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Snapshots One: Tommy, Cliff, Errol, Burt, Yul and the King

To go from the sublime to the... well no, not as bad as that but ironically it was around this time that I think I made a slight contribution to British rock and roll. One of my pals was the London entrepreneur John Kennedy, who had been a contact for a couple of stories when I was with the *Mirror* group. One day he rang up and asked me, as a show-business columnist, to come to the 2Is coffee bar and give my opinion on a young talent he had discovered called Tommy Hicks, who was due to go back to sea as a cabin boy on the *Queen Mary* in two weeks' time. John had promised Tommy to get him stage work before then but Tommy was doubtful. Could I help?

Well, I met them at the coffee bar and Tommy came on with his guitar with all the confidence of a world boxing champion, silencing Wally Whyton and his skiffle group. He sang 'Rock with the Caveman,' and we all knew this was a star in the making. When Johnny asked me what I thought I said, 'He's like a world boxing champion, has tremendous stage presence. This is a big star. You've got to sign him.'

I think that helped convince Johnny he was right – I recall we all argued heatedly on the pavement outside, I urged Tommy to take the plunge and sign with Johnny, but wanting to get back on to the *Queen Mary* where he also entertained, he felt sure that Johnny couldn't get him a good stage job in the West End so fast. He revealed he had to get back to the ship in ten days now, not two weeks. We had to act swiftly.

Through nightclubbing some nights, I had come to know Bill Offner and Al Burnet who ran the Stork Room and, I think, the Swallow Room clubs. We approached them and they gave Tommy an audition and a spot for a week – unpaid. It was just the kind of showcase Tommy Steele (I don't know when his name changed) needed, but we now had to get him some quick publicity to make sure scores of folk went to see him. Johnny hit on the idea of throwing a sort of debs' party at the Stork Room. Through his own

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girlfriend and my contacts with model agencies we got some pretty debby types together, and Johnny gave some of them a copy of the *Almanack de Gotha* so they could show off their foreign accents and pretend to be debutantes from the Continent. I recall one girl was the Princess of Nuremburg, another a deb from Lichtenstein, and others from 'Wickstein,' and even Paschendaele!

I rang up Derek Agnew, features boss of the huge-circulation Sunday paper *The People*, and Johnny went to see him, saying this fabulous new rock and roll star was already the rage of the debs' set, even foreign debs! Derek sent a reporter and photographer, Tommy performed like never before, and the 'debs' all clapped and yelled their applause. The story made a big splash, then one night the Duke of Kent was in the audience. Johnny Kennedy rushed out as the Duke was leaving and asked him what he thought of Tommy. The Duke replied something like 'Simply marvellous, tremendous,' and that quote appeared in the daily papers via Johnny. Result – the papers were delighted, the Stork Room bosses were delighted, and so was Johnny for he signed Tommy Steele up that very week, and he never went back to the *Queen Mary*. That may seem a shaky start for Tommy's illustrious career, but his great talent ensured he lasted.

It was not long after this that I met another up-and-coming young rock singer who seemed to be vying with Tommy for the title of 'Britain's Elvis Presley' – Cliff Richard. I had been invited by producer Jack Good to do a column on his new pop music TV show 'Oh Boy!'. I watched the first production and it was soon obvious that handsome young Harry Webb from Huntingdon was going to be a big hit. So I did the main interview with him. The first thing Cliff said to me was, 'I read your show page and think it's the best. You've met many big stars so is there any career advice you could give me?'

I replied, 'It may be a cliché but be polite, aim to please whoever pays you, for you can never really earn or deserve the big money you'll get if you make it to the top. Just realize that if you go up like a rocket you can always come down like the stick!'

Cliff laughed at that, but when he wanted to know about my meeting with his own hero, Elvis Presley, it enabled me to explain how Presley was in real life. I added: 'Truly great talent is usually masked by modesty and courtesy and this is always recognised by those who pull the strings. Niceness is the sign of a man who knows where he is going and has no need to prove himself against anyone else. Also, being nice to those you leave behind is a wise policy as the subservient today may become tomorrow's controllers, for their careers follow different and devious paths!'

Cliff said he thought this excellent advice and thanked me. Whether my

few words had anything to do with him for ever being known as the ‘Mr Nice Guy’ of show business, I don’t know. Certainly when I met the naive young teenager Harry Webb I never dreamed that he would one day be the millionaire Sir Cliff Richard who would lend his luxury estate in the Caribbean to Britain’s Prime Minister and his family for their holidays.

I was in the middle of interviewing Jack Good when he suddenly asked me if I could sing. Taken aback, I said I could – a bit – but why? Jack said ‘Well, you’re good-looking enough to be a pop star yourself. I could audition you.’

Instantly, I repressed an involuntary shudder as I recalled my disastrous debut as The Darkie, when six months of singing lessons had ended in one night.

‘Jack,’ I said firmly, ‘I have no talent in that direction whatever.’

The fact was I even got stage fright when I had to just announce a few category winners in my own magazine’s annual ball for our readers. It was my job to organize this ‘Date with the Stars’ ball at the Lyceum Theatre, London, and it was quite a production. We had various categories – Actor of the Year, Actress of the Year, Comedian of the Year, and so forth. We canvassed our readers, then made short lists of the names in each category and I had to approach them all. It usually ended with the ‘winner’ being the one who actually turned up on the night! I remember offering Comedian of the Year to Benny Hill, whom I’d recently interviewed. He could not accept as he had a prior engagement on the night but he did send me an open postcard on which he’d written, ‘Dear Mike, which star’s ball will you be holding?’ I’m glad to say the following year he did attend and performed a little skit on stage which was the hit of the night.

As mine had been the first main show-biz column to praise the new Cliff Richard I felt he maybe owed me a favour, but when I offered him, as our readers wanted, the Pop Singer of the Year award, he said he could not attend as he had an important gig on the night of the ball. But he did suggest his sister could accept the award on his behalf. She was a pretty little girl, and better on stage than I was, and she went down well, especially with our male readers.

My policy of spotting up-and-coming stars and getting their best stories before they became so famous they were hard to get to, sometimes came unstuck. At a preview I saw newcomer Terence Stamp’s marvellous first starring performance opposite Peter Ustinov in *Billy Budd*, and was soon round at his Ebury Street, Victoria, flat to get his life story. He was particularly interesting as he came from ‘the wrong side of the tracks’, the first Cockney lad from the East End to become a serious film actor. As we talked, he

indicated his flatmate, a tall, gangly chap with lizard-like eyes and an unprepossessing appearance who was washing dishes in the kitchen, and he said, 'You should write about *him*. He's going to be big.'

'What has he done?'

Terence replied that he was in a play at the Arts Theatre right now. I said I only wrote about major stars or those I felt would become stars. The man served us tea in a pot and poured it professionally like a waiter. He then stood there with the sugar bowl, and asked me politely, 'Do you want sugar, sir?'

I took two spoonfuls, said thanks, and dismissed him from my thoughts. His name? Michael Caine. Now Sir Michael Caine, one of the biggest international male stars Britain has ever turned out.

Another error of judgement on my part was when I tried to set up an interview with Errol Flynn, who had come to Britain to promote his new TV series. Flynn had long been a youthful hero of mine, especially after he made *Gentleman Jim* in which he played James J. Corbett, the Irish dandy who out-footed and out-fought the legendary first world heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan. It was obvious that Flynn really could box, and several times in that film he did perfect 'Ali shuffles' long before Muhammed Ali was born. He was also a keen sailor, and owned his own luxury yacht, so my own sailing adventure and boxing experiences and the fact that I also liked a drink, made me feel we would have much in common. When I heard he was staying at a pub/hotel in Shenley, near Boreham Wood studio, I picked up my office phone in front of all the other reporters and put in a call to Errol Flynn, which made them prick up their ears. When he came on the line I almost felt I was talking to a friend, and I made the mistake of calling him Errol and not Mr Flynn. I was explaining who I was, what big stars had seen me, and that our magazine had over three million readers when, I heard him say, 'Oh shit!' and he banged the phone down.

Not daring to lose face in front of my colleagues, I pressed the phone earpiece to my ear so they would not hear the empty dialling tone, and carried on a conversation as if Flynn was still on the line, saying things like 'Yeah, yeah... could I come and see you?... Well, any time really... you're free now?... the afternoon?... Oh, sure... Okay, I'm on my way.' With a cheery wave to the listeners I shot through the door and down the stairs to my car.

Cripes, now *I had* to get him! I roared through London's northern suburbs and when I reached the pub found that Flynn was in the bar. Politely, I told him who I was, apologized for my crass approach on the phone and said I was also a keen sailor, having sailed through the Bay of Biscay in winter without an engine. He softened then offered me a drink, and was soon giving

me a first-class story. I'll never forget his reply when I explained I was shortly to be a judge at a beauty contest.

'Well, sport, be very careful where you place the one you're after! Don't make her the winner because she's got the crown, the car, the big trip to Hollywood or whatever. Don't make her second as she will be so upset at coming so close to winning yet not, you won't get near her. Make the one you fancy third, because she will be happy, and grateful that she even got placed at all!'

I met Errol twice more over the years and he was always fabulous company. It was clear that he was drinking too much as the tell-tale veins were appearing on his face but I was sorry to hear of his death in that Vancouver bedroom at the age of only fifty-one. Mind you, it wasn't a bad way to go – making love to a pretty young woman.

One major slip-up was on my first trip to Hollywood when I was chatting up a girl in the Raincheck Club, frequented mostly by up-and-coming actors and sometimes even a top star. A small man in a smart suit came up to me saying he'd heard I had a big show-business column in the UK, and as his country singer client was due there on a minor concert tour in some two months, would I care to meet him and write about him? He indicated a tall young man wearing black trousers and a black shirt sitting at one of the tables in the smoky interior, who was staring at me with intense black eyes. I said I only wrote about established stars or those I was sure would become major stars.

'Oh, he will, believe me.'

I said, 'What's his name?'

'Cash, John Cash.'

'He won't get far with a name like Cash,' I laughed, and turned back to the girl.

Johnny Cash became one of the greatest country singing stars the world has ever known, and even now I writhe at my own stupidity, for I could easily have got his fabulous, adventurous life story from him there and then. Not only that; when I spent the second half of my life in wild, remote spots studying rare wildlife in Canada, Scotland and Spain, Johnny Cash records formed the backbone of my nightly entertainment on little battery-powered record players.

At this time I was trying to keep fit, mainly to look good for my job – and girls – and was learning judo from world champion Tiger Joe Robinson, who with his brother Dougie gave lessons in their gym in Orange Street, Soho. We amateurs paid our fees and were allowed to throw these two champions

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about the mats while learning all the various throws like Uchi Mata, O-Soto-gari and Tiotoshi. I recall that once I threw Joe when he wasn't quite ready with a very unorthodox, lucky (for me) move, and as he got up he cracked: 'I know what that throw was called – Oh My Goshi!'

At the time Joe had a contract to teach judo to the girl pupils at the prestigious Roedean School near Brighton. I asked him how he coped with the proximity of all that young, nubile female flesh. How careful did he have to be? He thought for a moment, chuckled and said, 'Well, I don't throw them about much. We do a lot of mat work!'

Joe was a super chap and a superb athlete then – seventeen stone and he moved like a cat. I also thought he was far better as an actor than the critics said when he co-starred with Diana Dors in *A Kid for Two Farthings*.

The biggest disappointment I ever experienced when meeting a movie star came with one I had long admired, and the man I still regard as the greatest screen actor of all time – this may surprise some folk – Burt Lancaster. No star has equalled him in the infinite variety of his roles. Look at just a few of them, the 'beefcake' acrobat in *The Crimson Pirate*... the Olympic athlete in *Man of Bronze* (still one of my favourite sports films)... the brittle, flawed city sophisticate in *Sweet Smell of Success*... the rugged Marine and that famous love scene with Deborah Kerr in *From Here to Eternity*... the ebullient, extrovert Italian truck driver with Anna Magnani in *The Rose Tattoo*... the crippled catcher in *Trapeze*... the gentle, sensitive prisoner in *Birdman of Alcatraz*... his Oscar-winning, barnstorming role as the evangelistic preacher in *Elmer Gantry*... the tragic, dignified Nazi Chief Justice in *Judgement At Nuremberg*, when he acted principally with his face... the doomed sky-diver in *The Gypsy Moths*.

I needn't go on. In most of Lancaster's films, especially *Gantry*, I had been spellbound by his genius, his energy, his authority, his sheer presence.

Naturally, when I met him at Elstree studios where he was filming Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* with Sir Laurence Olivier and Kirk Douglas, I anticipated an exceptional interview, but it was soon obvious that Burt wouldn't discuss anything at all about his personal life or early struggles. I certainly didn't dare ask him how he had coped when two of his five children were born with club feet and one caught polio. All he wanted to talk about was business, how and why he had been the first studio star to break the mould and form his own independent film production company, and the problems involved.

But I did get a personal story when I asked him about his astonishing friendship with Nicky Cravat, who played his fighting pal in *The Crimson Pirate* and *The Flame and the Arrow*. Burt told me that when he was a skinny

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kid (hard to believe!) in the hooligan district of East Harlem, New York, he had got into a few street fights; Nicky, a year older, had come to his aid, and they had become pals.

'I lost track of Nicky when I went into the US Army in 1941. After I came out and had made my first film, *The Killers*, I went to Chicago on a publicity tour and ran into him accidentally. We talked over old times – all the laughs and troubles we'd shared – and I invited him down to Hollywood so we could do pictures together. He's never regretted that trip.'

I bet he didn't. Cravat had been employed by Burt's film company ever since. Such a firm friendship was amazing in the film world when so many big names forget the pals they made on the way up. Burt revealed that while he did most of his own stunts he didn't do them all. 'I'm not a very good horse rider, and I sure wouldn't fall off a galloping horse for a film. Stuntmen are well paid for those things.

He also scotched the myth that he had been a trapeze flier in real life. 'I was never a trapeze artist, only a horizontal bars man. I'm too big for trapeze work.'

That was just about all of personal interest that I got out of him. But even now as I write this forty-six years later, whenever I see a Burt Lancaster movie coming on TV I drop everything to watch it. When I heard of his death in October 1994 at eighty, the same age as my dad, it was like another blow in the guts. I was more saddened to learn that he had suffered a severe stroke two years before, had become less active and had lived alone, almost forgotten, up to the time of his death.

One of my next big jobs came when I flew to Vienna and met Yul Brynner on the sunlit set of his new film *The Journey*, in which he was starring with Deborah Kerr. He came over to me still laughing at a small prank he had played on Deborah, and started to answer my questions. It was soon obvious that his story was more fascinating than most movie stars'. Astounding, in fact. Millions of words, largely guesswork, had been written about this phenomenon of thirty-eight who shot to fame after playing in *The King and I*, for which he shaved his head completely bald. Insolently domineering, his movements sensuous, he strode across the screen and into our minds with the grace of a giant cat.

Briefly, Yul revealed he had been born on Sakhalin Island off Siberia. His Mongolian father had owned a silver mine. His mother had been a Romany gipsy who died giving birth to him. When he was seven his grandmother took him and his half-sister to Paris. They had little money, so Yul started earning a living before his thirteenth birthday, playing guitar and singing

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gipsy songs in the streets, cafés and nightclubs of Paris. After meeting one of the Fanelli trapeze troupe from the Paris Winter Circus at one of the cafés, Brynner braved a frightening trial on the high trapeze, and was trained as a 'flyer', travelling with the troupe through France, Switzerland and Italy for the next three years. They were tough years and made Brynner a man at seventeen, by which time he had decided he wanted to be a legitimate actor. Then came the night that was to be his last on the trapeze.

'The audience was bored. I decided I would deliberately miss my partner's hands and fall into the net. I had done it many times before. There was no danger,' he told me.

He jumped. He should have bounced safely in the net, but it had been rigged badly. He bounced up, was thrown sideways, and went down out of control to land with a horrid crash on a set of parallel bars left over from a previous act.

'I was still conscious. The ring hands rushed over and carried me to the clown's dressing room, but on the way I passed out.'

Brynner was taken to hospital, his left leg broken, his left shoulder smashed. He had forty-seven fractures in his legs, arms, ribs and feet. For six months he lay in a plaster cast. Doctors said he would spend the rest of his life a cripple. Said Yul: 'After my stay in hospital I was taken back to my one-room apartment. The circus had paid all my bills. They always did – even if they fired you when you were better! Even today I limp. It does not show until the end of the day when I am tired.'

Brynner spent five years with the Pitoeffs, a famous White Russian theatre team, and was a jack-of-all-trades – stage hand, electrician, carpenter, costume designer, stage manager and eventually an actor. 'I really wanted to be a director. I did not enjoy the acting because all the parts I got were young lovers!'

In 1941 Brynner arrived in America to join the brilliant actor-producer Michael Chekhov, with whom he had been long corresponding, and his touring troupe.

He gained his acting spurs doing 'one-night stands in church halls, high schools and movie houses. I liked America very much.' He often drove the company's old Greyhound bus, and enrolled in a language school to improve his poor English. When America entered the war the troupe broke up, and from the summer of 1942 to D-Day Brynner worked as a French language announcer on the *Voice of America* broadcasts to Nazi-occupied France. He took various TV jobs trying to learn the art of directing when he heard of a producer who was looking for an actor who was also an acrobat and could sing. Michael Myerberg gave him an audition, had him sitting on the floor

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singing songs for one and a half hours, then cast him to play the lead on Broadway in *Lute Song* with the fabled Mary Martin. His Broadway career didn't last, however, so he returned to Paris, where he spent a year playing the guitar in a nightclub, before heading back to America to get back into TV.

He rose quickly to the top as a director, covering wrestling matches, baseball games, variety shows, fashion parades, drama and even cooking lessons.

'I rated high in insubordination. I became impossible with all executives who didn't know what they were talking about, but respected those who did. I was fired time and time again from shows, but always I was brought back – at a higher salary! I managed to get the results the public liked.'

In 1951 Rodgers and Hammerstein were searching for an actor of 'commanding magnetic personality' to play opposite Gertrude Lawrence in the Broadway production of *The King and I*. Mary Martin told them that Yul Brynner was their man. He went to see the famous producers, who also believed he was their man.

'But I was not keen at first,' Yul told me. 'I would rather have directed the play. I was making more money than any other TV director then, and wanted to stay in that work. Then, as I read the script, I realized that the King was a character who utterly fascinated me. This was a man I would enjoy playing. I accepted, thinking I would play the part for eight months, and I signed a contract for that period.'

Brynner played the part for four years. With his head completely shaven, he was a sensation. Why did he shave his head, I asked him.

'There were two reasons,' he replied. 'One, in assessing the King's character, I bore in mind that he had gone into a monastery to study. He lived among monks as this was the only schooling he could get in Siam. To do this he had to wear the cloth and shave his head like the other monks.

'The head costume woman, Irene Sharaff, said, "It would be a good idea if you shaved *your* head for this part." I said, "All right. I'll try it. It's six weeks before the show opens so I can always regrow it before then if necessary." I turned up at my first rehearsal with my head completely bald. It was a terrible shock to Rodgers and Hammerstein, then they too went crazy about the idea... Now I keep it like this for one reason only – it is much more comfortable than having hair.'

One night in 1953, Cecil B. de Mille saw the *King and I*. He admired Brynner's magnificence, the strength and almost savage animal attraction of his movements. He signed him up for a lead role in his epic, *The Ten Commandments*. The rest is movie history.

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Apart from his fascinating life story – and there was a lot more to it than I've written here, I shall remember Yul Brynner for a very kind gesture. He was one of the few stars who took me up on my offer to let them read my copy, and I had to persuade Howard French to telegraph me more money so that I could stay in Vienna an extra three days while I wrote the three-part series. I enjoyed myself at night, twice going to eat at Anton Karras's café and hear him play his famous *The Third Man* theme and other masterful pieces on his zither.

Once my story was written, Yul invited me to bring it to him in his suite in the splendid Hotel Imperial on Vienna's Elizabethstrasse. I entered the lounge, he thrust a large glass of vodka into my hands, took my manuscript and sat cross-legged on the floor with a pen in his hand. From time to time he grunted or said yes or no, while he cut bits out or amended and added. As he worked, my glance fell upon a rack of smoking pipes and there, in the centre of four, was just the kind of pipe I had been looking for for years. It was down-curved, stubby with a stout stem, and beautifully designed. As he handed me back my manuscript, saying it was fine, he asked me what I was looking at.

I pointed. 'That pipe. It's a beauty, just the kind I've been searching for...'

Before I could say more, Yul Brynner snapped it off the rack, thrust it into my hands and said, 'It is yours!'

Although I gave up smoking long ago, and had overbitten the stem before that, that pipe is still one of my treasured possessions.

Before long it became obvious there just weren't enough major stars in Britain, or even in Europe, to keep my top-names column pages going, so we evolved a new idea called 'Personal Call'. I arranged via Henry Gris, the veteran well-connected Hollywood correspondent of the Associated Press, to phone stars at their homes in Hollywood. This, too, got me an edge over other UK show-business columnists. Of course, Henry could not fix up truly top stars in this way – those like Sinatra, Brando and Monroe not only didn't need publicity but actively shunned it! – but he did pretty well with the first one. I was soon putting my personal call through to the then King of Hollywood, Clark Gable! He was about to play a romantic role opposite twenty-four-year-old Sophia Loren. As he was fifty-nine I asked him if he felt he should play lovers any more. His answer, as to my other questions, was unusually frank, 'It depends what the roles are. I certainly don't think I should be playing a Rhett Butler part like I did in *Gone with the Wind*. I couldn't get away with that any more. But there are still roles an older man could play – in comedy, for instance.'

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He admitted that his recent film *The King and Four Queens*, when he had been romantic lead to four girls, had been a comedy attempt that had not come off. I asked him what was the biggest lesson he had learnt in life?

‘The most important thing I learnt from success is that no one can do it on his own. Every star has a tremendous amount of help the public don’t know about. People behind the scenes who write for him, directors, cameramen, the technicians you never hear about. If you make yourself unpopular with them I guess you can say goodbye. I used to be pretty cocksure. Then I made some bad movies and I suddenly found I needed help. Luckily I got it. Once I was successful again, I learned to be more critical of myself.’

I asked him how he got his powerful physique. Was it true or just publicity that he had once been a humble tree feller?

‘No, it was true. I worked for the Silver Falls Timber Company in Oregon. I got three dollars and twenty cents a day. But I think any physique I have was formed before that. My dad was an oil man in Oklahoma and he got me working on one of his crews. I was eighteen or nineteen and I was swinging a sixty-pound sledge (hammer), sometimes for two hours at a time. I think that was what gave me a physique.’

I suggested that Hollywood was the home of unstable marriages, and as he himself had been married several times, though he was happy and settled now, what did he, a public idol, feel was important to a happy marriage?

‘Appreciating your home and the help and the association and the love you get from your family. There is nothing in the world quite as good for any man as having the love and affection of a wife and children. If he doesn’t have that, he hasn’t very much of anything... I haven’t always felt that. There were times when I wasn’t capable of thinking that way because I got rather inflated ideas about myself.’

We talked about his happy family – his wife Kay and two children, Joan and Bunker, but they were Kay’s children by a previous marriage. I asked Gable if he hoped to have his own children one day. His answer was brief but to the point: ‘I do, but I’m very happy with what we have.’

In a sad and ironic twist of fate, Kay fell pregnant when Gable went to make what was to be his last film, *The Misfits* with Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift. It was an intensely physical role, where he had to fight and tame wild horses, and he refused the use of a stuntman. He died shortly after the film was finished, and never saw his son to whom Kay later gave birth, the child he had so long craved.



At Heathrow airport after movie star Eva Bartok had invited me to fly with her to the premiere of her new film in Frankfurt. It was the start of our romance.



One of my first jobs as show business editor of the best selling Weekend magazine was to get stories from the two 'Kings of Horror' in those days – the fabled Boris Karloff (Frankenstein and others) and the versatile actor Christopher Lee, initially famous for his Dracula roles.



*I flew to Vienna to meet Yul Brynner, sensational star of *The King and I*, when he made *The Journey with Deborah Kerr*. I managed to overcome his initial slight hostility to get a fabulous interview, beginning with his days as trapeze high flier, and he even gave me a treasured smoking pipe.*



With the treasured pipe Yul Brynner gave me in Vienna.