

# The many facets of ROUGH DIAMOND ROD

**H**IS first words were: "Don't Taylor me or I'll knock you on your ass." Rod Taylor had announced his arrival on the set of *The Picture Show Man* movie, grouped around a bush racecourse at Somerton in northern New South Wales.

The ominous opener, emphasised with a clenched fist, was a retort to one of the production girls who had dared greet him with a friendly, "Hello, Taylor."

It could have been a disconcerting introduction to the Australian actor who rejoices in the reputation as one of Hollywood's most notorious hell-raisers.

So this was the man whose education was reckoned not to be the three Rs, but the three Bs — broads, booze and brawling. But you start to wonder when his frown gives way to a broad grin and he hugs the saucy girl. Ah, he was joking.

Holding court later in his caravan, he launched into a head-long assault on his much-touted image. "I have been hurt by my stupid exterior," he said. "People think of me as a hard-nosed, vulgar oaf. It hides a lot of softness and shyness."

Bare-chested, muscular and sporting a dinky-di Aussie hat, Taylor sat sipping a can of beer (no guzzling as the legend would have it) while fellow actors strolled in and out for a drink, obviously at his open invitation.

Alongside him in *The Picture Show Man* are three actors with whom he worked in radio plays more than 20 years ago — John Meillon, John Ewart and Don Crosby. In fact, Crosby was producer of the radio play competition won by Taylor which first took him to Hollywood in 1954.

Recalling their reunion, he said: "I was crying — it was an emotional time."

Did that suggest he was a sentimentalist? His friend and business partner, Terry Wilson, chipped in with a definite "yes." Taylor: "Too much so. I have

On location in Australia for *The Picture Show Man*, Rod Taylor lets down his hair and his legend of being a hell-raiser. DON GROVES reports.

been wounded a few times. I have enough scars. I think I would do a lot more good if I became hard-nosed but it makes me happy that I'm not. I could not live with myself as a hard-nosed bleep (one of his vocabulary of earthy expressions). I am not too ashamed of myself.

"This big cowboy here (indicating partner Wilson) goes to mass every Sunday morning, with or without a hangover. I go to my own mass — it could

clashed with Richard Harris. "I love him," is Taylor's answer. "It was just hard to get through the weekend with him" he said, alluding to their respective capacities for alcohol.

Was his reputation as a hell-raiser justified? "I have known how to raise a little," he conceded. Did that mean that, at the age of 46, he was softening? "For health reasons," he grinned.

The press have focused on the stormier aspects of his life



RADIO DAYS . . . Rod (then Rodney) Taylor in the ABC serial *Blue Hills*, in 1954, with actress George Sterling.

be in the house or out in the garden:

"He goes to his god who's in a church; I have a silent chat with the god inside me that gives me love of life."

Gentle words indeed for an alleged hell-raiser. But, then came a flash of fervent spirit when he added: "I say sorry, or goddamn it, next week I'll get that bleep!"

According to various Hollywood reports, Taylor can be hard to get on with on the set. It's said he had a brush with Rod Steiger, his co-star in *The Heroes*. "That's bull," he said by way of dismissal.

Making *The Deadly Trackers*, he was supposed to have

and times, but he is not bitter: "It's very easy for me to pick on someone who is as vulgar as I am. And I have been in a few scrapes . . ."

There was no such drama, however, on the set of *The Picture Show Man*. John Power, directing his first cinema-release feature film, admitted he had been a little apprehensive about working with a man of Taylor's international success.

"But," said Power, "he has been an angel to deal with. He's very sensitive to the feelings and moods of the other actors and their status; no one upstages anybody else."

"He's terribly good humoured. The other day he tried to put a

horse that was very toey after running in a marathon race. As he was getting off he slipped and fell on his tail. He thought it was very funny; he likes poking fun at his own he-man image."

The film, set in the 1920s and '30s, features John Meillon as Pop, proprietor of Pym's Pictures on Tour. Taylor is Palmer, a rival showman on Pop's picture show circuit, with whom he clashes.

Power said Palmer is the heavy, but he's not painted all black: "He's smart, he's aggressive, and he has cool Yankee charm; you are not quite sure about the menace beneath the smile."

Writer-producer Joan Long, who also has the screenplay for *Caddie* to her credit, frankly did not expect Taylor to agree to make the movie. When she first teleaxed the offer to him she made it clear the money involved would not be what he was used to. He replied that he would read the script without committing himself.

A few days after the script was dispatched Mrs Long was in Grafton, surveying locations, when she received a message to call Taylor collect. She did, and she said he was so excited he spoke for 45 minutes.

She found Taylor "terribly nice, great hearted. He is a mixture, an extrovert and wisecracker, and like a lot of actors he has insecurities. But it does not get him down or affect his professionalism; it's an endearing sort of quality."

Taylor is quick to point out that Meillon, not he, is the star of the picture. Taylor, however, is getting top billing. He said: "John was wonderfully hospitable in allowing me to take top billing because that's necessary for my work overseas. I am basically doing a kind of guest shot, as I'm happy to help."

Meillon recalled that he was assistant radio manager, age 16, for the Lintas agency, when Taylor, four years his senior, came in to see about a part.

He got the job, and the two became good mates. Meillon said: "I packed his bags and put him on the plane to Hollywood."



ROD TAYLOR on the set of *The Picture Show Man* ... with long-time friend John Meillon.

He was always the really good-looking guy, the one everyone else was jealous of because he had a kind of early Clark Gable look."

Meillon said he never doubted Taylor would be a star. It's apt that Meillon, no minor success himself, should make his 27th film playing opposite his longtime friend and colleague.

Taylor's partner, Terry Wilson, can act a bit himself. In the role of Bill Hawks he was a regular in 300 episodes of the *Wagon Train* series. Ironically, that show in the U.S. was pitted against Hong Kong, the 1960-61 series which first gave international recognition to the actor from Lidcombe, a Sydney western suburb.

Taylor said Hong Kong also established him as one of the first anti-heroes. As newsman Glenn Evans, he made sure he had a good fight scene in each episode. He also made sure he did not always win. He said: "That created the anti-hero and was extremely successful. There is big talk in the States about remaking it in colour with the same cast."

Bearcats, another series he made in 1973, was less successful. He and Dennis Cole were soldiers of fortune in the

U.S. desert country at the turn of the century.

He said: "It was an excellent format but it was too expensive. They (the studio) got in over their heads in terms of production costs and couldn't handle it, and I don't blame them. And I don't think the chemistry was right — the other character should have been an older, fun-loving type."

Taylor has appeared in more than 40 movies, he's not sure of the exact number — "I'd have to count them." But he's fairly certain *The Picture Show Man* marks his 35th as a principal, or star.

Ask him the picture he likes best and he nominates *Young Cassidy*, which co-starred him with Maggie Smith and Julie Christie.

HE said it was a delight to make, and he got to work with Sir Michael Redgrave, Dame Edith Evans, and Flora Robson. It was his favourite, but not the most successful, and it came after he rejected an offer to play the title role in the epic *Dr Zhivago* (which Omar Sharif accepted). He's still sorry about that.

"Another of my brilliant *bleeping* decisions," he termed it. "I thought I was the biggest thing to hit the screen. I was an

egotistical bleep. The studio (MGM) asked me to talk to David Lean about the picture. I told them I wanted to read the script first and they said there wasn't one yet. I thought, 'Such impertinence!' and didn't go down. I have regretted it ever since; Lean is my idol."

If *Young Cassidy* were his best effort, what would he count as his worst? "It made a lot of money but personally I didn't like *Hotel*. I was so restricted I could not be my usual gregarious self; I was so stiff I hated myself in that."

Taylor is plainly not one to boast about the merits of every picture he's made. In Paris recently he was in *Bigamy* — he has not seen it, but hears it's "a dog."

He said: "Someone told them I could speak perfect French. Well, I'm great in a restaurant but this had two versions — English and French — and I was a Kissinger in the United Nations with speeches that long" (he indicated a Kissinger-length speech).

Asked to rate some of his leading ladies, he gave some blunt appraisals. On Doris Day: "One of the best pros I ever worked with, a most under-rated acting talent."

Merle Oberon: "We were

kind of friends when I first arrived in Hollywood. She was under the impression that I was the re-incarnation of a former love."

Maggie Smith: "I fell in love with her and ruined my marriage" (Taylor and second wife, model Mary Hilem, were divorced in 1969; they have a 13-year-old daughter, Felicia, of whom he later spoke with affection).

Jane Fonda: "I was in love with her, too. And I was responsible for getting her back with old Hank (father Henry Fonda). She was into a hippie trip at the time and I told her to take off that make-up and go, talk to her father. She blossomed like a rose; she was delightful."

Elizabeth Taylor: "She is my dear love. We kid each other constantly about the fact we don't get in the sack." As much as he admires Miss Taylor, he is critical of her and a number of other stars for making what he feels are excessive salary demands.

"I don't agree with some of my old buddies who demand a million dollars a picture," he said. "How do you make your profit? They are just screwing up the rest of the industry. Stars are only necessary pieces in a picture; no one should hold up profit."

His peak fee for a movie, he said, was \$450,000, but he preferred to keep the salary reasonably low and take a percentage of the profits.

One would not presume to ask how much he would yield from *The Picture Show Man*, but he did allow that he was taking "what the U.S. would call peanuts, because I am sincere in wanting to help."

Those peanuts will be liberally salted when he goes to Queensland to record a TV commercial for a mining company. That would be worth, he said, \$160,000.

The principal lady in Taylor's life is said to be Japanese former dancer and painter Carol Kimura. "She is a dear, close friend," he confirmed, "one of the few. She has a samurai sword this big (hands two feet apart) and keeps me in check."

He was previously linked with, among others, Anita Ekberg and Zsa Zsa Gabor. On life with Anita, he said: "I couldn't keep up with the pace. It was like an Errol Flynn movie every day, I couldn't take it."

She scarged the bleep out of me. We had a tearful break-up in Rome. She said: "Why don't you stay, Aussie?" I told her I



# The many facets of rough diamond Rod

FROM PAGE 11

had to go back (to the U.S.) to work. I did, walked into my house and there she was, she had let herself in." What did he say? "Good evening, darling." Rod Taylor, it appears, has an answer for everything.

And what of his relationship with Zsa Zsa? "We swapped notes," was his concise summation.

The best illustration of the man's tender side is the gentleness of his tone when discussing Felicia, his daughter, who lives with her mother in New York.

A rigorous working schedule had kept him from seeing her for two years until they were reunited on *This is Your Life* earlier this year, and it was a tearful occasion.

"That brought the water out," he said simply.

He had seen her only briefly since, and he said: "It's a bad kind of situation. The break-up of our marriage was not easy, and it (the separation from

Felicia) is a little empty place in my heart."

According to her father, Felicia wants to be a doctor. If, instead, she aspired to be an actress, Taylor would not stand in her way. But he added the warning: "I would have a baseball bat for any casting director who tried to make her."

Among his friends are John Wayne, Glenn Ford, Robert Mitchum and Dean Martin, but he said he did not mix much with actors: "When I am not acting I don't like to talk about acting."

How would he describe his lifestyle? The man laughed and said: "Pretentious, luxurious

... then, more seriously, "Terry and I like to go horseriding. I go to the supermarket myself. It's really very suburban."

The Beverly Hills house of one of Hollywood's so-called hell-raisers is a refuge for stray cats. "They meow, to shut 'em up I feed 'em, and they fall in love with the place." I read that he had acquired six cats, but he said

the total had risen to 15. "They keep breeding." Also part of the Taylor household is a golden retriever, Calley.

Rod Taylor, back in Australia, is a popular fellow and demands for his time can tax even his high-voltage energy. He said: "When I come home I feel like Mark Spitz with eight gold medals. Some people do jump on me a little too hard."

"When I'm working I'm pretty zane. I usually shove myself in my room, call room service, then early to bed. I'm not a grog man, really. I will drink with anyone but when I know I have a big scene coming up I take it easy."

Taylor is a flag-waving patriot — for Australia. There's no hint of phoniness when he declares he's still in love with the country. He calls himself an Aussie, and retains an Australian passport to prove it.

His idea of contentment? "You won't believe this — to make movies in Australia. It would make me very happy to be a mainstring in pushing the (film) movement here."

"I love America, my house, my friends, but I think it's pretty indicative that I still have my Australian passport. I am proud to help. As long as they feed me, I'll work. And I am cunning

enough to know it could be an open door to a lucrative future here."

If further proof were needed, he intends to make two films back-to-back here next year. He's written the script for the first, titled *The Sargasso Sea*, and it would star himself and Terry Wilson, with the rest of the cast and crew being Australian.

The story, with parallels to the Bermuda Triangle, concerns the mysterious disappearance of 28 yachts. Apart from a four-day shoot in Miami, he sees no reason why it should not be filmed here.

The second movie would be a western, titled *Lazarus*. It's about a sheriff who loses his memory, and Wilson says it was written by the same man who did *The Sting*.

After *The Picture Show Man*, Taylor is off to Queensland to make that TV commercial, then Perth to talk about money for movies, and he wants to see South Australian Premier Don Dunstan, guiding light of that state's Film Corporation.

Will he be home for Christmas? He nodded, grinned and said: "Or else, down comes that samurai sword!" □

Colour photo: Mike Giddens