'Glenn Ford is a pussycat—David Janssen is a pussycat...

Why Can't Rod Taylor Be a Pussycat?'

—CBS memo

By Bill Davidson

Memos sent out by CBS's Program Practices Department usually are crisp and authoritarian in tone. But this one —from the network's euphemistically-named censors and guardians-of-the-public-morals—had a decidedly plaintive air. It was addressed to the producers of the new series *Bearcats!*, starring Rod Taylor (Thursdays, 8 to 9 PM, ET) and it read: "Glenn Ford is a pussycat. David Janssen is a pussycat. Why can't Rod Taylor be a pussycat?"

The answer to that question—*not* relayed to Program Practices—is that Rod Taylor is Rod Taylor. Equating him with a docile tabby would be like expecting the ferocious Great Sandy Desert of his native Australia to become overnight a Down-Under Disneyland.

Taylor, whose knotted-muscle physique and handsomely battered face bear a resemblance to the old world's heavyweight champion James J. Braddock, is a man who does not speak; he roars. He does not walk; he lunges. He does not reason; he explodes with oaths and imprecations.

I was witness, for example, to one of his set-tos with Program Practices over the telephone. He bellowed, "What do you *mean* I can't look *euphoric* after that night with the beautiful Mexican broad? Are you trying to imply that *every* Mexican girl is a *virgin*? Is it your view that *no one* stays with a girl *overnight*? What did they do on *Gunsmoke*? Lick *toes*? . . . The same to you, feller. . . . If necessary, I'll go back to New York and see that old man, Paley." (The foregoing, with all profanity excised, refers, in its final blast, to William S. Paley, chairman of the board of CBS.)

Until now, all three networks have enjoyed a satisfying placidity in their relations with the ex-movie stars who recently have flooded weekly-series TV. Doris Day, Henry Fonda, Shirley Jones, James Stewart, even Anthony Quinn, have responded with sweet reasonableness to the unaccustomed demands of the medium. The only incident to mar this pleasant record was the slugging of a producer by an ex-cinemite, who quietly was replaced just before the series went off the air last year.

But now comes Rod Taylor, who is something else again.

First of all, he is a free spirit exhibiting all of the frontierlike independence of Australians everywhere. Although he never attained the popular eminence of the Fondas and the Stewarts, he is an extremely talented and highly regarded film actor ("Young Cassidy," "Hotel," "The Birds," "Darker Than Amber," among others) and he knows it. Also, he has had the experience of a prior fling at television—a 1960 ABC series called *Hong Kong*, which was murdered in the ratings by being positioned against the then-invincible *Wagon Train*. Nevertheless, it helped him win an award for being one of the first believable antiheroes on either the large or the small screen.

Secondly, Taylor is aware of the fact that once again he has been thrown in as a sacrificial offering—this time opposite a *current* powerhouse, *The Flip Wilson Show*; and he is determined →

that if he is flattened, as expected, he will go down fighting. Having been a middleweight boxer in his youth, he often uses the prize-fight idiom to describe his plight. Regarding Wilson, he says, "I love the idea of getting in the ring with the champ instead of going in a preliminary on Tuesday night." Then, throwing down a shrewd challenge: "Flip is chicken if he doesn't invite me onto his show."

However, the 41-year-old Taylor is intelligent enough to realize that independence and bravado alone do not a successful Nielsen make. In films, in addition to being an actor, he has been a writer ("The Last Bus to Banjo Creek") and a producer ("Chuka"). So when he signed to do *Bearcats!* on television, he cannily decided to try to shorten the formidable odds against the show by retaining a piece of the ownership of the series for his own company, in partnership with Filmways and CBS. This placed him in a more advantageous strategic position for the roaring fights and squabbles that followed.

His co-owners wanted to go along with the concept of the pilot film (which ran as a successful two-hour movie on CBS last season under the title "Powderkeg"). It was standard derring-do about two soldiers of fortune—the other played by Dennis Cole—who roam the West in a Stutz Bearcat, doing *sub-rosa* guerrilla-type jobs for the U.S. Government, the railroads, or anyone else who will pay them. The time is around 1914. "*No*, dammit," Taylor shouted. "If we do that every week it'll be just like every *other* adventure series. The one thing we've got going for us is the *era*. It was an interesting and *funny* era, with old-fashioned melodrama and hissing the villain, and all that. Let's play this partly for laughs, with the broad gesture and even maybe the girl tied to the railroad tracks—the Perils of Pauline bit. The show should have the feeling of looking at daguerreotypes or through a stereopticon viewer." After a lengthy battle, the co-owners acceded.

And so it went. There were brouhahas over geography (Taylor wanted to take the show away from just Arizona, to do stories involving World War I fighter planes and possibly the sinking of the Lusitania); and, of course, there were the feuds about censorship. Taylor won nearly all. Whether he won the war as well as the battles is yet to be determined by the Nielsens.

Recently, on the sun-parched desert near Tucson, Taylor reminisced about his earlier battles in other times. He was wearing riding breeches and boots and a sweat-stained old-fashioned undershirt. He sat in a canvas chair outside his air-conditioned dressing-room trailer, drinking a white wine, which he described as awful "but beautifully bottled." He spoke in the poetic profanity of a Robert Mitchum, without a trace of Australian accent, which he long since has eliminated from his speech. In fact, he sounds more American than Mitchum himself—though, on demand, he can do a perfect cockney, Devonshire or any other accent in the English language.

"My first big fight was with my mother when I was a kid back in Sydney," he mused. "She was a writer and wanted me to be an artist. My father began as a rigger on a crane and finally ran his own construction crew. →

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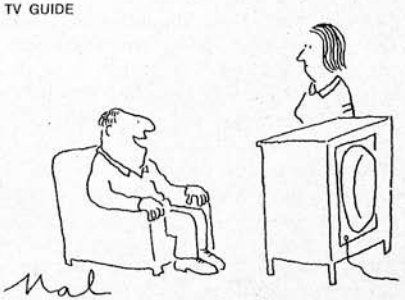


'I'm doing my thing.'

continued

My parents' relationship was one of those mad Dickensian things, which I was reminded of recently because my father came to visit me in my house in Beverly Hills. I built a snooker room for him and he brought home every drunken bum I had been ducking in Hollywood for years.

"Anyway, when I was a kid, I dutifully went to the Sydney Technical and Fine Arts College. Then I worked at commercial illustration for newspapers, and my mother was happy. But I did a lot of boxing and I was captain of an Australian surf club. I met a lot of actors there, and I got the bug. I gave up art and became an actor myself, in Australian radio. Mom put up quite a struggle over that—but she lost."

The dialogue grew saltier as he recalled subsequent skirmishes. "I did well as an actor in Australia," he said, "and then Paramount invited me over here in 1955 to have a look at me. Hal Wallis took that look, and maybe he was expecting Gregory Peck or something, because he said, 'Who *is* this bum with the broken nose? I never saw him fight.' So I told him to stuff it and lived on the beach for a while, catching fish for my food. Then Dore Schary tested me for 'Somebody Up There Likes Me,' the Rocky Graziano prize-fight story. I didn't get the part. Paul Newman did. But the Brooklyn accent I put on so convinced Schary I was from New York that he cast me as a Bronx boy in the lead of 'The Catered Affair.' He didn't know I was just 18 months out of Australia until the movie was half finished."

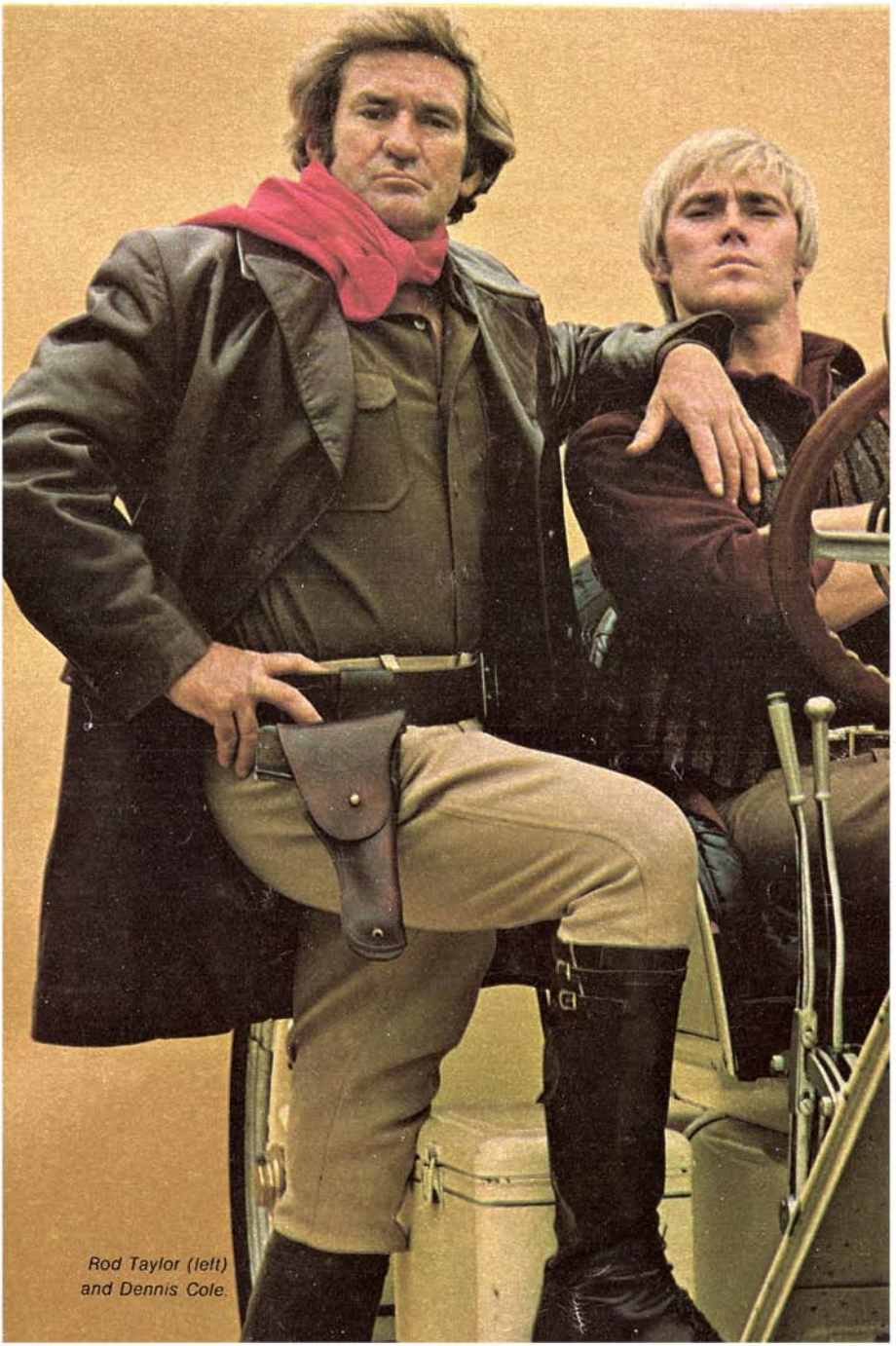
After that, it was ups and downs for Taylor—mostly ups. His temper and outspokenness lost him the roles of James Bond and Dr. Zhivago. But he kept popping up in other big movie parts—even, for a time, succeeding Rock Hudson as the assailer of Doris Day's virtue in two of her film comedies, "Do Not Disturb" and "The Glass Bottom Boat." With his business acumen, he earned a lot of money—especially in Europe, where his American pictures made him a much bigger star than he ever was here.

He still has quite a bit of the money, even though he has gone through two wives, the second of whom he describes as "a very poor model when I met her but a very rich *ex*-model since the divorce." Today he lives a raucous bachelor existence in the magnificent house he has owned for 17 years on a mountain top overlooking Beverly Hills. He thunders about in a souped-up 1963 Bentley convertible, and he is renowned for his exploits with "booze and broads."

As Taylor recounted it, he got back into television through forming an alliance with Filmways president Martin Ransohoff ("I dig Marty. He's a swinger"). "The relationship has been a constructively stormy one," he said. "We fought a lot about what we could market to the networks. I wanted to do a Jack London series—you see, that era really *does* grab me—and Marty wanted me to do something more commercial, like another *Mannix*. But we both agreed, and the fights stopped when a guy named Doug Heyes—whom I knew back in the *Twilight Zone* days—came along with the idea for *Bearcats!*"

Just then the show's producer, David Friedkin, came along. He reminded Taylor that it was time to go back to work. Friedkin is a gentle, handsome man who teams with Mort Fine (previously they were the producers of *I Spy*). Friedkin watched Taylor flex his enormous shoulders, take a final swig out of the bottle, toss it away as if it were a hand grenade, and go charging up the hill like a one-man infantry company—all the while uttering fearsome imprecations about his opposition, *The Flip Wilson Show*.

"It's interestingly tempestuous," Friedkin sighed, "but after all, we weren't *expecting* a Wally Cox." (END)



Rod Taylor (left) and Dennis Cole.