, #13). "Kids today remember me more from TV reruns of that movie than for anything else I've ever done," he marvels. "I expected it would be a tremendously impressive picture, but I never thought it would become a classic."

Although Pal had previously considered Paul (A Man for All Seasons) Scofield, Michael (The Day the Earth Stood Still) Rennie and James (20,000 Leagues Under the Sea) Mason for the demanding role of the intrepid time traveler, he ultimately preferred Taylor's more youthful appeal. For his part, the ambitious actor immediately warmed to the imaginative Hungarian-born filmmaker, whose distinguished track record included special effects Oscars for *Destination Moon*, *When Worlds Collide* and *War of the Worlds*.

"George Pal was a genius," Taylor declares. "He was a lovely, warm-hearted man. I thought of him as a funny little elf. He was surrounded by tiny puppets and toys, which he brought to life in his movies."

A childhood fan of H.G. Wells' work, Taylor was extremely enthusiastic about his first starring role. "George specifically asked MGM for me," he recounts. "We had lunch

several times and discussed the project. He had a marvelous talent for illustration, and I was fascinated with his pre-production drawings. He knew that I was an artist, so we got along beautifully. We worked in close partnership, and I even helped him find the female lead."

Selecting the right actress to play Taylor's love interest, the Eloi maiden Weena, proved to be particularly difficult for Pal. His choice of the inexperienced Yvette (*The Black Hole*) Mimieux was initially rejected by MGM.

"There was a lot of trouble casting Weena," Taylor affirms. "I suggested that I test with different girls. My first choice was Shirley (*The Sender*) Knight. Yvette and I have since become dear friends, but at that time, I thought she was kind of a strange little hippie child. I was afraid she would be hard to work with.

"I knew when I did her screen test that Yvette couldn't act at all. But she had a sulky quality which George believed was right. The innocence she projected as part of her character was actually innate in her own personality. I often wondered if she was even

listening to me when we shot our scenes.

"Eventually, though, Yvette became a very good actress. She was a delight to work with when we made *Dark of the Sun* in 1968. She is actually a much better actress than she is given credit for being."

Paying tribute to the visionary British writer, Pal subtly indicated that the time traveler was actually Wells himself by attaching an engraved plate on the time machine which read: "Manufactured by H. George Wells."

"I didn't attempt to think what Wells may have really been like," Taylor comments. "I played my version of what a magnificent guy he must have been. Why couldn't he have been strong, romantic and athletic, as well as a brilliant scientist? George was very happy with my conception. I think it was the ballsiness of Wells, as I played him, combined with his being highly intellectual, which sold the character."

Rallying the helpless Eloi in a war of liberation, Taylor performed all his own stunts in a strenuous fight scene with their misshapen Morlock oppressors. "Those poor bastards

TV tourists were treated to an omnibus of adventure guided by Greg Evigan, Taylor and Kirstie Alley on *Masquerade*.



MASQUERADE PHOTO: AB



It was Taylor's *Time Machine* mission to rescue the Eloi from their underground Morlock prison. The actor reveals that he never saw a completed script for George Pal's projected sequel.

had a *hell* of a time," he chuckles. "They were actually stuntmen wearing rubber Morlock suits, and they were sweating bullets. By the time we finished throwing punches, they were totally exhausted. But it wasn't as dangerous a scene as it looked. What appeared to be high cavern walls and ledges only rose about eight feet in the studio."

Surprised by the unexpected critical and commercial success of *The Time Machine*, Taylor and Pal intended to team up again. Although he turned down the lead role of another heroic scientist in Pal's *The Power* in 1967 (eventually played by George Hamilton), Taylor agreed to star in a subsequent fantasy project, whose title he has since forgotten. "It could have been a magnificent film," he believes. "It was slightly futuristic. I would have played a strange, extremely powerful Howard Hughes type of character in Las Vegas. Unfortunately, George could never get the picture off the ground."

Such disappointment and frustration continually plagued Pal during his final years, even sabotaging his long-planned *Time Machine* sequel, in which Taylor and Yvette Mimieux would have reprised their original roles. "George wasn't quite sure what the plot was going to be," Taylor reveals. "He had some marvelous ideas, but he kept changing the concept. He told me about five different storylines, but I never read any completely finalized script."

"I didn't see that much of George towards the end of his life, because I was working overseas most of the time, but I always had the feeling he was very sad. He had so much trouble getting his movies made, because he lived in another world. The studio executives treated him like a weird little fellow who

couldn't make money. He just didn't inspire confidence in the moguls, who were only interested in profit. I think George Pal must have died of a broken heart."

"The Birds" View

For his charismatic performance in *The Time Machine*, Taylor received a Golden Globe Award as the Outstanding New Male Personality of the Year. Following a brief sojourn into television, as star of the short-lived ABC series *Hong Kong*, he renegotiated his exclusive MGM contract, obtaining his release on the condition that he make one picture per year for the studio.

Once he was available to accept a wider range of roles, Taylor returned to the fantasy field, playing a resourceful lawyer confronting the menace of nature inexplicably gone mad in Alfred Hitchcock's terrifying *The Birds*. His rough-hewn Australian edges still apparent, he often found himself clashing with the master of the macabre.

"Hitch was a *pompous* old bastard," Taylor asserts. "He was such a pain in the ass because he was so dogmatic. I managed to get along with him, but we had a definite love/hate relationship. For example, at his very select birthday parties, the only actors he always invited were Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Shirley MacLaine and yours truly."

"I don't know which of my films Hitch may have seen, but he invited me to Universal to chat about *The Birds*. He told me he didn't want an elegant actor, like Cary Grant. He wanted someone with *balls*. I didn't think we got on too well at that meeting. He was a strange man to talk to, and he had very rigid ideas. But to my great surprise, he cast me two days later."

As shooting progressed, the friction be-

tween actor and director intensified, especially in one memorable incident. "We were rehearsing a scene between me and Jessica Tandy, who was playing my mother," Taylor recalls. "I was helping Jessica wash the dishes and put the food away. As we rehearsed, reporters from *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life* were on the set watching us."

"Every time I opened the refrigerator door, I noticed the light inside didn't go on. Suddenly, Hitch announced: 'We shall now try a take.' I turned to the cameraman, Bobby Burks, and said: 'Don't forget the practical in the refrigerator. When I open the door, the light should go on.' Hitch overheard me, and in front of all the press, he said: 'We will now take a two hour lunch break, while Mr. Taylor—our *technical advisor*—tells us how to make our movie.' Then, the son of a bitch went off to eat."

"At the day's end, Hitch sent his secretary to invite me to have cocktails with him and the press. I said: 'Tell Mr. Hitchcock: Screw you! *No!*' She gave him the message, and came back and said: 'Please, you *must* go.' I finally agreed, and went up to his suite of offices. There he was, surrounded by the press, with the chosen seat next to him on the sofa left empty. As I walked in, Hitch said: 'Here is the one I love—my *star*.'"

Striving to achieve the maximum in suspense, Hitchcock frequently put his cast in actual peril, surrounding them with thousands of potentially lethal live birds. "Hitch wanted what he wanted, and he would get it any way he could," Taylor remarks. "Personally, it didn't really bother me. I even volunteered to do the shots of me reaching to close the shutter while the seagulls bit my arm. I took a tetanus shot, and let the seagulls actually bite me, because that was the

best way to do the scene.

"But poor Tippi Hedren had a nervous breakdown doing the scene in which she was attacked by birds in the attic. They put her in a corner, and kept throwing so many live birds at her that she went apeshit. And it was no picnic for any of us shooting the scene with the bullfinches flying down out of the chimney. There were more than 1,000 real bullfinches, and they were scared. Do you know what 1,000 bullfinches do when they're scared? They *crapped* all over us.

"I must have been hit on by every seagull in Northern California. For the final scene, in which we slowly drove away through a mass of birds, some of them were dummies, but most of them were live tranquilized seagulls. There was one raven with them named Archie, whom I'll never forget. Every morning when I first came on the set, that damn bird flew down from I don't know where, bit me and took off again. He must have had a taste for Australian flesh. I promised myself I was going to kill that son of a bitch when we finished the picture if it took me the rest of my life."

The Spy Who

Relishing the technical challenge of coping with the dictatorial director, Taylor nevertheless considers *The Birds* to be one of Hitchcock's lesser achievements. "The movie's first half is almost entirely expository, and I thought that was very bad," he maintains. "I don't know why Hitch spent so much time setting up character relationships that went nowhere. I found the dialogue to be stilted and dull. I didn't think the characters were attractive or interesting people. I especially hated *my* character—a square, repressed idiot who would never have attracted a sophisticated woman like Tippi Hedren. I did everything I could to make him appealing, but it was very difficult."

Annoyingly ambiguous and deliberately unresolved, *The Birds* has long been the subject of fierce debate among film scholars. Many critics interpret the picture as an elaborate ecological allegory, about self-absorbed people causing their own destruction through their lack of respect for the universe's natural order. Unimpressed by such analysis, Taylor stubbornly rejects any notion of some symbolic meaning.

"I don't believe in over-intellectualizing a film," he insists. "I don't think Hitch had any particular theme in mind beyond the actual storyline. The reason the characters were so unpleasant was that he simply wasn't interested in nice people. Forget about searching for hidden significance. *The Birds* is purely a look at dear old Hitch's feelings about humanity."

Firmly entrenched in the heroic mold, Taylor went on to star in such popular adventure fare as *A Gathering of Eagles*, *Fate is the Hunter*, *36 Hours*, *The Hell With Heroes* and *Trader Horn*.

Honored by American film buyers as one of the top five action stars of 1968, he was awarded their Exhibitor Laurel. That recognition did little, however, to dispel his

disappointment at having turned down a chance to play the '60s' premier heroic figure.

"Producer Cubby Broccoli [STARLOG #99] wanted me to screen test for James Bond when he was preparing *Dr. No* in 1961," Taylor discloses. "I refused because I thought it was beneath me. I didn't think Bond would be successful in the movies. That was one of the greatest mistakes of my career! Every time a new Bond picture became a smash hit, I tore out my hair. Cubby and I have laughed about it ever since."

Hoping to identify himself with another popular fictional character, Taylor portrayed John D. MacDonald's freelance knight in slightly tarnished armor Travis McGee in the 1970 *Darker Than Amber*. Insufficient financing and spotty distribution torpedoed plans for several sequels. While the movie lacked the distinctive world-weary ambience of MacDonald's prose, it offered Taylor the opportunity to perform one of the bloodiest fight scenes in screen history, opposite veteran heavy William (Red Dawn) Smith.

"The Hollywood Stuntman's Association made me an honorary member for that fight," he relates. "Bill Smith, who is a dear friend of mine, suddenly forgot the fight routine, the way a dancer might forget his choreography. He belted me in the nose, and my blood splattered everywhere. I wiped my face and shouted: 'Don't stop the camera. Keep rolling.' From that point on, the rest of the fight was ad libbed. I got Bill in a corner, and smashed him with a breakaway lamp. He thought I had gone crazy, and he hit me with a real lamp. So, some of the blood was old Rod's—it wasn't all ketchup. But we got some great footage."

Displaced by one of Hollywood's periodic desperate quests for a youth audience, Taylor retreated to television for steady employment in the 1970s, headlining the ill-fated series *Bearcats* for CBS, *The Oregon Trail* for NBC, and—two seasons ago—*Masquerade* for ABC, as well as the TV movies *Family Flight*, *Cry of the Innocent*, and a busted pilot based on the Burt Reynolds film *Shamus*. Overexposed on the small screen, he traveled to Europe and back to Australia to star in such little-seen features as *Hell River*, *The Picture Show Man*, *Jamaican Gold* and *A Time to Die*.

According to Taylor, this scene from *The Birds* was "no picnic"—especially for the actors laid waste by 1,000 frightened bullfinches.



THE BIRDS PHOTO: COPYRIGHT 1963 UNIVERSAL PICTURES



DARKER THAN AMBER PHOTO: COPYRIGHT 1970 ALLIED ARTISTS

Travis McGee himself became bloodied and *Darker Than Amber* when the film's planned fight scene became an ad-libbed free-for-all between Taylor and William Smith.

"I don't get offered major studio films any more," Taylor laments. "Nowadays, they want Sylvester Stallone or Chuck Norris. Frankly, I don't blame them. I'm a little too old for all that macho bullshit. I would feel embarrassed doing a love scene with a much younger actress. If I went barechested on camera at my age, people would puke."

Remaining active, he recently completed two European adventure films, *Marbella* and *The Face*, both destined for inevitable home video release, and replaced Richard (The Grey Fox) Farnsworth as a time traveling cowboy in Universal TV's pilot *The Outlaws*. As he awaits the fate of his latest TV venture, durable hero Rod Taylor looks back with fondness and pride at his twin journeys into classic science-fiction cinema, aboard *The Time Machine* and beneath *The Birds*.

"When people use the word 'classic' to describe two of my movies, it really makes me feel that my career has been worthwhile," he reflects. "It's wonderful to know that my work has touched so many people. The trip over from Australia in 1954 was definitely worth it. But I wonder—whatever became of that damn tweed suit?"