



Jocelyn Krieger

Douglas a charmer in bathrobe chat

Melvyn Douglas disappointed me. He wasn't at the Academy Awards presentation to accept his Oscar, and I wanted to see how he looked in a tuxedo.

The last time I saw Melvyn Douglas off-stage, he was wearing his bathrobe.

The scene was the long ago and far away Shubert Theater in Detroit. Along with the Cass Theater, the Shubert gave Detroiters the best glimpse of a real New York playhouse. Dog-eared and an unpretentious hole-in-the-wall, the Shubert glittered with acting.

Backstage was equally dismal. It consisted of a long line of dressing-room doors. Behind one sat the star. Which one? Only the stage manager knew the well-kept secret.

I was a high school senior when I slipped the stage-manager the password: "Mr. Douglas is expecting me."

He was. The day before when he had answered his hotel telephone, Melvyn Douglas had succumbed to my line.

"Excuse me for bothering you," I sweetly apologized, "but I didn't know where else to reach you. I'm a high school student and I write a celebrity column for a Detroit newspaper. I'm sure my readers would love to know the real Melvyn Douglas. Could we meet sometime this week?"

It worked. Just as it did with Henry Fonda, Julie Harris, Van Heflin, Sidney Blackmer, Eddie Bracken, Sophie Tucker, Hildegard, and others. Douglas invited me to meet him in his dressing room between the matinee and evening performances the following day.

APPREHENSIVELY, I knocked on the dressing room door. In the 1956 interview, I wrote:

"When the door opened, a tall, debonair gentleman with a small moustache stood before me. It was then I became acquainted with the distinguished actor with a delightful sense of humor."

Never did I mention in the entire article why I had commented on Douglas' delightful sense of humor. I was too embarrassed!

How do you suppose a teen-age female feels upon finding herself alone in a dressing room with a bare-legged, bathrobe clad male

star of stage and screen? Uncomfortable.

Noting my uneasiness, Douglas graciously offered me a chair accompanied by an explanation.

"You see I dressed appropriately for the occasion — an intimate chat between friends."

In addition, he insisted my photographer wait in the hallway saying, "I would rather be alone with you."

A warm laugh followed betraying the actor's teasing nature. The fact that Douglas is a genuine, compassionate human made him most memorable. The hours passed that afternoon and it was more of a conversation between friends than an interview.

BORN IN GEORGIA yet spending his early childhood in New York, the twice-winning Oscar Award actor didn't really get his start in the Big Apple.

"I was 19 when I first did Shakespearean theater in Chicago," began Douglas. "But I really learned to act in Detroit. Jessie Bonstelle gave me my first real acting lessons."

Douglas was referring to the Jessie Bonstelle Theater which existed in the present Wayne State area, and to the great lady of the stage who gave the theater its name.

"New York is the Mecca of all actors," said Douglas. "So many actors waste their life beating on the gates of New York and are never admitted."

What did Melvyn Douglas advise young acting hopefuls? "Don't go to New York until New York calls for you," is how he put it.

New York audiences of 1925 were introduced to Melvyn Douglas in "A Free Soul." Clark Gable made his screen debut in the motion picture version of the play.

Douglas' own screen premier came in the mid 1930s with actress Gloria Swanson.

"Tonight or Never" in 1931 held special meaning for Douglas. He played opposite, and later married his leading lady, Helen Gahagan.

HIS SUCCESS ON Broadway was not only as an actor. Douglas became a noteworthy director.

In the early 1950s, Douglas directed and starred in the New York production of "Glad Tidings." I had



Teenager Jocelyn Krieger interviewed bathrobe actor Melvyn Douglas in his Shubert dressing room a long time ago.

played the ingenue lead in the Detroit production of "Glad Tidings" the year before I met Douglas.

I still recall how unbelievable it was when Douglas asked my interpretation of the role he had directed on Broadway. He would throw me a cue and expect me to deliver the line. All of this was consuming his valuable time between performances. Yet he remained unconcerned.

When "Kramer vs. Kramer" captured the majority of the Oscars, it pleased me to see young Justin Henry nudged out by the 79-year-old Melvyn Douglas.

It's not that I hate child actors. His first screen role was magnificent. Hopefully, someone took Justin aside and explained that one great performance doth not an actor

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make. It takes a combination of great past performances climaxed by a single role to earn an Oscar.

I haven't seen Melvyn Douglas in "Being There." When I do, I know the wrinkled, crusty old man on the screen will be only a creation of the makeup artist. I'll bet Melvyn Douglas still looks handsome in a bathrobe.

Jocelyn Krieger is a Southfield resident, music teacher and actress in broadcast commercials.

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