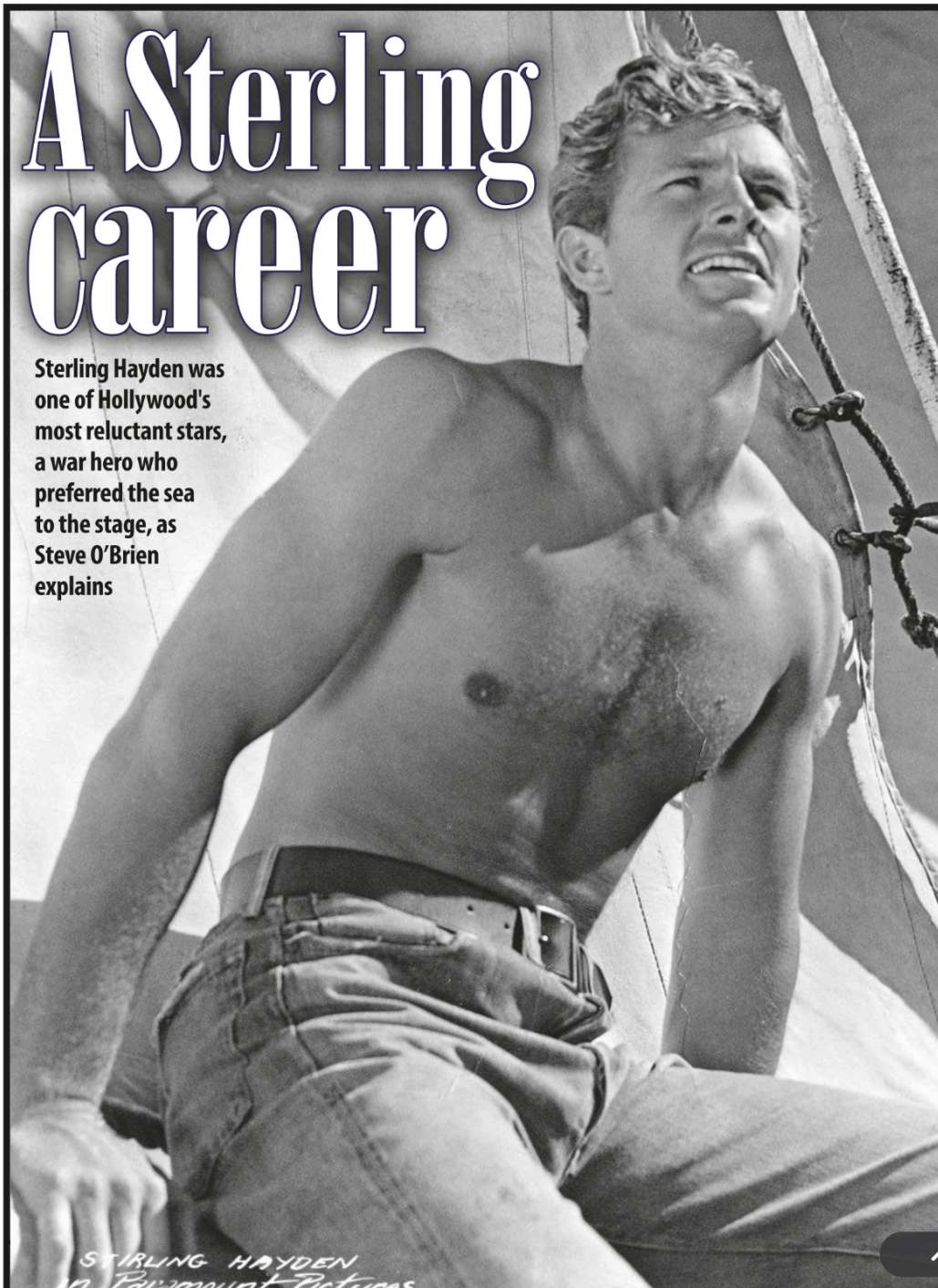


A Sterling career

Sterling Hayden was one of Hollywood's most reluctant stars, a war hero who preferred the sea to the stage, as Steve O'Brien explains



There are few actors whose disdain for their career was as full-throated as Sterling Hayden's. Look at his most unfiltered interviews, and it's all there. 'There's nothing wrong with being an actor, if that's what a man wants,' he once said, 'but there's everything wrong with achieving an exalted status simply because one photographs well and is able to handle dialogue put in one's mouth by others.'

Of his movies, he admitted he considered them 'Bastards, most of them, conceived in contempt of life and spewn out onto screens across the world with noxious ballyhoo; saying nothing, contemptuous of the truth, sullen and lecherous.' In fact, his contempt for the day job was so great he once told an interviewer, 'If I had the dough,

I'd buy up the negative of every film I ever made and start one hell of a fire!'

DISDAIN FOR FAME

You'd think, from all that vitriol, that Sterling Hayden's career was one of forgettable B-movies and shallow potboilers, yet on his filmography are some of the most lauded pictures ever made – *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The Killing* (1956), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) and *The Godfather* (1972) among them. It didn't matter how big or small his role was, Hayden – with those chiselled features and 6ft 5in frame – was always a striking presence. His turn as the sociopathic Brigadier General Jack D Ripper in *Dr Strangelove* is a scene stealer in a movie full of tour-de-force performances, and in *The Godfather*, he's the corrupt police chief Mark McCluskey, shot in the neck in an Italian restaurant by Michael Corleone, in one of the movie's most significant scenes.

But then whoever Sterling Hayden played, however extreme their character, however dramatic their life, it was always going to be mild next to the one he

Hayden's first wife was the British actress Madeleine Carroll, best known for her leading roles in Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *Secret Agent* (1936).

lived himself. Many actors of his generation (he was born in 1916) saw combat, but few could say that they were a member of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), a department within the US government that would eventually morph into the CIA. Then there was his private life: In 1947 he married his second wife Betty Ann de Noon, with whom he had four children, before divorcing in 1958. Awarded custody, Hayden defied a court order by loading the kids aboard his 98-foot schooner and sailing for Tahiti. For nearly a year they lived as fugitives from American justice.

LARGER THAN LIFE

'He was always somehow larger than life,' the writer Howard Skiles said of the actor in 1976, the year Hayden released his first work of fiction, *Voyage: A Novel of 1896*. 'Here was this handsome-as-hell youngster and he becomes a movie star overnight and then the war comes along and he goes into the Marine Corps and gets a medal for derring-do with the Office of Strategic Services, and then he



Hayden's first marriage to British actress Madeleine Carroll lasted four years



He played Dix Handley in *The Asphalt Jungle* opposite Jean Hagen, probably best known as Singin' in the Rain's Lina Lamont



comes home and makes more pictures and kidnaps his kids and sails away to the South Seas and writes a best seller and – Jesus! – you name it.'

WALKING AWAY

Hayden had made his screen debut in 1941 in the romantic drama *Virginia*, following it up with the same year's *Bahama Passage*. But deciding his destiny lay elsewhere, he quit the industry, declaring, 'I'm no actor! I'm a sailor!' His dream of buying his own schooner and exploring the sea, however, was put on hold when America joined the Second World War. A proud patriot, he wasted no time in enrolling as a US Marine, where, over the next three years, he would be awarded various medals, including the prestigious Silver Star.

Though sailing would remain Hayden's passion, it was acting that allowed him to follow that dream. Returning to Hollywood after the war, he won parts in such films as *Blaze of Noon* (1947) and *El Paso* (1949), but his screen career came under threat in the early Fifties when the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) started its witch hunt to find Communist sympathisers in Hollywood (Hayden had joined the American Communist Party in 1946, only to resign six months later). Under pressure from the HUAC he appeared as a 'friendly witness', controversially naming former associates. Though



Hayden was the paranoid Brigadier General in the Cold War satire *Dr Strangelove* while Peter Sellers played three different characters

collaborating with the committee saved his film career, the decision to rat out former friends haunted him forever. In his 1963 autobiography *Wanderer*, he wrote, 'I don't think you have the foggiest notion of the contempt I have had for myself since the day I did that thing.'

RUGGED ANTI-HERO

While the careers of the individuals named by Hayden suffered, his own flourished, and the Fifties saw him winning leading parts in films such as *Battle Taxi* (1955), *Crime of Passion* (1957) and *Terror in a Texas Town* (1958), cornering the market in tough, rugged anti-heroes.

By the Sixties and Seventies, Hayden could afford to be choosier, picking parts in between sailing adventures and writing. But though he proved canny with many of his career decisions, he showed poor

judgement elsewhere, as proved by his rejection of the role of Quint in *Jaws* (1975) – a part that eventually went to Robert Shaw.

THE LONG GOODBYE

A latter-day highlight was Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973). A neo-noir, it starred Hayden as an alcoholic novelist, in a genre he'd made his name in 20 years before. 'I was stoned all the way through *The Long Goodbye*,' the actor admitted, 'but Altman didn't object. He told me, "If it works for you, go ahead." So I did, and that was the first thing I ever did that I could actually stand to watch on the screen – the first time I wasn't acutely mortified. Well almost anything will work out if you keep at it long enough, I guess.'

Sterling Hayden continued to act, on and off, until his death from prostate cancer in 1986. But, *The Long Goodbye* excepted, he never did make peace with his screen career, viewing Hollywood as trivial and unauthentic, and acting as 'a stupid business'. But then when you've lived a life as livid and storied as Sterling Hayden's, nothing in fiction could ever match it for pure drama.

Under pressure from the HUAC, Hayden appeared as a 'friendly witness' during the Communist witch hunt in Hollywood

DID YOU KNOW?

Hayden's final screen role was in the British horror *Venom*, opposite Oliver Reed, Nicol Williamson and Klaus Kinski, a movie that critic Vincent Canby called 'the silliest film of 1982'.



Reel obsession

Terry Brown of Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire takes us through his life in films

Growing up in the Forties my cinema experience was limited to the Saturday matinees. As a teen I was into rock 'n' roll but one film changed my idea of popular music, *YOUNG AT HEART* (1954) (1) starring Doris Day and Frank Sinatra. While not strictly a musical, it's packed with numbers from *The Great American Songbook*. I still watch it regularly and never tire of it.

After school my first job was a trainee projectionist. Cinemas of the time were reminiscent of the 'flea pit' in my second choice *THE SMALLEST SHOW ON EARTH* (1957) (2). The film starred Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna as a young couple who inherit a rundown cinema that is run by three equally tired attendants played by Peter Sellers, Margaret Rutherford and Bernard Miles.

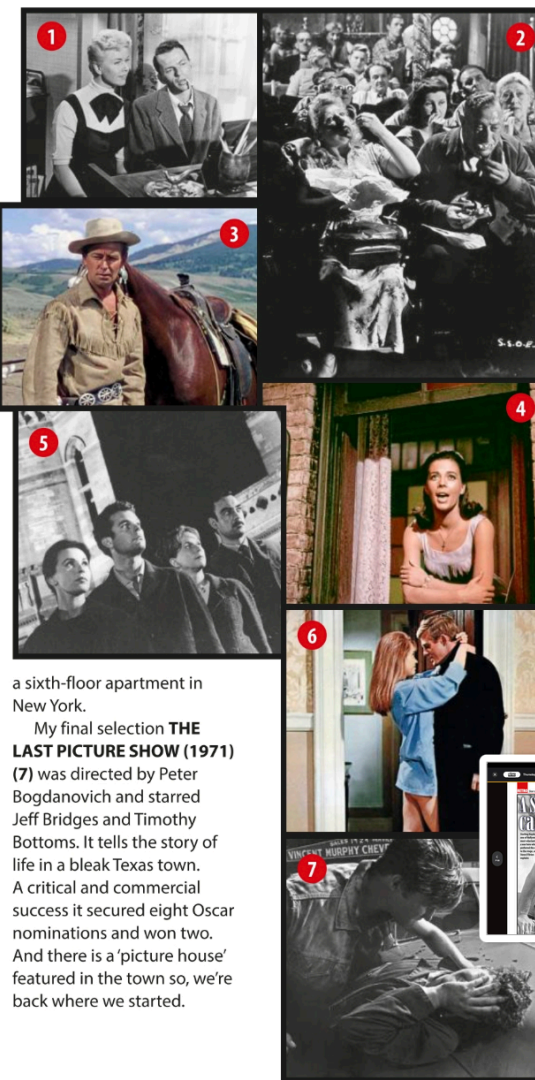
In homage to Westerns of the Saturday matinees my next choice is *SHANE* (1953) (3), a standout of the genre. It starred Alan Ladd, Brandon De Wilde and Jack Palance in a storyline that has been much copied but never topped. Produced and directed by George Stevens from a novel by Jack Schaefer, it was

nominated for five Oscars and won for cinematography.

Just as the big Hollywood musicals were going into decline along came *WEST SIDE STORY* (1961) (4). Directed by Robert Wise, with music by Leonard Bernstein and a story inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it had big numbers reminiscent of old Hollywood and energetic dance routines from the rock genre.

My next selection, also directed by Robert Wise, couldn't be more different *THE HAUNTING* (1963) (5) tells the story of psychic researchers investigating an allegedly haunted house. Shot in black and white it doesn't actually show you any apparitions (as opposed to the 1999 remake) but the eeriness is enhanced by atmospheric music, sound effects and great acting, with a particularly standout performance from Rosalie Crutchley as the housekeeper, Mrs Dudley.

After that, time for some light relief. My comedy of choice is *BAREFOOT IN THE PARK* (1967) (6) starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda. The screenplay by Neil Simon tells the story of the newly-wed Bratters, free-spirited Corie and uptight Paul, sharing



a sixth-floor apartment in New York.

My final selection *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW* (1971) (7) was directed by Peter Bogdanovich and starred Jeff Bridges and Timothy Bottoms. It tells the story of life in a bleak Texas town. A critical and commercial success it secured eight Oscar nominations and won two. And there is a 'picture house' featured in the town so, we're back where we started.

Tell us your magnificent seven films and why they mean so much to you. Contact details on page 3