

**TALKING CANDIDLY
OUT HIS HOLLYWOOD
EXPERIENCES AND
HIS FAVOURITE
LEADING LADIES**

**ROD TAYLOR
AUSTRALIAN STAR OF 'THE BIRDS'
AT HOME WITH WIFE CAROL**

'I turned up at the studio in my tight Australian suit with a broken nose. I was the first of the uglies to break through'



Rod Taylor has often been described as the first Australian superstar, the Mel Gibson of the Sixties. He's acted with some of the world's most beautiful and talented leading ladies, including Jane Fonda, Elizabeth Taylor, Doris Day and Maggie Smith – though perhaps he's best known for his role opposite Tippi Hedren in the 1963 Hitchcock classic *The Birds*.

Rod arrived in Hollywood in 1954. He was already established as Australia's most popular actor and soon made his name in America, winning a contract with MGM. Described as "the young Spencer Tracy", he starred in films such as *The Time Machine*, *The VIPs* and *The Glass Bottom Boat*. Hollywood's *Variety* magazine called him "a beefy, breezy action hero". He's never been short of work, with numerous film and television roles, including a part in the series *Falcon Crest*.

Still handsome and brawny, though not as slim as he used to be, Rod is charming, with a roaring laugh and self-deprecating wit. We met the 68-year-old actor relaxing at home in his colonial-style mansion in Beverly Hills, drinking Fosters lager, with his beautiful wife, artist Carol Kikumura, 55.

The couple met in 1961 when Rod was at the height of his fame and Carol was a teenage art student in Los Angeles, earning some extra money as an extra in Rod's TV series *Hong Kong*. After a brief romance, the relationship came to a dramatic halt when Carol's mother banned her from seeing the actor, who was 13 years older than her. They split up reluctantly and Rod went on to marry model Mary Hilem. They had one child, Felicia, now a TV presenter in New York, but the marriage ended in an acrimonious divorce in 1968.

When Carol called Rod almost 20 years later, the romance was immediately rekindled. They married in 1981 and it's clear the couple are still very much in love. When Rod isn't filming, they relax at home by the pool or play golf. Both are keen gardeners and frequently host elegant dinner parties for friends. Weekends are often spent at their second home in Santa Barbara, though recently Rod has been in Australia shooting the movie *Welcome To Woop Woop*.

Rod and Carol are both accomplished artists. Their paintings and ceramics decorate the house, giving it a warm and distinctive style. Rod, also a keen carpenter, has made a lot of the furniture, including the whimsical kitchen table carved with a message that seems to sum up the actor's love of life and hospitality: *Chicken, mash, tatties and pease and goode wines our tummies to please*. The couple talked to HELLO! about their life in LA.

Carol, you were so young when you first met Rod. Were you always in love with him?

"He made a lasting impression! I adored him, but we had to conduct our relationship in secret because my family hated Rod. We had to split up and I went my own way as an artist and dancer. Then, years later, I saw him on TV and called him at the studio."

R: "She told me I'd got fat and I told her to get her ass over to my house. We started up again and have been together ever since."

Did you decide not to have children together?

C: "No, it just never happened for us. But Rod and I have Katie, our dog, whom we adore, and we're lucky because we really like each other's company. Also, Rod's daughter lives in New York and we get on well."

R: "I'm close to Felicia now, but my ex-wife and I had a bitter divorce and I wasn't allowed to see my daughter until she was 16. Suddenly at school everyone told her that Daddy was really cool and she got in touch! She's a financial journalist now. I don't know where she got her brains."

Rod, how do you feel about actors earning millions for one movie?

"They earn too much. You don't need that much money and it doesn't make you happier – in fact, most of those high-paid actors look miserable. I have little patience with stars who demand the earth for their services. How could you ever spend that much?"

with wife Carol and dog Katie (above right) at their colonial-style Beverly Hills home. The couple first in 1961 but, after a brief romance, were apart for almost 20 years. They share a love of art – and the things on the stairs are by Rod. The actor says he never looks at his early movies because they "remind me that I was fairly presentable and now I'm just an old codger"

When I was a star, I made £300,000 a picture, which was an enormous amount, and you can have a wonderful life with that kind of money. But \$20 million salaries inhibit creativity."

Rod, you've always been creative – you were once an artist. How did you get into acting?

"I went to art college in Australia, but I wasn't really the right type. I should've been pale and aesthetic. I didn't wear my hair the right way and I was too boisterous. But I was quite a good artist and had my own pottery business to pay my way through college. While making my pots I used to listen to the radio soaps and one day I thought, 'I can do that'. So I auditioned and became the biggest radio star in Australia."

What brought you to Hollywood?

R: "I became famous in Australia doing movies, won an award as Actor Of The Year and came to Hollywood for a screen test in 1954. When I hopped off the plane, I think they were expecting a cross between Rock Hudson and Marlon Brando. There I was in my tight Australian suit with a broken nose and they took one look and said, 'What's this?' I was the first of the uglies to break through."

You were a real heartthrob. What was it like being a sex symbol in those days?

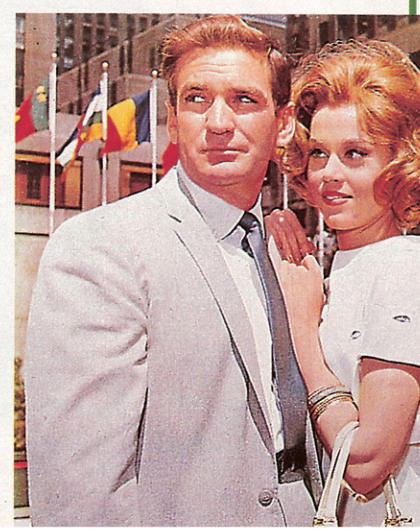
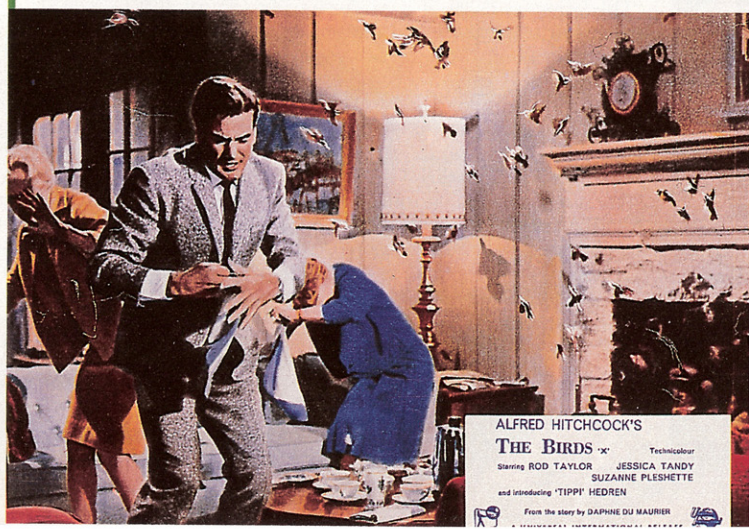
"Me a sex symbol! You're out of your mind! I was the punk from Down Under. But it's true I worked with some truly lovely girls and I fell in love with all of them. They obviously thought I looked okay."

You signed a contract with MGM.

"The first day they put me on contract, I walked through the big arches as Clark Gable was leaving the place. He was walking out with armfuls of stuff from his dressing room. It was strange and quite sad. I walked in, Gable walked out."

"I did movies right away and my breakthrough film, when I was young and gorgeous, was *The Time Machine* with the beautiful Yvette Mimieux. That movie was made for under half a million pounds, nobody thought it would be anything and it became a cult classic. ▶

Rod as a "gorgeous young boy" in *The Birds* (below left) and *Sunday In New York* with Jane Fonda. Described as a beefy, breezy action hero, he's worked with some of Hollywood's leading ladies – but he won't say which of them he had affairs with!



"Then old Hitchcock called me to do *The Birds*, which was incredible. They'd feed the seagulls whisky and wheat – the only reason those birds stayed still was because they were drunk! Another trick was to put raw meat in the lens so the huge ravens would swoop into the camera. They couldn't get away with it now."

Did you like the old system, when actors were on contract to a studio?

"Yes. They nurtured you, groomed you. It was a wonderful start because you were able to polish your craft in a way they don't do these days. And it was such fun, having lunch with all those legends – Liz, Monty Clift, Bette Davis, Fred Astaire. It was like a family. Actually, it was also quite embarrassing because the studio tended to typecast you and my role was as the active, macho, leading man. But I wasn't really big enough to play that kind of guy. I don't have a clue why they picked me when there were guys like John Wayne around."

Which of your leading ladies were you particularly close to?

"Maggie Smith is the best actress in the world. Doris Day was great – bubbly, frothy and immensely talented. Jane Fonda was wonderful, adorable – we were together in *Sunday In New York*. That was before she got political. And Tippi Hedren was a sweetheart. I'm not telling you who I had affairs with, though! Let's just say I was a very friendly fellow."

Who was your favourite actress?

"This is my favourite, the love of my life – Carol. But my favourite actress would have to be Liz Taylor. We were very close. We starred together in *Raintree County* in 1957 when I was the new kid on the block and she was very sweet to me. Then there was *The Birds* in 1963 – a great movie. We're still great pals and see each other for dinner."

What was it like making *The VIPs*?

"It was terrific fun, with plenty of electricity with Liz and Richard Burton. We made it just before *Cleopatra* was released, so it cashed in on all the publicity about Liz and Richard's romance. It's one of the few times I've played an Aussie in Hollywood and I wrote a lot of the dialogue. We play these big egos desperate to get out of Britain, trapped at the airport. Darling Maggie Smith played my secretary, madly in love with me."

"Orson Welles was terrifying, but he liked me

because, being so brash and Australian, I talked back to him. Orson told me, 'I've tried everything in the world sexually and philosophically, so I've decided all that is left is gluttony.' He ate huge meals all day long. And I couldn't stop laughing whenever I saw Margaret Rutherford. She was so funny. She'd say, 'What are you laughing at, darling boy?'"

Do you get nostalgic for the past and wish you were still on the Hollywood 'A' list?

"Never. I never look back at the movies because it reminds me I was fairly presentable in those days and now I'm an old codger. I'm just happy I'm working. The wonderful thing is, now I get roles where I can play the ugly old dinosaur that I am."

What's your movie *Welcome To Woop Woop* about?

"Dreadful title, isn't it? It's an outrageous Australian comedy about an American boy who picks up a hitchhiker, a beautiful girl who drugs him and takes him home to this dreadful town which is ruled with a rod of iron by her dad. I play the daddy in this terrible town called Woop Woop. We shot it in Australia and Carol came with me. We're never apart for long, because we adore each other."

You both look healthy. Are you careful about what you eat?

"I'm getting so old that I have to be careful these days, but I do love eating. If you don't enjoy yourself, what's the point in living? Carol's a dancer, so we do a little exercise programme every morning with stretching and yoga. Then we have fruit and a little toast. We used to eat huge cooked breakfasts, but not any more. I still like my Sunday joint, though."

"Carol and I both love cooking. I make a fantastic salmon en croute – okay, I buy the puff pastry, but it's still pretty good. And we make an amazing ratatouille with vegetables and herbs from our garden. We keep a modest wine cellar and, of course, we like Aussie lager."

Why do you think your relationship with Carol has lasted so long?

"I told you, I used to be very friendly when I was a gorgeous young boy! Seriously, we liked each other from the start. We have the same interests, we're both artists. And she puts up with me!"