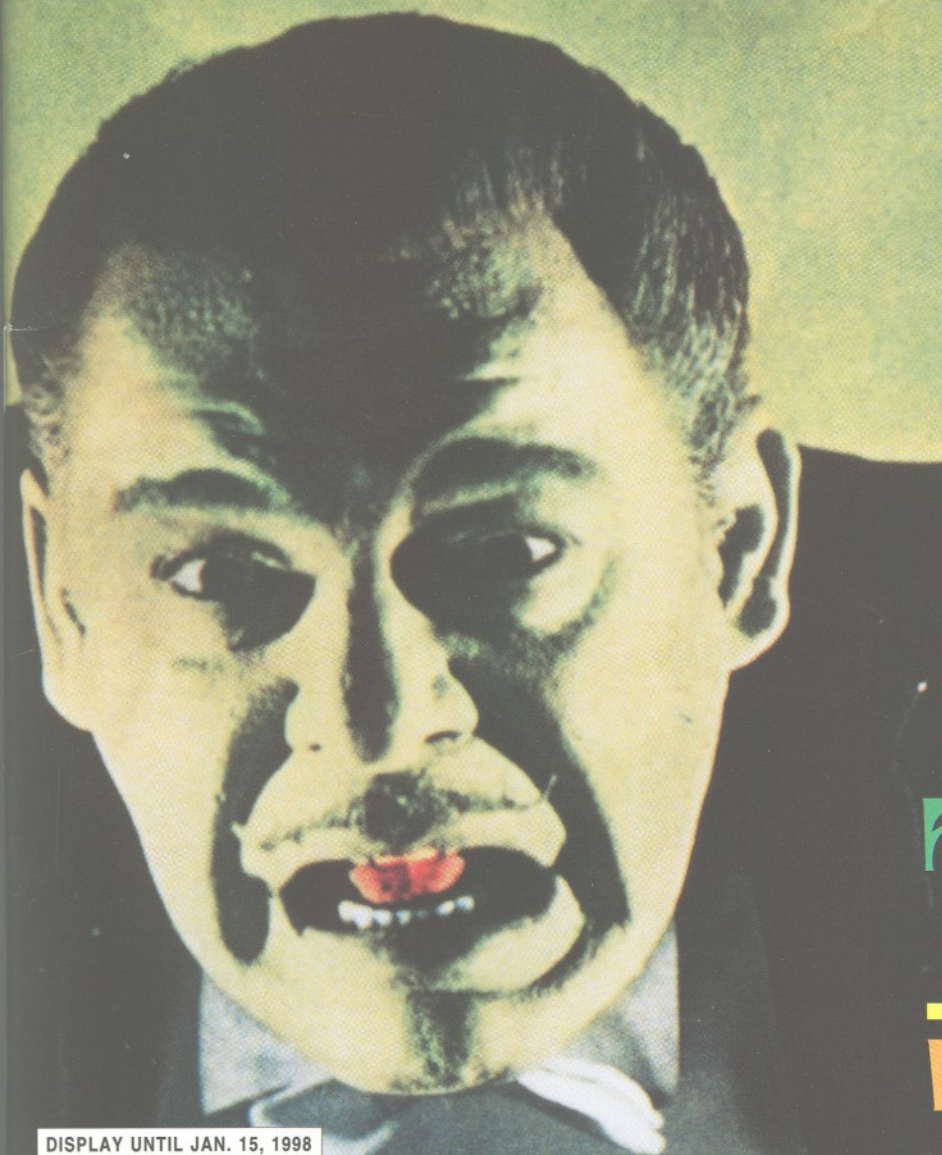
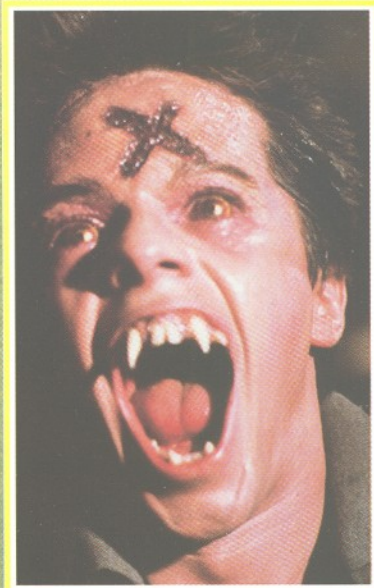


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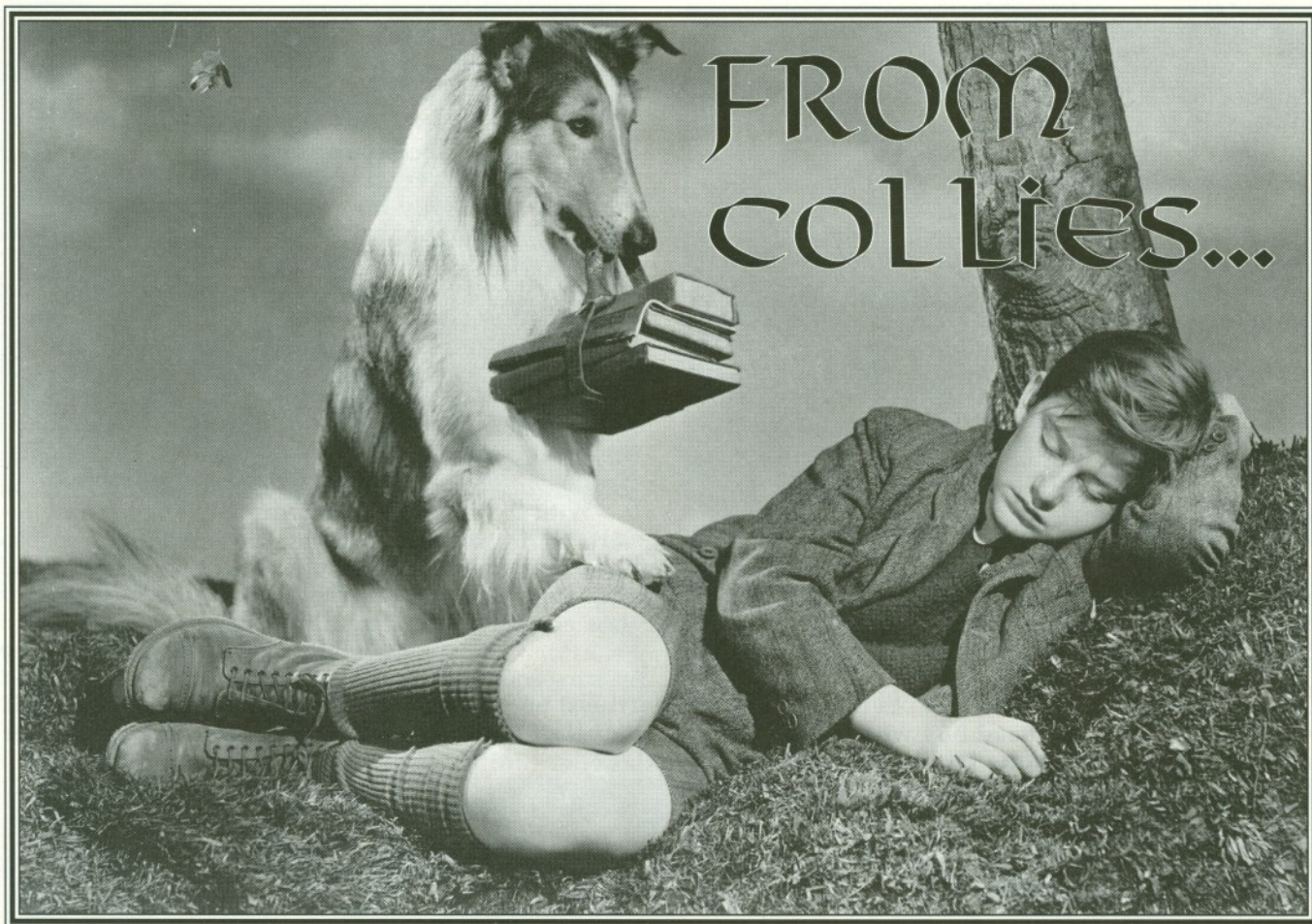
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Roddy McDOWALL

interviewed by Danny Savello



He made *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* in 1941. He's the cartoon voice of the Mad Hatter in 1997. When it comes to lengthy careers, few actors hold a candle to Roddy McDowall. True, he started early, in 1938 at the age of 10, but that isn't necessarily a plus in the world of show biz. Preparing to celebrate his 60th year in the business next year, McDowall took the time to talk with *Scarlet Street* about his remarkable career, in which he's played everything from a vampire hunter to a chimp

Scarlet Street: Do you come from an acting family?

Roddy McDowall: No, my mother always wanted to be an actress. She'd taken opera lessons and she was very taken with films, but she wasn't a professional.

SS: How old were you when you started acting?

RM: Well, I actually started modeling at the age of five, but the first actual job I did in the movies I was about seven or eight. I made a great many films in England, but there were only two or three which were long parts. I mostly played small parts until I came to America.

SS: The titles are intriguing. *MURDER IN THE FAMILY*, *POISON PEN*, *DEAD MAN'S SHOES*

RM: *MURDER IN THE FAMILY* was the second film I made. The distinction of the cast was quite phenomenal. Barry Jones, a very distinguished British actor, Jessica Tandy, Dennis Strong . . . it was a small movie taken from the book *About a Murder in a Family*. There's nothing really remarkable about it. *POISON PEN* was a film with Flora Robson in which I played a very small role. *DEAD MAN'S SHOES* was a film with Leslie Banks that was rather a well-known remake of a French film.

SS: Did British filmmaking prepare you for Hollywood?

RM: What it did was that I was a professional by the time I came to America. I knew what it was like to be in film, but it didn't prepare me for acclimating to the Hollywood studio system, which was entirely different.

SS: In what way?

RM: Well, in those years the studios were a great big empire. If you were under contract, you were trained and privileged and ac-

cepted. British films didn't have, at that time, great studio cast lists. Alexander Korda had a stable of stars, but for the most part they were made in an entirely different way than studios in America.

SS: What brought you to the United States?

RM: The war. My father took my mother, sister, and myself to America for the duration. Within two weeks, I got cast for the film *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY*.

SS: Wasn't your first American film *MANHUNT*?



RM: That was the first one made here, because *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* was initially to be made by William Wyler. Through a series of events, Wyler went on to other things and John Ford came on to do it . . . but, in the meantime, they put me in *MANHUNT*.

SS: Which was directed by Fritz Lang, who was known as being something of a tyrant.

RM: He was wonderful . . . very, very nice. I knew him on and off for the rest of his life and he was always very nice to me.

SS: Your costars in *MANHUNT* were Joan Bennett, George Sanders, and Walter Pidgeon.

RM: I made two films with Joan Bennett and she was very sweet,

but I didn't know her very well. Pidgeon I knew well, because we made three films together. I liked him very much. I also did *SON OF FURY* with Sanders, but I didn't know him well.

SS: *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* was the Oscar-winning Best Picture of 1941.

RM: Nobody realized it was going to be that much of a phenomenal success. It was a very happy film to make, because Ford was a very succinct director. He knew just what he wanted and there was no waste of time. It was a wonderful group of people. All of us remained good friends. Maureen O'Hara, Anna Lee, and myself are all still very friendly. James Monkson was one of the brothers and I haven't seen him in a while, but we still correspond. It made a big impression on all our lives and it became a tremendous launching implement. It was a huge success.

SS: Much of the 1940s involved you with four legged costars, including *Lassie and Flicka*. Do you find these are the films you're most asked about?

RM: No, not really, no more than films like *CLEOPATRA* or *FRIGHT NIGHT* or the Ape films.

SS: Are you an animal lover yourself?

RM: Yes. I don't have any, now. I used to have dogs and cats, but I travel so much.

SS: You worked with Orson Welles in 1948's *MACBETH*.

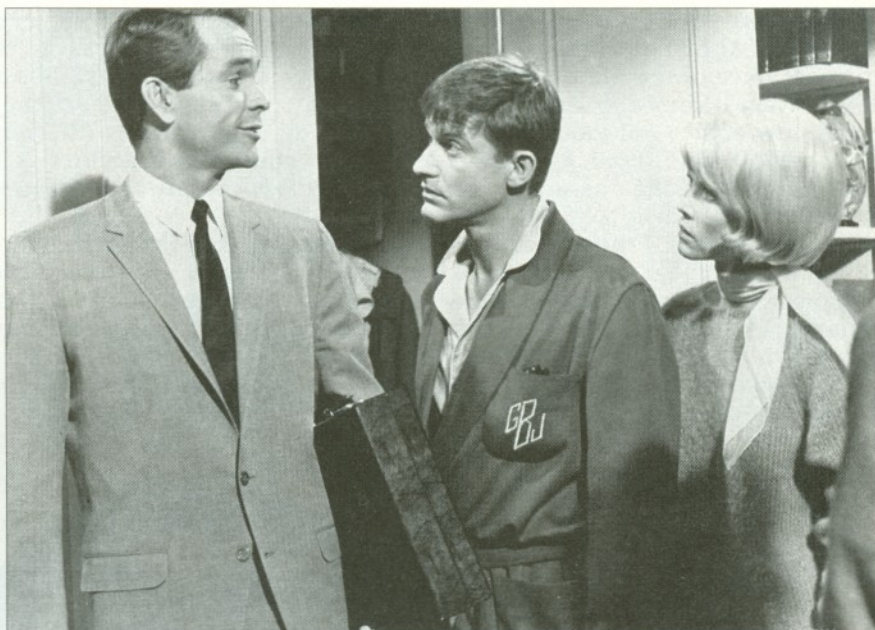
RM: We did it on the stage first. It was a strange experience, because it was prerecorded like a musical, with the concept that it could be made faster. It's not one of my favorite projects.

SS: Did you find it a difficult transition from child to adult actor?

RM: Oh, yes, because acting as a child bears no relation to acting as an adult. You're working on basic instinct and talent as a child; children have immense concentration. The craft has to be learned as you grow up. You don't have a sense of craft as a child.

SS: So you really have to start all over again. Do you think that's why so many child actors find it so hard to cope when they grow up?

RM: No, I don't think so, because so many have. There's a tendency on the part of the media to exploit that period, but it's simply not a fact. I can name people—Jodie Fos-



LEFT: One of the true classics of the silver screen is *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* (1941), with Elsa Lanchester, McDowall, and Donald Crisp. **RIGHT:** Disney's *THAT DARN CAT* (1964) starred Dean Jones, McDowall, and Dorothy Provine.

ter, Kurt Russell, Dean Stockwell, Natalie Wood, Elizabeth Taylor, Mickey Rooney—just a huge group of people who made the transition without difficulty.

SS: But the ones who have had trouble are the ones who make the headlines.

RM: Well, that's exactly it. The troubled ones are much more provocative. The media drags them out every half decade to exploit some situation. There's so many that have had lives that have been totally productive. Look at Shirley Temple—she's had three careers in entertainment and a couple of oth-

ers on the side! So it really isn't a valid premise. A lot of children, when they grew up, decided they didn't want to be actors. Some of them became directors like Sidney Lumet and Ron Howard. It's not an accurate assessment.

SS: Was there a period when you found it hard to find work, or did you just sail on through?

RM: It's always hard; that never changes. Every performer is, to a large extent, a preconceived notion. If he finds success as an adult or a child in a certain sort of vehicle, then the studios start to think of

you in that light continually. It takes a tremendous amount of energy and persistence to break that mold and do something else. It's never easy; it just appears that way. Someone like Bette Davis with 60 years of unparalleled success or Katharine Hepburn—if you investigate, you'll find out that it's really not the case. As well as being very successful, they also had a string of disastrous flops. That happens to a great many people. It just isn't remembered.

SS: In the 1950s, you concentrated on stage and television work.

LEFT: Peter Ustinov (as Hercule Poirot) was joined by Colin Blakely, Jane Birkin, Nicholas Clay, Maggie Smith, Diana Rigg, Denis Quilley, Sylvia Miles, James Mason, Emily Hone, and Roddy McDowall. **RIGHT:** McDowall's early '70s long-hair period included a starring role on Rod Serling's *NIGHT GALLERY*.



"It was a very well-written script. Tom Holland, the man who wrote FRIGHT NIGHT, directed the film and he was very good. The character of Peter Vincent was fascinating to play, sort of like the Cowardly Lion."

RM: That was a marvelous period for me. I left California because there wasn't any productive work for me to do. I was a preconceived notion and, going to New York, I didn't realize it was going to be a bonanza. Live television was just coming into its own and that was such a great arena to learn. I also did theater at the same time, because everything was in the same place. That was a wonderful decade of education.

SS: When you returned to movies, it must have been a shock for *Lassie* and *Flicka* fans to find you in 1960's *THE SUBTERRANEANS*, which was based on a Jack Kerouac novel.

RM: No, because films made in the early '40s simply were not known in the late '50s the way they're known now. There wasn't a constant exposure to them. They were on television to a degree, but people didn't remember them. They didn't remember *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* with the same impact in 1958 that they do in 1997. So, in a sense, a lot of people seeing *THE SUBTERRANEANS* for the first time in the early '60s weren't really aware of the potency of my playing against my earlier image. I mean, the whole thing about Greta Garbo being a star . . . she was a complete unknown in the '50s, because she hadn't made a film since 1942! The Garbo comeback began in the late '50s when they started showing her films in the art houses in New York. A whole generation didn't know her name!

SS: When you made *THE SUBTERRANEANS*, had MGM changed much from its hey day?

RM: Oh, yes, they had all changed enormously. They didn't have the incredible stables of stars, they didn't have the star system . . .

SS: Were you at all a part of the Hollywood rebel crowd?

RM: Which crowd is that? (Laughs) No, I didn't live here. I lived in New York in the '50s and '60s. I would come out here to work.

SS: In the same year as *THE SUBTERRANEANS*, you appeared in a more traditional Hollywood picture

called *MIDNIGHT LACE*. Fittingly for a mystery, one of your costars was Nora Charles herself, Myrna Loy.

RM: I worked with Myrna often and we were very close friends. She was one of the most remarkable, enjoyable, endearing people I've ever known and one of the most talented film actresses I've ever seen. I don't know how one would compare her with Nora Charles, because the canon of her work is so extraordinary, but she and Bill Powell were a wonderful team. The thing about Myrna Loy that's always appealed to me is that she was always very modern. Nothing of her's ever dates. She's a completely now, up-to-date lady.

SS: *SHOCK TREATMENT* featured you as a crazed killer in a mental institution. Do you find it more enjoyable playing villainous characters than heroic ones?

RM: No, but villainous characters are fun to play. The character in *SHOCK TREATMENT* wasn't so much a villain as he was disturbed. Characters who are disturbed are a challenge to play.

SS: We're struck by the variety of your roles. In 1965 alone, you appeared in *THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD*, *THE LOVED ONE*, *THAT DARN CAT* . . .

RM: Oh, the role in *THAT DARN CAT* was wonderful to do. The director, Robert Stevenson, was very good. *THE LOVED ONE* was fantastic! The script was so good and the character was terrific. I worked with John Gielgud, a total delight. The film was not successful at all, though, any more than *LORD LOVE A DUCK*, made within that same period, which was a very good movie with Tuesday

Weld. I played a murderer in that, a terrific character.

SS: You were also the Bookworm on *BATMAN* . . .

RM: I loved being the Bookworm. It was delightful to do those shows. There was supposed to be another appearance of the Bookworm, but I don't remember what happened. The schedule didn't work out, I imagine.

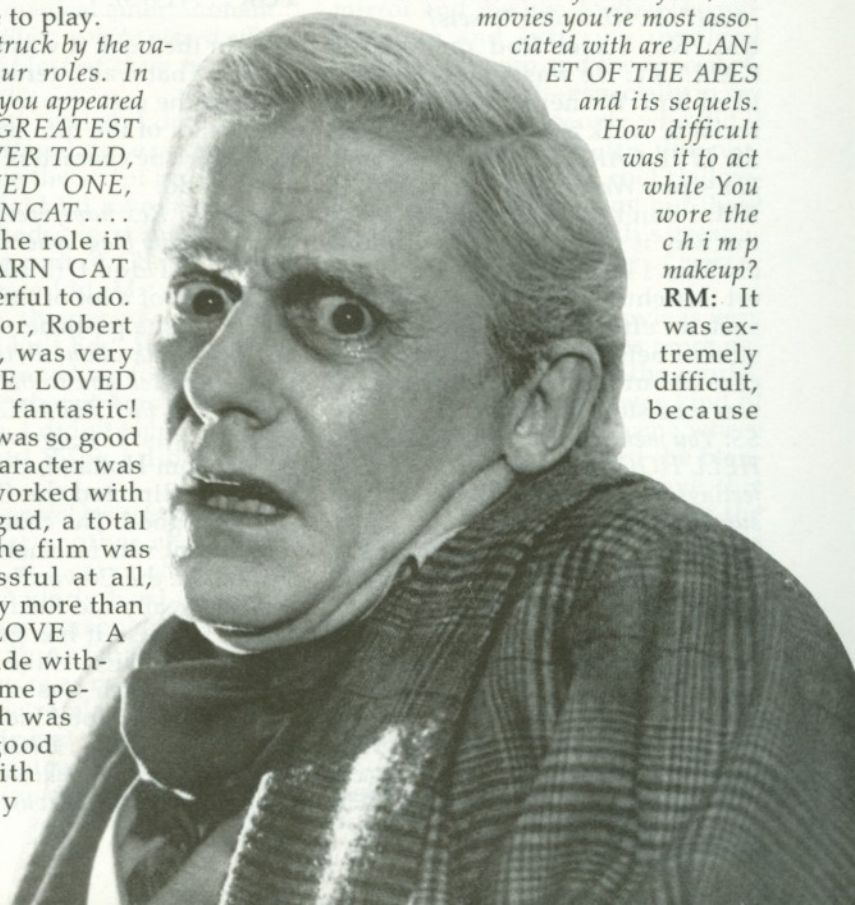
SS: You made a rather strange film called *IT*. One minute it's about the Golem and the next it's a *PSYCHO* takeoff with you talking to your mummified mother.

RM: *IT* was extremely aborted. The film just went totally to pieces and I really don't remember chapter and verse on it. It should have been rather good, actually, but it was very badly done. *IT* was actually my first real horror film. I had always wanted to do a horror film, but it was very bad as opposed to *THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE*, which was done a year later and was quite a good movie.

SS: For science fiction fans, the movies you're most associated with are *PLANET OF THE APES*

and its sequels. How difficult was it to act while You wore the chimpanzee makeup?

RM: It was extremely difficult, because



trying to register under all that appliance necessitated a tremendous amount of imagination. We had to continually move our faces to show a lot of activity so we didn't look dead. It was an incredible challenge, but the films were fascinating to make and they were great characters.

SS: How long did it take to apply the chimp makeup?

RM: It took three and a half hours.

SS: Did the makeup process become less time consuming for the later films or the TV show?

SS: No, the quickest it could be accomplished was three hours.

SS: You missed *BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES*.

RM: I was filming in England at the time. With Ava Gardner, in *THE BALLAD OF TAM-LIN*.

SS: Have you a favorite of the films?

RM: Well, the first is a remarkable movie. I enjoyed the fourth and fifth because I liked playing my own son. In the TV series, I played another character called Galen, who was entirely separate from the rest. He was fun to do.

SS: It's interesting that it's as a human being that you wound up in a zoo in a *TWILIGHT ZONE* episode, "People Are Alike All Over." Rod Serling wrote that episode and *PLANET OF THE APES*, and also hosted *NIGHT GALLERY*, on which you appeared. Was Serling a presence on the *TWILIGHT ZONE* and *APE* sets?

RM: No, I met Rod on *NIGHT GALLERY*. He was a nice fellow; I liked him. We never had any great social or work association, though.

SS: *FIVE CARD STUD* was a hybrid film—part Western, part mystery.

RM: I don't think the film worked the way it read. It was a lot more obvious. I loved working with Robert Mitchum, though. He made such an effort to give the impression of being an actor who didn't care about acting, but I think he was a master craftsman.

SS: You mentioned *THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE*. What are your own feelings about haunted houses and the supernatural?

RM: I don't have any. I don't discount it, but it doesn't keep me awake nights. (Laughs)

SS: *HELL HOUSE* was the first and only film produced by James H. Nicholson following his departure from American International.

RM: He died shortly after the film was released and he didn't have a chance to do any more films. He

was very able. I liked him very much indeed. I thought *HELL HOUSE* was a well-crafted film; it holds up pretty well.

SS: You were one of the stars in *EVIL UNDER THE SUN*, playing a gossipy biographer of the stars named Rex, a character who isn't in Agatha Christie's novel.



After the original, *ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES* (1971) is the best loved of the series—but Roddy McDowall (pictured with Kim Hunter) preferred the last two installments, *CONQUEST OF . . .* (1972) and *BATTLE FOR . . .* (1973).

RM: In the book it was a woman, I gather. That was interesting to me, because the cast was so terrific and the design of the film was so beautiful. Christie characters are so delicious to do.

SS: Could Rex have been based on a living gossipy biographer of the stars?

RM: No, I don't think so. It's a composite of a lot of different people. It's just a pastiche.

SS: Let's talk about Peter Vincent. What attracted you to the horror host character in *FRIGHT NIGHT*?

RM: It was a very well-written script. Tom Holland, the man who wrote it, directed the film and he was very good. The character of Peter Vincent was fascinating to play, sort of like the Cowardly Lion. Tom Holland really did the film marvelously, because it has great humor in it and tension—like *DEAD OF WINTER*, which was not a success but was a very good movie.

SS: As you said, *FRIGHT NIGHT* marked the directorial debut of Tom Holland. Was it difficult being a 40

year veteran of film and working with a first-timer?

RM: No, I'd known him. He was an actor many years before that, so that was never a problem. He was very talented; he had a strong grasp of the material, because he'd written it and he knew how he wished it to evolve. He was extremely professional.

SS: Did you have any suggestions about the character that found their way into the film?

RM: I think that happens when you're working with a good director. Everybody brings something to their part and things grow of themselves. It's a wedding of suggestions and ideas.

SS: Was there ever a fear on your part that starring in *FRIGHT NIGHT* might peg you as a star of horror movies, another Boris Karloff or Vincent Price?

RM: No, I don't think that way. I worked with Karloff a couple of times and he was a lovely man. We worked on television together in *HEART OF DARKNESS*. Vincent Price, I worked with a lot. He was a very dear friend, but Vincent has done a great many films that had nothing to do with the horror genre. We toured together on the stage in *CHARLEY'S AUNT*. He was a wonderful man.

SS: You're now involved vocally with the *Batman* animated series as Jervis Tetch, the Mad Hatter.

RM: Oh, I love playing the character of the Mad Hatter! I've done voiceover before. I was the voice of the Robot in *THE BLACK HOLE*. I did *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS*, which is a cartoon.

SS: It's performed much like a radio show, isn't it?

RM: Yes, just like that.

SS: What would you consider your favorite film experiences?

RM: My favorite? I loved making the *WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER* and *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY*, *CLEOPATRA*, and *LORD LOVE A DUCK . . .*

SS: That's quite a variety.

RM: Usually one's favorite films are based on the life experiences one has had during the progress of the film. Other pictures that haven't been enormously clever or inventive—even though they might have been successful—well, you still don't have the same affection for them.

