

SGN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

An interview with Tab Hunter



Tab Hunter Confidential – Photo courtesy of Allan Glaser Productions

by Sara Michelle Fetters
SGN A&E Writer

The 41st annual Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) kicked off [on May 15, 2015] with a gala screening of the Paul Feig comedy *Spy* starring Melissa McCarthy, Rose Byrne, Jude Law and a very, very funny Jason Statham. What follows is a 25-day smorgasbord of wonderment, over 400 features, documentaries and shorts from the world over scheduled to screen at venues throughout Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. Films big, small and gloriously in-between will make their appearance, offering up literally something for everyone as the world's largest, best attended film festival marches happily forward in all its glorious, unabashed cinematic excess.

TAB HUNTER

Of all the visitors, filmmakers and dignitaries scheduled to appear during the festival, it's quite likely the one that gets me most excited is Hollywood icon Tab Hunter. At one point he was considered a studio golden boy, appearing in big budget musical productions like *Damn Yankees* and seeing his shirtless image plastered on posters around the globe while also having a number one single with the release of "Young Love" in 1957. But by the 1960s the worm had turned, the days of the "Studio System" on their way out, leading to the actor being outed by paparazzi and in many ways ending what had been a successful career as leading man and romantic lead.

He worked off and on for the next 20 years appearing mostly on television and in a series of lower budgeted B-movies, never again rising to the same iconic heights of his youth. It was meeting and working with legendary gonzo filmmaker John Waters on the 1980 underground classic *Polyester* that ultimately brought Hunter back into the limelight, however, the film giving him a first opportunity to truly be himself in front of the camera like no production before ever had. In 2005 he penned the eye-opening memoir *Tab Hunter Confidential*, the autobiography a beautifully well-written and intimately raw account of his life and times in Hollywood working as a closeted actor.

It took a little convincing, but celebrated director Jeffrey Schwarz (*Vito, I Am Divine*) was able to convince the actor that now was the time for a documentary based

on his memoir. Sharing the title of the autobiography, the film is a revelation, digging even deeper into Hunter's story while also sharing fascinating interviews – both archival and new – with notable filmmakers and celebrities including Clint Eastwood, Debbie Reynolds, Connie Stevens, George Takei, Noah Wyle, Rock Hudson, John Waters and celebrated Turner Classic Movies host Robert Osborne. It's magnificent, Schwarz composing a fascinating historical journey that's almost impossible not to be mesmerized by.

him that talked me into doing the book in the first place and, for that, I thought, what the hell, I'll give it a shot because at least this way they'll have the truth from the horse's mouth and no one can make me look like a horse's ass after I'm dead and gone.

So, that was the book, and I always thought it was going to stop there, but then it became a bestseller and Allan, after a little bit of time, came back to me and suggested we should make a documentary out of it. I rolled my eyes at him and initially said no, but he came back saying how it would be

in regards to teenage bullying as it relates to sexuality and gender expression. In retrospect, you could say that the book came out at the perfect time when it did in 2005. Now, here in 2015, you can say the same thing about the movie.

Tab Hunter: Timing is always everything, without question, but it is interesting that both the book and the movie seemed to get released right when we're having these really hard, profound conversations in this country about a lot of the issues you just mentioned. Director Jeffrey Schwarz really worked very hard on the film and I trusted him implicitly. We [Allan and I] had done interviews with him on the *Divine* documentary and it was never a question he'd be the one to handle this film as far as we were concerned.

When I first saw it [the film], I couldn't believe what he'd done. I was just blown away. It was a very good feeling. I was so pleased to see how it turned out. Then, to have it released now by HBO, when so much is going on in the country right now involving so many of the issues we talk about in the film, I just feel so lucky, and I do hope young people watch it and hopefully are able to learn something about their own journeys and that they understand that there is hope and happiness waiting for them if they reach out and grapple for it.

Sara Michelle Fetters: It's not just the archival interviews, which are fascinating, but it's the interviews he managed with many of your contemporaries right now. Were you ever surprised at what people had to say about you?

Tab Hunter: Allan told me upfront that he wanted to bring in many of the people that I knew and had worked with over the decades, but he also said he wanted to interview people he said were inspired by my story but that I didn't know, people like Portia de Rossi, Noah Wyle, Lainie Kazan and so many others. I trusted him, and I wanted to make sure he had the freedom to tell the story he felt needed to be told, but I honestly didn't know what to expect until I saw the finished film.

But as far as being surprised? I can't say I was. I mean, at this point, it's pretty much all been said, both good and bad. I was appreciative, for certain, and I'm gratified by many of the remarks, but I honestly can't say I was surprised. What actually meant the most to me was seeing my mother, my

brother, my good friend Dick Clayton who helped get me started in this industry, there would be no Tab Hunter if not for him, it was those things, those inclusions, that's what touched me the most. The way Allan presents them all I was very pleased with. Those moments mean a lot.

Sara Michelle Fetters: I'm always a little flabbergasted, looking at your story and that of fellow closeted stars like Rock Hudson and Richard Chamberlain, by what it took to survive during this portion of Hollywood history, what it took for you to be a star.

Tab Hunter: But that's what life is, isn't it? It's about survival. About the choices you make. Look, a lot of people are really out there and are very active in their feelings and I am so impressed and inspired by that ability. During my time in Hollywood, I was just the opposite. I was very quiet. I was very reserved. I had to be what they [the studios] wanted me to be or they'd just go find somebody else. It was that simple. Those wonderful movie moguls of the time, they knew what it took to build and make careers, and if you wanted to be a star then you did what they said no questions asked.

Sara Michelle Fetters: Because they also knew how to destroy careers.

Tab Hunter: Exactly. They had the power. But, then, they were your boss and you did your job, that's all there really was to it. Now, I did turn down a few films and that didn't exactly make me the most popular guy on the lot at times, but they also knew which films to put me in that would show me off the best. But I did finally wear out my contract, and that was actually when everything changed for me as far as my career was concerned, it wasn't the moguls going out of their way to destroy me or anything.

The studio era? In my opinion it was a wonderful time, even with its flaws. It's a whole different ballgame now. It's all large corporations, all of which that seem to think spending more money makes better motion pictures which is unconditionally untrue. Like it was during my day, it's still all about the material. Material, material, material; great material is how you make a great motion picture.

Sara Michelle Fetters: And, you should know, because you were actually there when everything changed, when the Studio System came to an end during the late 1950s, early 1960s, and the new wave of filmmakers and studio heads began taking control. You saw it firsthand.

Tab Hunter: I did. That's a very good point. You also have to realize television was really starting to take command of the audience's attention during that time, and that really did hurt the motion picture industry, more than I think today's young people and moviegoers comprehend or understand. Those moguls knew what they wanted. Today, these large corporations, they rarely have any sort of idea as to what it is they want. There are too many people adding their input. The writer and the director and the producer, they no longer have any control. They're forced to go along or they [the studios] will just find someone else to take their place. I mean, ego is a killer, and with all these corporate boardrooms trying to make decisions overriding the filmmaker's wants and intentions I think there's a lot of ego getting in the way today.

Sara Michelle Fetters: If you can't sell the plot of a film in five words, or if it isn't about a superhero or a name franchise, or if it won't play in China, then there's no reason to make the movie at all.

Tab Hunter: Right. Concentration spans seem to be only two minutes long anymore or, at least, that's how these corporations think. It's not good for the industry, and I think that's why the majority of the good films you see have to be made independently outside of studio reach. Not all, as with anything there are exceptions, but the majority. I don't see how anyone can disagree with that.

Sara Michelle Fetters: Back to your story, do you ever allow yourself to think what could have been? What might have happened with your career had the Studio System not come to an end, had you not been outed? I mean, when *Damn Yankees* came out, in all honesty you were one of

the biggest stars in the world at that point. Would remaining there have been worth the cost it would have required to do so?

Tab Hunter: My mother was a wonderful, strict, old-fashioned German woman, and she always said something doesn't sit well with a lot of people even though it's absolute true: Accept things as they are, not the way you want them to be. Whoa. I mean, think about that for a second. What a statement! So true.

Sara Michelle Fetters: You also got the opportunity to work with some incredible directors, George Abbott, Stanley Donen, Raul Walsh, William A. Wellman, Sidney Lumet, John Huston, just to name a scant few.

Tab Hunter: Wonderful directors. For me, the greatest ones that I had the pleasure to work with were the ones who came out of live television. Sidney Lumet. John Frankenheimer. Arthur Penn. They just knew how to get the best out of you. We're talking really fine directors. But then, I go over to Italy and I'm working with Luchino Visconti. I mean, my gosh, this man was brilliant! I was very lucky to work with the directors I did, no question.

Sara Michelle Fetters: Could you have gone to Italy, worked with Visconti, had your story not had the arc that it had?

Tab Hunter: He wanted me for *Senso* back in 1954, but my agent at the time didn't even know how to pronounce his name let alone give me the script, so that never happened. When I met with Luchino years later he told me this story and I rolled my eyes. If only I had known! I mean, that film! It's stunning. But I would get the chance to work with him later on. He was a master. One of the best.

Sara Michelle Fetters: Then there is John Waters. In many ways, your story wouldn't be complete without him. What was that like? Getting that call from him? Working with *Divine* and all the rest on *Polyester*?

Tab Hunter: John is your friendly undertaker. He truly is a sweet, if mischievous, man. He was wonderful to work for. He was terrific. He had his group and they were devoted to him, willing to do anything. It was guerrilla filmmaking at its finest. In many ways I owe so much to him. To this day, I can't help but smile every time I see John. I enjoy him so very much.

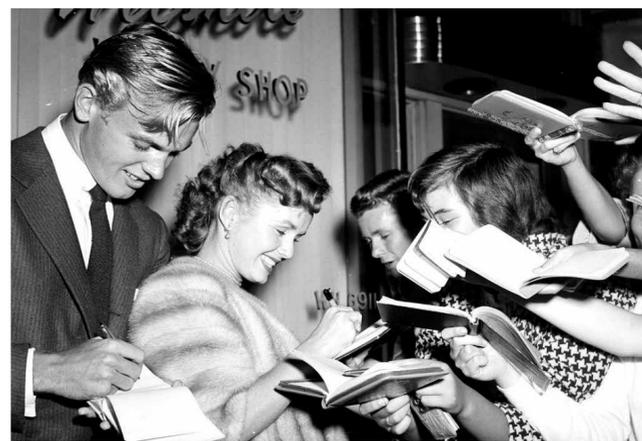
But, making *Polyester*, you just had to embrace the moment. It was a very exciting time. It really was. It was the first film I'd done in ages, I was doing dinner theater at the time and I had two weeks off so I thought, what the hell, I'll do this little picture for this guy with the crazy mustache and see what happens. I had read the script and it frankly sounded like a lot of fun. I was also a major fan of *Divine's*. I mean, who can forget *Mondo Trasho*? Such a talent.

Sara Michelle Fetters: What does your story say to the young Gay kid in middle America who's afraid to tell anyone what's going on with themselves, or the young Transgender girl in the Northeast terrified they're not going to let her use the right bathroom and she's going to have to face unimaginable ridicule? How does this story apply to them? How can they relate?

Tab Hunter: I'm not one to give advice. I never have been. But I can tell you that people have to be truthful to themselves. You have to go down the road as openly as you can. You have to have an open mind. Geraldine Page once said to me, if people don't like you that's their baggage. I thought that was fabulous. Not only did I apply that to my life, I also pass it on to every person that I meet. If others don't get the message, that's not your problem, that's theirs. As long as we accept this journey positively, we have to be positive, anything is possible.

There are three words I think are very important to a person's health: mental, physical and, number one, spiritual. I think we always have to be aware of those words no matter what path we're on. As long as we take care of those things, are aware of them, nurture them, then we stay on the path and can live a healthy life. If others take issue then, like Geraldine said, that's their baggage, not yours.

This article was originally published in the Seattle Gay News, May 15, 2015.



1953: During his time as a Warner Bros. heartthrob, Hunter was often paired with popular actresses, like Debbie Reynolds, and expected to put on a show of dating for publicity. – Photo courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images



1955: Hunter beat out the likes of James Dean and Paul Newman for a role in the war movie *Battle Cry*, which helped him become a more serious and respected actor. – Photo courtesy of Getty Images



1956: Hunter and Natalie Wood were good friends – dancing and flirting publicly at functions together while privately carrying on their own secret romances; she with Dennis Hopper, he with Anthony Perkins – Photo by John Springer Collection / Corbis via Getty Images



1959: Also a recording artist, Hunter had a huge hit with 1957's "Young Love" – it spent six weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. – Photo courtesy of ABC via Getty Images