

The Hollywood hyphenate

HE has now reached the ranks of what is known as a Hollywood hyphenate. It took him 12 years to get there, but to become an H-H is just about as high as you can get in an industry that offers all kinds of rewards for its most talented and hard-working people.

A Hollywood-hyphenate is a writer-producer, writer-director, a producer-director, an actor-director or an actor-producer.

Sydney-born 36-year-old Rod Taylor, after appearing in 23 motion pictures, as star or co-star of half of them, is now an actor-producer with a two-million-dollar feature film on his hands, with all the multiple problems that the dual role piles up.

But for the ebullient Rod Taylor, all the sweat and worry of the past 22 months that it has taken him to put this package (as they call it) together, has been worth it.

The production, called "Chuka," is well on the way. Producer Taylor for weeks was confined to a suite of offices at Paramount Studios in Hollywood, with his assistant-producer and secretaries, assembling cast, arguing with agents, manipula-

ting budget and handling the thousand and one details that must be attended to before a set is built or a foot of film exposed.

Evenings and weekends he spent writing and rewriting the script of the novel by Richard Jessup, a western story variation of the "Beau Geste" theme. It is set in the American west after the Civil War and is the story of a bunch of travellers off a stage coach facing overwhelming terror from a horde of savage Indians. Now producer Taylor has moved from his second-storey offices at the studio to the sound stage and shed his business suit for the tasseled leather jacket, torn shirt and high,

black boots of the title character, a Mexican gunfighter, allowed his whiskers to grow and darkened his tan features. His office and dressing-room is a large and luxurious trailer parked right across the studio alley from the sound stage. Most of the picture is being shot there.

For three weeks since he returned from a quick trip to the Middle West to promote his made-in-Europe feature, "The Liquidators"—the release

was held up due to legal complications—he has been incommunicado to any interviewers, and understandably so. And he remained so for the first week of actual filming.

The day I saw Rod Taylor the production was swinging. An ambition that he had nurtured for years had come about. He was producing and starring in his own creation.

He sat, relaxed, in his trailer and talked with me for an hour.

What did he recall of his early days in Sydney before ever he began to nurture the idea of becoming an actor? What about his schooling at Parramatta High School, for instance?

"For God's sake," answered Rod, removing his greasy, flat, brown hat of his role, and scratching his head. "That's going back a bit, friend. Wait a minute, give me time to think."

"Well, there was one master, I remember, called Nicholson. He taught me how to fail at maths and be good at track. Maybe he felt I'd turn into the school's star athlete or something. I had a couple of good buddies there. One was Mick Mathers, who later be-

from GUY
AUSTIN
in Hollywood

came a reporter on 'The Sun,' and Don Westley.

"I don't quite know what he went on in the world to do. As for me, even then I knew inside of me that I really wanted to get into something that had connection with the theatre.

"I seemed to have some talent for drawing and painting. I felt I might get into the theatre by becoming a scenic designer. So I went on to East Sydney Technical and Fine Arts College.

"I was still in college when I saw Sir Laurence Olivier and the Old Vic company in 'Richard III.' That decided me to become an actor. But it also presented a bit of a problem. I didn't know anything about acting. I had to earn some money to pay for tuition at the Independent Theatre, where I planned to study.

"So I faked my age and got a job with Mark Foy's department store, designing and painting backdrops for window displays and fashion shows.

"What age was I? You really want to know things." (He grinned). "I'll have to ask my old man."

LOW PAY

He got up, went to the phone on the small bar in the trailer, and dialled. While waiting for the number to answer, he said, "My dad's staying with us. Been here weeks. Doesn't want to go home. He comes on the set a couple of times a week, and ogles all the young girls around the lot. Hello."

Taylor sen. must have answered the ring.

"Hi, you old bastard! What are you doing? The plumber hasn't been yet? Well, call him, and tell him to bloody well get over right away. One thing, do you remember how old I was when I got that job at Mark Foy's? . . . Seventeen? I thought so. O.K. Bye father dear."

Our hyphenate sat down again.

"Seventeen," he said. "I thought so. No, I don't remember what they paid me. Precious little. About four quid a week, I think it was. So I worked at Mark Foy's during the day and studied drama at night. I was there eighteen months, I believe. Can't



Gunfighter Rod Taylor, on the lookout for varmints, is both actor and producer of "Chuka," his own two-million-dollar production for Paramount Pictures.



Family group: on a visit to the set in Hollywood, William Taylor and his wife, of Sydney, are photographed with son Rod and his wife Mary.

quite remember. I also scrubbed floors of an office building one time to earn a bit for tuition.

"After about a year or a bit more of study, I managed to get into radio, which was booming in Australia. There wasn't any television there in those days. I really got breaks on radio. I did about twenty different daytime shows a week, hopping from studio to studio playing every imaginable character in soap operas and stuff.

"But what I really wanted by then was the stage. And being a determined bloke, even then, I got it—the Mercury Theatre, which was very well-known in Sydney. My first big part was that of John Tarleton in Shaw's "Misalliance," in which it seems I did rather well. Among some of the young actors at the Mercury with whom I got very friendly were John Meillon, Ken Wayne and Charles Tingwell.

"Everything seemed to break at once for me around that time. Hollywood writer and producer Martin Rackin, with director Bryon Haskin, came to Australia to film 'Long John Silver,' with the late dear Robert Newton.

"I had just won the Rola award as best radio actor of the year, which in

those days of radio was a very coveted honour. Marty saw me acting in 'Misalliance' at the Mercury Theatre. He had also heard me on radio. He asked me if I would play the part in 'Long John Silver' of Israel Hans, a mad, blind old man. So they fitted me out with white contact-lenses, and I did it.

"Marty Rackin seemed to like me and was very enthusiastic about me. He had apparently sent cables to a number of leading agents and studio heads about me.

SURFER

"The Rola award carried a £500 grant for a trip to England, so anyway I was determined to make that. But I didn't then have any intention of leaving Australia for good. I was an only child and my mother and dad had always been wonderful to me.

"I think mum, particularly, wanted me to stay with an art career. Then, I lived the life in Sydney. I loved the place. After all, I'd spent 24 years of my life there, never been away from home, and had had what success I had had there, too. For four years I had been with the Mona Vale Surf

Lifesaving Club. I had joined when I was sixteen, was made captain at seventeen, and became stroke of the boat crew.

"I had always been an athlete; done pretty well as an amateur middle-weight boxer.

"After I had finally become established here in Hollywood the studios wrote up those marvellous biographies that they send out wholesale to the Press. Everything you've done (and quite a bit you haven't done) is always blown up by the publicity people out of all proportion to the truth.

"For instance, in the very first biog. put out about me, and in every one of them since, I have always been described as 'the undefeated middle-weight boxing champion of Australia.' Brother, half a dozen times since, when I've been in a bar, especially in some small town where we've been on location and done the rounds of the dives at night, some bloozie has come up to me, dancing on his toes with his fists waving, and hiccupped, 'So you're the great boxing champ, eh? Well, put 'em up and show me.' I've always managed to crawl out of that situation without making the papers."

CAREER CLASH

When Rod had said that he had never left home, hadn't he had a first marriage in Sydney?

"Well, yes," he said. "I meant I had never left home, meaning Sydney. I was married at a tender age during my early stage and radio struggles. She was a beautiful girl, a top model I met when I was working at Mark Foy's.

"We were both very young and the rock we foundered on was strictly a career clash. It didn't last long. After all, marriage takes complete co-operation at all times, and when you get two egos each fighting an outside war there's bound to be trouble. Someone has to give. If you go back to the basis of human society, the woman's place is in the home. However clever she is, the woman's place is in the home.

"But that's all dead and done with. My former young wife is now very happily married to a barrister and they have two children. We had no children so divorce was no hardship to either of us.

"But getting back to the immediate time that I won the Rola award, I was all set to go to England, never thinking Marty Rackin's promotion of me to the Hollywood big-shots would come to anything. However, I got a cable from the then world-wide, powerful Hollywood talent agency, M.C.A., to stop off in Los Angeles on my way to England and see them. Two of their male staff, wearing the then uniform of M.C.A.—dark suit, socks, black shoes, white shirt with dark tie and looking like undertakers—met me at the airport, said 'How do you do? Mr Taylor,' looked me over, looked at each other, said, 'Come in and see us sometime during your stay here'—and that was that.

"What happened to me during the next nine months shouldn't have happened to a dog. My first paid job—after living in a shack at Malibu Beach and subsisting mostly off fish I caught from the pier—was on my old medium, with the Lux Radio Theatre. My first supporting role was with Bette Davis in 'The Virgin Queen.'

"But I seem to have made it, after

all. It was that brush-off by M.C.A. at the airport that made me determined that I'd stay here and show them. I know I did."

But since Rod started to hit it big, continued going up and up and up, life has certainly made up to him for the lean years. He has rollicked through them having himself one hell of a time, to use his own words. He has travelled in and made pictures and TV in Italy, France, Germany, Denmark, Japan, China, England. And along the way he has had quite a few romances with beautiful actresses.

One of them was the beautiful oriental France Nuyen, the star of both stage and screen versions of "South Pacific," and who lost out for the lead of "The World of Susie Wong" due to a number of personal troubles. This idyll lasted for a long while, subject to innumerable gossip-column items predicting marriage, which, of course, never came off.

Then there was another Chinese girl, Mai Tai Sing, whom Rod met in San Francisco where she delicately waited on customers in a cocktail lounge.

Rod's enormously successful TV series "Hong Kong" was just coming up. Said he at the time, "I wanted that dignity on 'Hong Kong.' She is gentle, cultured, she has the oriental charm that I admire so much."

But nothing came of that one, either.

Five years later it was voluptuous Anita Ekberg. They first met at a party given by Tony Curtis and his then wife, Janet Leigh. They appeared to cotton to each other right away, but didn't meet again until some months later, in Rome. Rod was in Italy to star in the title role of "Sir Francis Drake." Much of the film was made at a picturesque little town on the coast called Marina Di Maratae. Anita, on a friend's yacht, visited the port and the rumours, started in Rome, flew far and wide. But this one went on the ice too, when Rod returned to the U.S.

WEDDING

But in late 1960, Rod Taylor met 25-year-old, tall, slim, blonde model, Mary Hilem, at a party hosted by actor Kirk Douglas and his wife Anne. And that was the beginning of the end of his Hollywood bachelor days. They were wed June 1, 1963, in the Westwood Methodist Community Church in a typical Hollywood marriage ceremony attended by screen personalities.

The marriage got off to a shaky start, with two separations. But now all seems blythe and gay in the huge Taylor home in Beverly Hills. They now have a daughter, Felicia Rodrica, born August 28, 1964.

Does Rod have any plans to make a film in Australia?

"Yes, indeed," he answered. "When I can get around to it. J. Arthur Rank bought the rights to an Australian novel 'Last Bus to Banjo Creek' for me. He has had a script written by Lord (Ted) Willis, who is quite a writer. But I have so many commitments ahead of me I don't know when I shall be able to do it."