Interviews: George Kennedy, Carol Lynley at the Hollywood Celebrities Show

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CHICAGO – The 1960s movie stars, captured forever on celluloid in their era, still thrive and survive. At the recent Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show, Oscar winner George Kennedy (”Cool Hand Luke”) and cult star Carol Lynley (”Bunny Lake is Missing”) spoke about the long time passing 1960s.

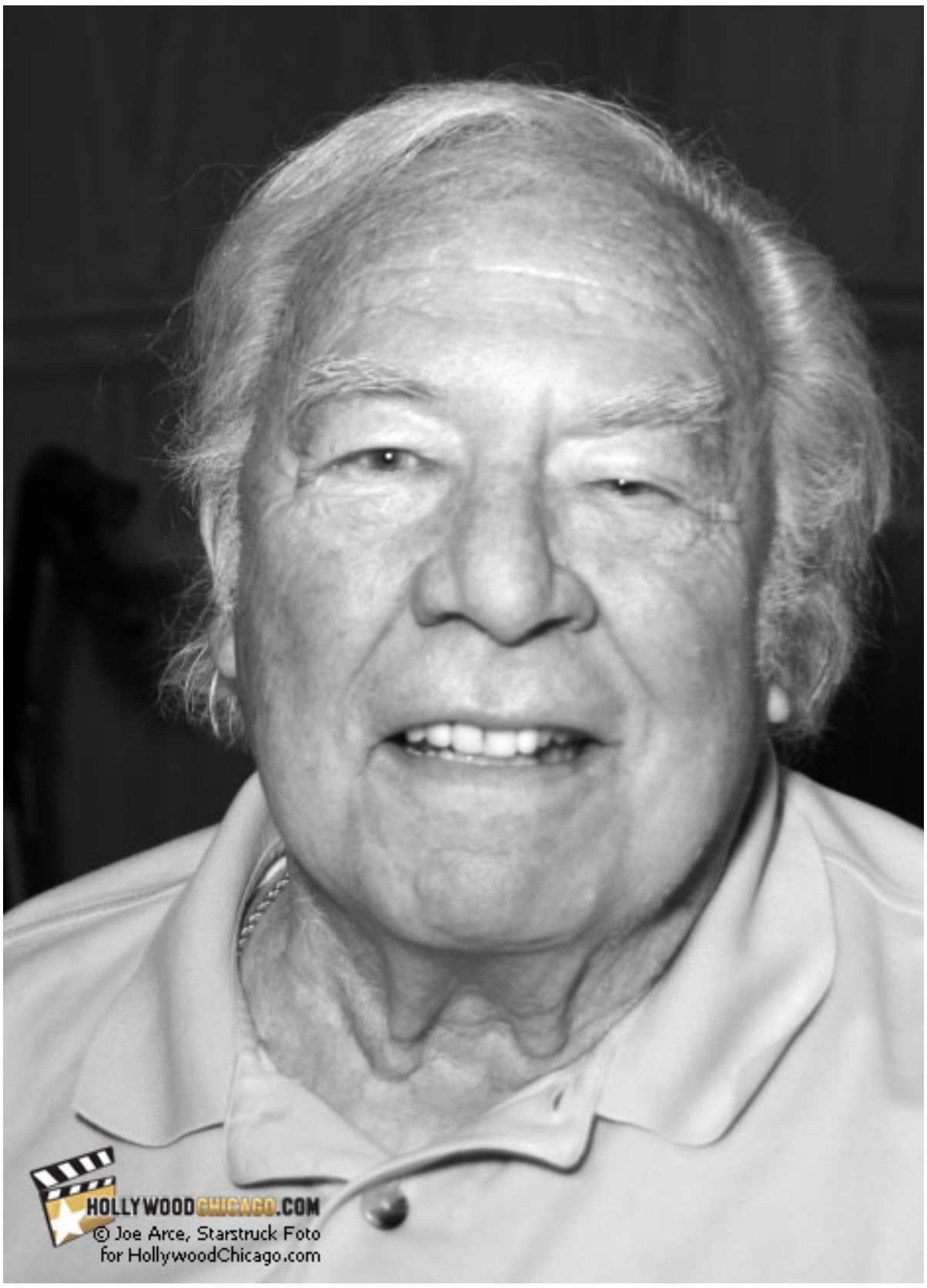
The Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show is a biannual event in Chicago where attendees can meet and greet the stars, collect autographs and find cool collectibles at the comprehensive memorabilia market. The next show in the area is scheduled for September 25th and 26th, 2010.

HollywoodChicago.com was there at the last show in March, and spoke to George Kennedy and Carol Lynley. Photographer Joe Arce was also there to capture their images at the event.

George Kennedy of “Cool Hand Luke,” “Airport” and “The Dirty Dozen”

George Kennedy is best remembered for his numerous character roles in big and famous films. After starting in television as a consultant for Phil Silver’s “Sgt Bilko” series, he took on bit roles in TV throughout the early 1960s, before landing a role opposite Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn in “Charade” [1963]. This led to steadier work and bigger roles in “Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte” [1964] and “The Dirty Dozen.” [1967]. But his greatest and most memorable turn was opposite Paul Newman in “Cool Hand Luke” [1967], for which he won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.

He has continued to work throughout the years, with the Airport movies of the 1970s, and had another generation discovering him in “The Naked Gun” series of films (as Ed Hocken) in the 1980s and ‘90s. And to his credit, he is listed as having made six films since 2005.



George Kennedy at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show,
Chicago, March 13th, 2010
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: How did your early career in the army prepare you for show business? And how did you translate that into one of your first jobs advising the Phil Silvers Sgt. Bilko show?

George Kennedy: One came out of a growth out of the other. At the end of the war, I was a high school graduate with no training except for shooting at German soldiers in Europe. I was a staff sergeant, with a couple of bronze stars, so they asked me to re-up and they sent me to Officer's Training School. When I did that, I became a part of Armed Forces Radio Service. And through that, I became the military advisor to the Sgt. Bilko show. The happiest years of my life.

HC: You were part of one of the great casts of all time in the caper film, "Charade." What type of actor was Cary Grant, and what kind of presence did Audrey Hepburn have in person?

GK: Almost incalculable to describe. Not only did Walter Matthau, Ned Glass, Jimmy Coburn [Kennedy's co-stars] and I adore Audrey, but Cary Grant – who in my mind's eye was the biggest, best looking movie star that ever existed – fretted that he wanted to make sure he wasn't doing anything that would upset her. [laughs]

Audrey Hepburn was so far removed from normal humanity, I swear to God this is true. We would, between shots, sit outside of her dressing room door, on the floor and talk to her while she was inside – even Cary Grant would do this. She was a wonderful actress and lovely lady.

HC: You famously paid for trade paper ads yourself to promote your Supporting Actor nomination for Cool Hand Luke. Can you remember what the atmosphere was like surrounding the ceremony, and how you felt when Patty Duke called your name?

GK: I didn't expect to win. It was hands down that 'Bonnie and Clyde' was going to win everything, and the odds against me were phenomenal. The last thing I said to my wife before going in was 'remember, my award comes up second, so we have a long time to sit there looking like good losers.' So when Patty announced my name, I remember I hit my leg and went up there. I didn't have a speech prepared, so I just said 'thank you for the greatest moment in my life.' Which it was.

HC: Probably your most notable film character is Joe Patroni in the Airport series. Was there anybody you knew in real life who you based the character on, or was it an invention of your own?

GK: Patroni was a real guy, that wasn't his name, but he existed. He did for TWA what I did in the movie. He actually did what I did in 'Airport.' He got a plane out of the mud by the exact method shown in the movie. He was famous. He and I became friends, and through him I started flying airplanes.

HC: Although you're not known for comedy, you scored in the Naked Gun series. What was the most absurd gag you had to do?

GK: The Naked Gun movies were wonderful to do, but they were not easy to do. The Zucker brothers [David and Jerry, with Jim Abrahams] are geniuses, but they do like to do 40 takes. I used to ask them 'are you watching a fly sh*t on the wall, because you're certainly not watching us!' [laughs] They would laugh, they would laugh at anything.

HC: 'Dirty Dingus Magee' was a very odd film for Frank Sinatra. What do your remember from that set and working with Sinatra?

GK: Frank Sinatra! He and I were friends, and after that movie we were still friends. I think Sinatra was the greatest entertainer of my life. I have everything he ever recorded and I got the privilege to talk to him about it. We were friends, and we could talk about anything.

Carol Lynley of "Bunny Lake is Missing" and "The Poseidon Adventure"

Carol Lynley is a veteran film performer, with a career that spans over 50 years. She made a big splash in her film debut, the controversial "Blue Denim" [1959], reprising her stage role about a teenager dealing with pregnancy. Primarily a sex symbol (she famously posed for Playboy in 1965), she also had a nice run of notable films in the early to mid 1960s, culminating with the cult classic "Bunny Lake is Missing" [1965], directed by Otto Preminger.

She has worked throughout the subsequent decades, achieving notoriety again as Nonnie in "The Poseidon Adventure" [1972], the role of the singer of the hit song, "The Morning After." Recently, she appeared in a short film for Sage Stallone (son of Sylvester) called "Vic" [2006].

Carol Lynley at the Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show, Chicago, March 13th, 2010
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: You starred in the stage and screen version of the controversial “Blue Denim” at a very young age. What did you understand about the character you played and how were you able to handle all the controversy surrounding It?

Carol Lynley: I knew nothing about that character. [laughs] I was a 15-year old virgin, that’s all I can say. I did the film version with Brandon De Wilde, who was also a 15 year-old virgin. It was an acting job.

I started as an actor at age 10, in New York. My connection to Chicago is that I did ‘Anniversary Waltz’ at a downtown theater, and my understudy was Karyn Kupcinet [daughter of Chicago columnist Irv Kupcinet], who everyone called ‘Cookie.’ We used to hang out together, she took me to her school and I used to go to her parents Irv and Essie’s place for dinner. They were really nice to me. Kup was at the height of his media power at the time, there was nothing to be gained by hanging out with a 12 year old. [laughs]

HC: What was the basis for your decision to pose for Playboy, both in the midst of your career and in a day then film stars didn’t necessarily do it intentionally?

CL: It wasn’t really my decision, I had an agent who said I needed to make a transition from teenager to adult, and this was the one way to fast track it, which he was right. I did the shoot in Los Angeles.

In retrospect, I wish I hadn’t done it, it’s a little tacky. On the other hand, it’s here in my roster of pictures. [laughs] Compared with what they do now, it’s practically innocent.

HC: Later, you were filming ‘Bunny Lake is Missing’ for director Otto Preminger. What do you think audiences didn’t understand back then

about the film that future admirers picked up on?

CL: Well, now it's a classic, shown often on Turner Classic Movies, which is wonderful. It was one of the last movies made in black & white, before everything went to color. People who reviewed the film, like Richard Schickel when he was with Life Magazine, tended to review Otto Preminger, because it was during the 'Otto the Terrible' years. So it was viewed unfairly because it's a really great movie.

HC: What was the story behind the two film versions of the Jean Harlow biography? Did you know you were competing against another production?

CL: I didn't know about the other production. Another agent decided I should do this one and quite honestly I didn't know who Jean Harlow was. I knew her from the old films, but I never had sat down and studied her. We rehearsed it for three weeks like a play, and shot it like a TV show, in what they called 'Electronovision.'

I was working with Judy Garland, who was playing my mother. And just before we were about to start shooting, Judy came up to me and said, 'Carol, I'm leaving.' I was in a panic, but she was telling me because she liked me. She also said they'll say Judy Garland was leaving because she's stoned, drunk or crazy. She was actually in good shape when she did the film. But she added, 'Carol, this is a piece of sh*t.' [laughs] That is verbatim.

I went back to my house that night and thought, maybe she's testing me. That was on a Friday, and Monday morning Ginger Rogers showed up to play the mother role. She did a great job, with literally no rehearsals.

HC: What was the deal with 'The Maltese Bippy'? Why was it so strange and how did you get involved in it?

CL: I don't know, why don't you ask me about my good movies? [laughs] It was the height of the 'Laugh-In' era, and it was the same agent that got me into the Harlow movie. [laughs] I liked Dick [Martin, of Rowan and Martin] tremendously, he was sweet and easy-going. Dan Rowan was not a lot of fun.

HC: Finally, what role do you want to be remembered for and why?

CL: I have to go back to Bunny Lake is Missing. I always say it's 'my' movie, but there are some other people in it like Lawrence Olivier, Noel Coward and Keir Dullea. [laughs] It is a wonderful movie, and a wonderful feeling of vindication, because when it came out in America, it was a total flop because the studio wouldn't give it any support, nothing. I cried for a year, because I worked so hard and I knew it was good. And it hurt that it disappeared. But about 15 years ago, the museums started showing it in retrospect programs. It is one of Otto's great films, it was a feeling of vindication for all of us.

The Hollywood Celebrities & Memorabilia Show is back in Chicago, September 25th and 26th.
Click here for details. *[15]*

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