



JOHN STANO/staff photographer

Laszlo Willinger took photos of Hollywood stars more than 40 years ago. His pictures helped perpetuate an industry which dealt in illusion and glamour.



WILLINGER-KOBAL

Vivien Leigh's bouffant gown may have been embellished with butterflies, but it's a good bet very few noticed that detail when this

photo was taken in 1940. She was appearing in the film "Waterloo Bridge."

Shooting stars

In this universe, the world gravitated toward glamour

By Louise Okrutek
staff writer

SIGMUND FREUD, European statesmen and Hollywood glamour queens have taken their places in front of Laszlo Willinger's camera.

"Part of being famous was to have a photograph done by me," Willinger said of the European phase of his career.

"I was a recognized portrait man," he said, smiling proudly. The hand in which he held the cigarette made a small, deft arc as it approached his mouth.

His recognition in Europe prompted Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to hire Willinger to produce glamorous shots of its stars during the heyday of Hollywood glamour.

A RETROSPECTIVE of his work for MGM, "Exhibition of Great Holly-

wood Portraits," runs until Jan. 15 at the Pierce Street Gallery, 217 Pierce, Birmingham.

"You don't have models like these anymore," he said of the Hollywood stars whose portraits cover the gallery's walls.

In spite of the pressure to turn out glamorous shots of the likes of Vivien Leigh and Joan Crawford, the job wasn't a difficult one, according to Willinger.

"You know who sweats? The little guy in the corner shop who does weddings and bar mitzvahs. He's taking pictures of people who don't want to be photographed," Willinger said.

MOST OF Willinger's subjects were cooperative.

"These were people who were used to being in front of the camera. They were good looking. They were aware of the need for publicity which made pho-

tographs very important. Probably a lot more people saw the black and white stills than the movies," he said.

Publicity stills also helped create a demand for an actor which that performer could translate into a bid for more money.

However, all of MGM's actors didn't crave tremendous amounts of publicity.

"Spencer Tracy — he'd give me five minutes," Willinger said. "He was never a star in the sense that thousands of screaming teen-agers would be wherever he went. He could go places and not be recognized."

IN THOSE days, the studios supplied photographs of its stars to more than 350 of the nation's daily newspapers. The photos helped fill the two pages of movie news most of the papers contained.

Shadows and dark backgrounds would appear washed-out or too dark in the papers, so photographers carefully took horizontal shots against a plain background.

Rectangular photos were preferred because their shape almost forced newspaper editors to run the pictures across several columns instead of one.

"I would crop the pictures so they couldn't chop them," said Willinger.

After taking photographs for distribution to the daily papers, Willinger and the studio's other photographers spent time dreaming up exotic shots of actors and actresses aimed at winning space on magazine covers.

"IT MADE a difference if you were on the cover or if they ran the picture on page 34, quarter-column size," he said.

People who bought magazines weren't the same people who came to see the stars on the cover. But there was a prestige in magazine covers.

Studios used magazine covers and newspaper movie pages to promote actors while they worked on a film and between projects.

"You didn't sell a movie. You sold a star," Willinger said.

Such an emphasis on publicity placed the studio photographers under pressure to come up with different shots which would catch an editor's eye.

Props were tailor-made for maximum effect. Willinger posed Joan Crawford amid a group of angled columns. Lightly grasping two columns and dressed in a diaphanous gown that didn't reveal as much as it suggested, Crawford made the set look as if it were made only for her.

IN FACT, it wasn't. But a professional could lend a personal touch to any situation. Using this criteria, Willinger picks Crawford and Leigh as his two favorite actresses.

"They were strictly professionals. I give them the highest marks. It was a

relationship of mutual respect for each other's talents," he said of his association with each.

"They could visualize and offer suggestions. There aren't many professionals in any discipline — real professionals. When two of them meet, something happens," he said.

"They could show emotion at the right moment. It involved close cooperation between the photographer and the subject. It ends at the last moment of the session," he said.

TO CAPTURE those emotions, the photographer has to leave himself wide open to the camera.

"If you feel inhibited or rejected, it shows. You must be able to say, 'this is me. That's all there is and I think it's pretty damn good,'" he said.

Just as the photographer must be honest, his subject couldn't be drastically altered to look more attractive than in real life.

"You can't cheat. You can do a little with make-up or lights but if it isn't there, the fanciest make-up, the finest cheating won't do it," Willinger said.

Sometimes the rapport needed between a photographer and an actress was absent, making the assignment more difficult.

"JEANNETTE McDONALD — I never photographed her again after 15 minutes. She said to me 'I don't think we're going to get anywhere.' She was right. The instinct has to be there."

There must be some understanding between a photographer and his subject, Willinger said. The photographer's job is to illustrate the emotions of the subject.

"I don't care what the photographer is feeling," Willinger said.

Such momentary openness between a photographer and subject was necessary in a business geared to promoting illusion.

CRAWFORD RECEIVED 1,000 letters a day. The women who answered the letters weren't allowed to go home unless all of the day's mail had been answered. Christmas and birthday greetings were sent in the actress's name to all of her fan club presidents, Willinger remembered.

"Those were bad times, worse than today. People didn't go (to movies) to see suffering."

"People don't want to go to a movie to know how miserable the world is," he said.

Those people saw movies in which struggling secretaries and socialites alike wore Adrian originals and lived in sumptuous apartments.

"AT METRO, movies must have happy endings. They were making 'Romeo and Juliet' (Louis B. Mayer saw it and said 'You can't release it

without a happy ending. We'll do a thing where they meet in heaven," Willinger said. The heads of the movie companies at that time were uneducated but instinc-

tively knew what audiences wanted, he said. "L.B. Mayer, he could sit and cry at Esther Williams' love scenes," Willinger said.

"These were people who were used to being in front of the camera. They were good looking. They were aware of the need for publicity, which made photographs very important. Probably a lot more people saw the black and white stills than the movies."

LASZLO WILLINGER



WILLINGER-KOBAL

Joan Crawford managed to look strong and sexy at the same time — not an easy feat in 1939.



WILLINGER-KOBAL

Clark Gable was "the King," whose reign probably was helped by photos like this one taken by Willinger.