For the
Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

Interview on

JOHN ENGSTEAD
Hollywood Photographer

by Robert L. Greene
Q. Claudette Colbert once said that the only photographs of herself that really kept, and also the ones of her family—her first husband and whatever—were the photographs taken by John Engstead. And, of course, it's so typical of the world of Hollywood that there were a lot of people whose names have not become totally familiar to us in the outside circle. But when you get into their work, and you get into the material of their lives, you realize that they were very much a part of the important fabric of Hollywood. And in the tapestry of the really early days and the golden days of Hollywood, these people made it possible for us to have images that would be totally missing. I mean, John showed me a picture of Lillian Gish when she couldn't have been any more than 19 or 20. But it is so ravishingly beautiful that I gasped. You know. That kind of thing. So you realize that he's been around a long time.

I should explain that he has a heart condition and isn't in the best of health. We're doing the tape on his terrace, which is close to a highway, and so occasionally we are going to hear noise that reflect traffic and that sort of relationship. He likes living that way, because it gives him the feeling that he's not totally removed from the bustle and hustle of society. Because what you feel about him is that, as a young man, he was not only very attractive and very earnest and interested and somewhat driven, but he was also a party boy and
ready to go at any given moment and thus, was adored by many of the stars, who found his humor and his interest in them (there's nothing like somebody who's a great listener as well as a great talker). And, of course, I think one of the cements that you find that holds these patches of people together over the years is good old gossip; I mean, somebody you can count on to tell you what's going on behind the scenes. Or, who's angry with whom, who's sleeping with whom, who's faking, who's closeted, whatever. And the sense that you get of John Engstead is that he was more than willing to supply all that information. But there's no denying that when you look at his collected work that he photographed major stars in a major way. And in many times created images that must have made them deliriously happy, because he has...It's that same "fan quality" that he brings to his social activities that also reflects itself in his photographs.

I identify with him on the basis that he...It's amusing to me...The first movie star that I can really remember in my consciousness is somebody that I just gasped at the energy and the vitality and the sheer loveliness and beauty and the Americanism of the quality, was Clara Bow. Of course, I couldn't wait to ask John about Clara.

A. She had just made "Wings," and I thought she was absolutely sensational, of course. She dashed into the office one day, and the publicity department was all around in a circle. You cane down the hall and there was an opening space
in the middle and there was offices, and she came down. And, of course, everybody just stopped working, and Clara came in with her little socks and her little high heeled shoes, and her little short skirt dress tied around the middle. And, you know, while (?) . . flying around, she was just happiness personified. She was just so natural, and everybody just...I mean, it was like somebody taking on gas. I've never taken dope, but it was like a shot of dope, when you looked at this girl. And I thought, oh boy.

Well, I was an office boy, you see, and a messenger, as well as hired for....

Q. One of the amusing things about living in New York City, for instance, John, is that you keep meeting people and think that you're meeting, you know, a really truly sophisticated New Yorker. And as you push and scratch anybody, seven-eighths of the people come from other states. Therefore, I was terribly interested in the fact that you were born in Los Angeles. Now, that was a period when Los Angeles was not considered the biggest city in the world and had really only one industry, which was the motion picture industry. Did that direct you to motion pictures? I mean, is that something you wanted to be in or be involved with?

A. I wasn't really. You see, I was really stage struck and I really thought actors were simply marvelous and I wanted to meet them, so when I was going to high school the only way I could figure out to meet people was to go interview them.
And so the first thing...Gilda Gray had been here. And, nobody knows Gilda Gray today, but she was a really great, sensational Ziegfeld shimmy dancer. She was always in the Sunday supplements. She was married to a guy who was supposed to be a gangster in Chicago. And, of course, this whole thing had a great aura of fascination. And so she came for a personal appearance at the Metropolitan theatre in Los Angeles, and (?) before she arrived they had this great big enormous billboard all over the city, like there had never been before, and it said "Gilda Gray." It didn't say the theatre, it didn't say anything. Well, that was pretty exciting that way, because this sort of shocked Los Angeles at that time, see. But this was 1925. This far out, we had a million people here, then, you know. Beverly Hills was nothing. They had a race track in Beverly Hills, where the Beverly Hills Hotel is.

But anyway, I thought oh, my God, I've got to go see this woman. So my mother and sister and I went down and they were just lined, standing in front of the theatre. We had to stand in line, and, of course, we could only get into the balcony, way upstairs. But anyway, you looked down, and here all of a sudden this great, sensational music comes. This jungle rhythm you see. And all of a sudden this woman comes out on the stage and she has nothing on but this little leotard with silver spangles and her hair, she's got two inch strips of silver all over her hair. So everything moved when she shimmied. Everything moved. I'd never seen anything like
Anyway, she wasn't pretty, but she had great glamor. I thought oh, my God, isn't this woman wonderful?! I didn't interview her. But the next one who came to town was Ann Pennington, who had also been in the follies, and she came down to the "Kinnelith" Theatre, which wasn't quite so good, so grand. So I thought I'll go and interview this one. And so I called up the theatre and I said I was from L.A. High School and I wanted to interview Ann Pennington for our paper. It was a daily paper, a small paper, about 12" tall, or something. It came out every day though.

Q. Was this the work of a brilliant school editor, who decided that if the big city papers--Louella Parsons and the Hearst papers--could do interviews and gossip, there's no reason why the high school paper shouldn't do the same thing? Did they assign you these things, or was it your drive and your creativity that made you go out and get these interviews?

A. No, no, no, no. I just said I was going to do it. I was going to do it. So I went down and the man said yes, so I had to come down and see the first performance, you know, at 1:00. My mother said I could stay out of school, so I got in the car and I drove down to the theatre and went in. And, gosh, she was in a dirty little dressing room, and she was sort of crummy herself, and I was amazed by this. And she wasn't enthusiastic about me at all. To have to be interviewed by some stinkin little 15 year old kid, you know.
So, anyway, I got a story from her. You know, what she... But you know, for high school, you can only ask them. If a girl wants to be a dancer today, what is the best way for her to start? What do you think a success is? You know? That kind of stuff. You couldn't ask about her sex life or anything. I didn't know about a sex life anyway! But, so, I... So she gave me a little 5" X 7" autographed picture and I did my interview and I took it back to L.A. High and I took it to this Catherine Carr (the kids used to call her Kitty Carr) and she was the journalism teacher, the head of the paper. So she looked at it and I didn't... I wasn't taking journalism, so I just gave it to her and she took it, and the next day in the paper the headline says, "L.A. Boy Interviews Ann Pennington." That was the headline of the paper. And my story was in it.

Well, I started. So I ( ). A woman that I was very enchanted with was Adela Rogers St. John. Adela Rogers St. John was an editor... She and her husband ran "Photoplay Magazine," and she was a very attractive woman (actually in her old age she still is). A fascinating lady. So, I interviewed Carla Meyers and Louise Fazenda ( ).

Q. Yeah..?
A. ... John Barrymore and... I started taking journalism too.

Q. It's terribly interesting that my "daughter" is married to Richard St. John, who is Adela St. John's son. And just two weeks ago we drove up to the motion picture home where
she is living. Adela is 93, and just as sharp as a tack. So much so that she is always in trouble with the staff and the "inmates," as it were, (she refers to them as the inmates) because she challenges everything, as she did when she was a brilliant reporter, as well as a major screenwriter. An extraordinary lady. But it is funny how lives get intertwined, John. But, I want you to tell me...I'm thrilled...I've only known her as a very old woman, and she fades in and out and doesn't have a great deal of interest in me. Although she did think that I looked a little like "Fairsley Farr," whom she had met in Paris. That's our only connection as far as her conscious mind is concerned. So, tell me more about Adela St. Johns.

A. I went to see her one day and I thought, I want to meet her, so I found out where she lived. So about 6:00 one night I went up to her house, up on (?) Boulevard, and I said that I was in high school and asked her if she would write a story about success for the paper. She was a graduate of the school; that was the reason I could get to her. She was a graduate of that high school.

Well, she wrote the story and I picked it up the next day, and there was a sheet like this, a sheet and a half or something, you know, double spaced. It wasn't a big story. So I took it out to Kitty Carr and I said, "I have got this story from Adela Rogers St. Johns that she wrote for our paper. And Catherine Carr looked at me like I...and said, "What do you mean by asking Adela Rogers St. Johns to write a story."
We can't print a thing like this in our paper. We have a daily paper and it's small. How can we print all this stuff. She said, "Where is it?" And it said...I'll never forget the story. It said, "If anyone asks you what is success, it's hard work. That's all there is, only two words. There's no such thing as luck. It's just hard work. I spent 16 hours a day when I began, selling the newspapers." And she said, "This is the whole story."

Well, she went on and read the whole thing and said, "This is marvelous," Kitty Carr said. "Take it down and have it printed, we'll run it tomorrow." So we did that. Then I took it back to Adela and gave it to her, and Adela said, "How would you like to interview Colleen Moore?" So I said, "That's fine," so she arranged for me to go to First National Studios to see her, she was making "Irene." And I got on the set and they had this big production number of her coming down in the "Irene" dress, and I thought, "My gosh this is wonderful!"

Q. You are to be complimented, John. Because there aren't that many young people who would have been that personally ambitious, or who had the ability to charm people. I mean, Adela St. Johns--all these people that you're talking about--were not only successful performers, but they were very intelligent, bright, creative people and I think you should be very pleased, when you think back, that these things worked as well and as effectively as they did. It's not an accident. There are those people who have magic and you are obviously one of them.
Who else did you interview? Who else were you exposed to that we would all adore knowing?

A. I used to interview John Barrymore, too, when he was making "Don Juan," and I got him first thing in the morning, about 8:00 in the morning, or 8:30, first one on the set. And God, I just remember this man with red eyes! And, you know, he'd been drunk the night before, obviously, and he had this terrible hangover, and he didn't say much, you know.

Q. John, you did all this because you were a star struck kid?

A. Yes. Well, I was writing for the paper and it was fun to do it, you know. So I read in the paper that Red Grange was coming to town. Now, there's nobody today, I don't think, who compares to Red Grange. He was this great idol. Do you remember Red Grange?

Well, he was just...I found out when he was coming in so I went down to the station to meet him when he got off the train, and as he got off the train, of course, there were 100 people there. Now, all the newspaper people--all the reporters, all the photographers--were there, and I got up pretty close to him and I heard his manager say, "Well, he's right at the Biltmore Hotel and you can all interview him there. He's going right now." So they all left.

Well, I got to my car and I got to the Biltmore Hotel before Red Grange got there, and he came in with his manager and all these people trooping in with him, you see. And he
says he was going to Room 1115, or whatever it was. So I went right with him, I got right next to him, and I got in the elevator with him. And all these other characters are lookin at me, sayin "Who the hell is this squirt comin in here?" you see. So I went up to his room and I walked into his room and I stood there right beside him, as close as I could get to him, while everybody in town--"The Examiner," "The Express," "The Times," "The Daily News"--all these people asked him all these questions--"What's your longest run? What's your happiest thing? What are you most proud of?"--and all' this stuff about baseball. And I was writing it all down. And I got all the interviews...All the best things from all the papers and when they got through, he looked at me (he was very nice) and said, "Well, what would you like to know?" So I asked him about kids and football and stuff; about taking care of your health, and all that sort of thing. He was marvelous, this guy. I knew this would be a good interview.

Q. John, you seem to be able to get into hotel rooms that nobody else can get into. I heard a rumor that you were the only (is this true?), that you were the only reporter that was able to get an interview with the author of "The Green Hat?" Michael Arlen?

A. Michael Arlen. Michael Arlen was out here in Hollywood and he was a tough little character and he said, "Absolutely no interviews." And And Adela Rogers St. Johns said to me, "If you ever want anything at Paramount, you call '(? )Hurley.
.. Michael Arlen, because he was in the press, and nobody... he wouldn't interview with anybody. So I finally called up "Harold Hurley" and I said I was a friend of Adela Rogers St. Johns and I wanted to interview Michael Arlen, and he said, "You can't do it. Nobody's interviewing him at all. Nobody whatsoever." Period. That was it.

So, someplace I read that he was living at the Ambassador Hotel. Now, the Ambassador Hotel was only three blocks from my house. So, I thought, well, I'd go down and see him at the Ambassador. So I asked my mother if I could stay out of school, and I think about 9:00 in the morning I went down to the Ambassador Hotel and the desk told me his number, and he was with the (?), out near the front. Of the Ambassador. And I went in and I knocked on the door and a Chinese servant came to the door and I said that I was from L.A. High School and that I wanted to interview Michael Arlen. And he said... He said, "You come back in an hour and I'll see what I can do." Well, nobody else had asked him, you see. So I left and I came back in exactly one hour, exactly one hour, and the Chinese man came up and said, "Where you been? He said he would see you. Now it's too late. He's going to New York this morning." So I said, "Oh, God." He said, "Wait, I'll see what I can do." So he went in to see Mr. Arlen, and Arlen came out. He said, "I'm leaving now, but I'll tell you what I can do. You can walk with me to the desk and you can walk back (?) .. over to the desk and back and I'll answer any question you want."
Q. Well, of course, it's always fascinating, these twists of fate in our lives. I think for everybody. That determine what our path is. Now, obviously, as a fan, as somebody who was really star struck, you created this relationship to your school paper. But, how did you get into the studios? I mean, that's a big jump, from the local high school paper to a job, particularly when you have no background at all, on the payroll of a major studio? How did that happen?

A. Once when I was interviewing "Louise Fazenda," who was very nice, and her boyfriend at the time was Hal Wallis, and he was head of publicity at Warner Brothers, and so she said to me one day...I took her the interview and she saw it and said, "This is very good. Would you like to work in the studio?" Well, I never dreamed...This is like heaven. So I said, "Yes, I'd like to work in the studio." So she said, "Well, my boyfriend is Hal Wallis, and I'll make an appointment for you to see Hal Wallis."

So, I went to see Hal Wallis, and I took him my little interviews and things. And Hal Wallis said, "Well, you'll have to be messenger boy, you'll have to be an office boy in the publicity department."

Q. John, this was at Warner Brothers?

A. Office boy in the publicity department, at Warner Brothers. But he said, "I have to get an allotment from New York." See, all the allotments, for how much they pay out, are all down in New York. That's the big office of the studio. The
business offices are in New York.

So, he wrote to New York and they wouldn't let him have the $18 or $20 and so he couldn't hire me. But she had given me the idea...Louise "Fazenda" had. So I went to see "Harold Hurley." I was over at Paramount one day, and I had never met "Harold Hurley," but I thought, "Well," and I went to the front desk, in the publicity department right there in the "marathon," and I said, "John Engstead, a friend of Adela Rogers St. Johns, to see Harold Hurley." Well, that was the thing. "Go right in." And I went in to see Harold Hurley and I had my interviews and I said, "I want to get a job." He said, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "I want to be a writer." Well, he looked at me and he said, "What have you got?" Well, the Michael Arlen thing was way down at the bottom, because it really wasn't a good interview. I put Red Grange on the top, and Louise "Fazenda" and the rest of them. So finally...He thumbs through the things and he read them, and they didn't impress him, of course, when all of a sudden he got to Michael Arlen, and he said, "Did you interview Michael Arlen?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "How did you do it?" I said, "I went over to see him at the..."

He said, "Come here." He took my...(He was assistant head of publicity)...He took my hand and he took me into Arch Reeves office, who had this big, oak paneled office, and he said, "Arch, this is the only guy in Southern California who's interviewed Michael Arlen. You've got to hire him.
You've gotta hire this kid." So they said, "Well, you can start in a month. Can you type?" And I said, "I can't type," and of course I couldn't. So they said, "Well, you're start at $18 a week. You'll be messenger and (?)�

Q. It's fascinating to me, John, to have you talk about this early period in your life, because those of us who know your photographs never dreamed that this was the other area that you entered the studios with, this particular talent as an interviewer. That jump must have been a strange one to make. And again, I'm always fascinated with these things that change our lives. I mean, what was your relationship to photography? I mean, did you take the pictures, did you style the pictures?

A. Well, I didn't do styling. I produced the things. I got everything, the backgrounds, (?) I wanted, everything. You know? After I got started. But sure...Well...They had a meeting one day in the publicity department and they had all the guys sitting around Arch Reeves office, he had this big office.

Q. Whose office?

A. Arch Reeves. He was the head of publicity. He's the guy that hired me, see. So I was in there and he said, "We have a (?) in the New York office. They don't have enough art, they don't have enough photographs. We have to do more. And I need to ask you, I know you're busy, but if anybody can even just get an idea for a sitting, just get a photographer, a good photographer, and do it themselves. You don't have to
be there all the time. Just get it done. Make your appoint-
ment and get it done" So I thought, "Well, I could do this.
And if I went along, I could help, too," see. So I thought...
I had always seen pictures outdoors, pictures in gardens and
on boats and...
Q. That's right.
A. So I thought, oh, those beautiful pictures you see
in magazines—gardens and things. So, I went to Ron Hutchinson
who was the publicity man on "Wings," and (?) . . . publicity
man and I said, "I want to do Clara Bow in a garden," and he
said it was a good idea, so he gave me her telephone number.
I said I would get some clothes from wardrobe and I'd find a
place to photograph, and she said...I said "Who shall I get
to photograph?" And she said, "Otto Dyer." Otto Dyer was with
her on "Wings" and "he's very good, get Otto Dyer." So I got
Otto Dyer, but first I called up Clara Bow and I said I was
with the publicity department at the studio (?) . . 12 or 55,
and I said I wanted to do a sitting of her in a garden, and
would she do it, and she said yes she would.

She said at 1:00 one day, I was going to pick her
up at her house. And (?) . . Cadillac limousin, and then I had
to have a grip, of course, to handle those (?) . . and then I
had to get Otto Dyer, and he helped me, of course, with the
(?) and that kind of stuff, see. So then I went up to the
wardrobe department and Edith Head or Travis Banton went
through the wardrobe and got me dresses and some bathing suits
and some shorts--things for her to wear around the garden
see. So, the day I was going to do this...And, of course,
I had to (?) the newspapers every morning, take all the stuff.
So I rushed out very early and rushed down to Los Angeles and
went to all the newspapers (and there were a lot of them at
that time; not many today--like the "Daily News" and the
"Record" and the "Express" and the "Examiner" and the "Times.
And then they had two in Hollywood--the "Hollywood News" and
the "Hollywood Citizen.") I had to make a whole route and get
them and then get back to the studio by noon. Of course I never
had lunch. Then I picked up the car. They told me where to get
the car, I got the car, and I got Otto and I got the wardrobe
and we went out to Clara Bow's house. She lived at 512 (?)
Drive, and I picked her up. She got in the car with me.

Before that, in between that I set the sitting. I
went out on "Center City" Boulevard where I thought they had
beautiful houses out there. And I went along and I looked at
these things. They had two or three acres, each one of them,
see. So I found one of them I liked very much. It belonged
to "Winnett," who was the head of Bullock's Wilshire at the
time. And he had a beautiful garden, and he had ponds and all
this stuff.

So, I went to the house...Of course, it was after
I got through work at night. I only got out there...So I knocked,
or, I rang the bell, and a young man came to the door, a little
bit older than I was. And I said I was from Paramount Studio
and I wanted to know if I could bring Clara Bow out there to make some photographs in the next day or so. So he said, "Well, I don't think we've ever done this, but you're lucky my father's here." So Mr. Winnett, a little tiny man, came to the door and I said I was from Paramount and I wanted to ...and he said, "Well, I guess you can do that, sure." I said, "Is there a little room where she can change her clothes?" And he said, yes, yes, so that was all set. So I said we'll be out this day.

So, I took her out and she was marvelous. You know, Clara...Just...Give her a tree and she'd hang from a limb. She'd come through the garden gates, and she'd do the lounges and she would do...

Q. It's rather marvelous to hear you talking about Clara Bow, because there really... She was unique and so individual. There really weren't many stars like Clara Bow, of that quality.

A. Not...No...Well, Lombard was marvelous, but, you see...more calculated. More...She thought what she was going to do ahead of time. Clara never, ever...It never entered her head what she was going to do ahead...It just came to her, you see. It was just like a spring that came out of her. As fast as I could...It was 8" X 10" film then, you see. So, we did all this. And by the time we got back to the studio it was about 6:30 at night. I dropped her off at her house and we got back to the studio, and then I got back to the apartment.
And there was a couple of secretaries I used to pick up on my way to work and bring home, it was my father's car I was using to do all this messenger work. So, I got back and she said, "Were you out making pictures of Clara Bow this afternoon?"

And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Oh, my God. Nobody knew where you were, and Arch Reeves found out about it, and said, 'Who the hell gave permission to the office boy in our publicity department to take the highest priced box office star of the screen today out on a sitting? God. Are you people crazy?!'" And Hal Hurley said (he hired me), "Well, wait till tomorrow and see the pictures."

So, tomorrow morning, I had to go get the papers again, so I was out of the place, and when I got back at noon, on my desk was a little orange memo. It was always on orange paper, that Arch Reeves sent. And I hadn't seen the pictures. (?) He said, "In case your high powered publicity men want to know it, the best sitting that Clara Bow has had in years was done yesterday by John Engstead and Otto Dyer."

Q. Yes.

A. (?) . . . always used to take his cigarettes and roll them around the end (?) . . and he said, "Now, John, you can do some of these things. But you've got to do all your own clippings. You've got to clip all the newspapers, you've got make all the things. All this stuff has to be done before you can go...But you can do another sitting once in a while."

Q. In the corporate world, we always are aware of that
particular jungle and the politics of the entry of a new persona into the corporation. I would assume, John, that for a...You were about 17 years of age...To be given the responsibility of dealing with major stars, as well as having the approval of the publicity department--to say nothing of it getting back to the main office in New York--I would think that the other photographers...Wasn't "Walling" and "Ritchie" at the studio at that time? Wouldn't they be, how do you say? A little concerned?
A. No. But...They did resent it. I mean, Ritchie resented it. There's no doubt. I mean, Gracie Allen...George Burns came in one day to do a sitting, and Gracie Allen said, "John, those last pictures you did with me I just think were marvelous!" You could just hear, Ritchie just die! And I thought, "Well, my gosh," (?)...but you see, I did it, and I told her what I wanted and I showed her the poses and I showed...I showed her how to pose... (?)..."Come on, let's do this."

Sylvia Sidney...Sylvia Sidney would come in with the most beautiful Travis Banton gown and sit down with her feet spread like this. Now, what do I do? So you have to direct the whole thing.

Q. I'm trying to get the picture clear in my own mind, John. As you talk about it, it's almost as though you invented a whole new direction for these pictures. Is it conceivable that someone like Ritchie wasn't allowing the stars to have poses that were the traditional or the cliche' poses? How about that?
Q. He wasn't... He didn't care. He thought the Hurrell stuff, all that stuff was terrible stuff. Cecil Beaton would come out there watching... The first time, one of the first times Cecil Beaton ever shot was at Paramount... Photography... And we gave him a camera. And, of course, I knew this was for "Vanity Fair," and I loved "Vanity Fair" and I knew these were going to be good pictures. So, I got everybody on the lot to pose—"Kate Masters" and Bill Powell—everybody.

Q. Cooper.

A. Cooper. I got everybody, see. Half an hour. He only took ten minutes, and so finally... (?) develop the pictures... And he'd look at these things and say, "Oh, my God, that's (?)" (?) say that. You know. They just didn't realize what he was doing. So this is why they wanted me. .. (?)

Then they took me in from... Well, first, actually, they let me write on a couple of pictures. "The Case of Edith Smith" with von Sternberg. That was my production. I did the publicity on that. I did "Stairs of Sand" with Wallace Beery. I did all the publicity.

Q. John, as one listens to you talk one realizes that you have worked with and touched the most extraordinary people, the legends of this entire industry. I mean, you mentioned von Sternberg, the creator of Dietrich. What was he like?

A. He wasn't cooperative at all, because he didn't think... I was much too young to do the thing for him, and he just... Really... He didn't help much. And it was a lousy picture
anyway. James Hall and Esther Ralston. Esther Ralston was never anything, you know.

Q. Let's get back to Clara Bow. Because when one tracks your career, one is aware that much of what happened with you happened because of this unique relationship between this spontaneous girl, who posed by instinct, really. There are people who study and create and invent themselves, and there are people who are sprites, and that's what she was. But there is this kind of instinctual ability to kind of just throw yourself and identify and empathize with whatever the experience is, and certainly some of the most famous shots in the world are your shots her at the beach, and wasn't there one in a boat?

A. The boat was another thing. That was another thing. I took a bunch of shots on this boat. This yacht... (?).. Another time at her house. Well, I did the sitting, the bathing suit sitting, at her house. She lived in Malibu. And so I went down and she said she was going to be there at 2:00, or 1:00. A nice sunny day, and we sat there and waited and of course she was late. She got there about four in the afternoon. A lot of days in Malibu the wind comes up in the afternoon, and boy that wind was coming up. But, she knew she was late and she knew it was her fault. And she was a good sport. She got on her bathing suit and went right out in this...And we had our coats on, and she was running around there in the sand, you know, with all this wind and sand hitting her, and
I was holding a dark cloth over it...Eight by ten pictures these were. You can imagine what trouble he had, trying to pose her, trying to photograph. But she knew how to pose. She knew she had to hold still for him to focus and stuff. She knew what to do. So she stayed there and she worked for half an hour, three quarters of an hour. It was hard to keep her because it was so damned cold. He took five pictures, one after the other, he went fast. See, I was pretty fast and she was pretty fast, and I would help with the "plate overs" and all that kind of stuff to get done. But she was such a good sport. This is what's amazing. Other stars would have said to hell with it, it's too cold, come back tomorrow. But not Clara.

Q. It's interesting about relationships such as photography to stars. Or any individual. In some ways, it's such an intimate exchange of vulnerable feelings. Because the good photographer is able to get the internal expression; the real feeling and the real essence of the person. And I've often wondered, particularly in terms of the Hollywood photographers, because of the exalted position of the star. The American royalty. Did you get to know her well as a friend, as a person? I mean...Or was it just a professional arrangement? Did you know her that well?

A. Oh, yes, she liked me. After the first sitting I saw her on the lot one day, after the garden scene, and she came up and she said, "You know, Arch stopped me on the lot the
other day and he asked me about you, and he said, 'How does he work?'" And she said, "Oh, I tell him you're good." She said, "I tell him (?). Oh, sure," she said. But then after I did these couple of pictures, then I was also doing photographs then. They had another guy in there doin the...I was not doing messenger for him anymore. So I did a sitting across the lot, besides just for my thing. But also, all the editors of the magazines...And whenever I went to a newspaper or to a magazine, downtown, no matter who it was, I wouldn't just take it and drop the written copy. I would take it out of the envelope and I would stand there and I would say to this, "Mr. Van Heusen, this is from Paul Snell at Paramount, and it's (?) [I'll read this later]. . But if there's anything I can do for you at the studio, let me know and I'll relay it to Paul (?)..." Well, a lot of times they would say, "Well, yes, we do. We need a picture..." And so on and so forth, and so I got to know all these people. Especially at the magazines. "We're doing a layout on so and so, a composite. 'What you think of Marriage,'" or some such thing. "Will you ask Paul or Julie to call me when you get back to the studio?"

Well, I had worked with them all the time, (?) layouts...got a lot, so they finally said to Arch, "Why don't you let this young man handle all the fan magazines?" So, he called me in and said, "They want you. So, you're gonna handle the fan magazines." So this girl moved out of the office and I moved in. , (?) And then I was in (?) publicity, because
you got all these requests from New York, for magazines. For
fan magazines, you know. How they live at home and what they
eat and what they don't, and how they dress in their kitchen,
and their pets and boats and their cars. You're always getting
(?) . . So this went on. And finally, I was doing so many stills
Arch said, "Look, we're gonna take you off the fan magazines
and you can be art supervisor. You're gonna handle all the
stills for the studio." I had to okay all the stills, I had
to mark them for retouching. I had to send them to New York,
whether they'd go to..."This picture's good for newspapers,
it hasn't got too many shadows. This one has more shadows, we
know this one is good for magazines. This is all the back-
ground." You know, like Loretta coming through the door. That's
for a magazine. That's exclusive to New York. You know where
they go, so you send them around. Twelve prints and this, two
prints on this, eight prints on this. Resect it, retouch...
They'd send me the retouched proofs so they could send me the
retouching. And, I had to make all the sittings, for the whole
studio. All the portrait sittings, all the fashion sittings.
Everything. And I had to take care of all the guys (?) . .
Q. It's interesting to recognize that not everybody was
thrilled to have the still photographers invade the sets. I'd
be curious. Would somebody with a temperament and the arrogance
and the, well, the power that von Sternberg had, was he one of
those people who was cooperative with you? Was he...Did he like
your being on the sets?
A. Yeah, he really was marvelous. He would pose it; tell them, let's do this, this is the way to do it. He came into the gallery all the time with Dietrich, at Paramount. He did everything. He lit them, he posed her. Everything. He would get her to lean over a chair for five minutes in a god-awful pose, and he'd tell her... Always talkin in German. Trying to get these expressions in her face. And he would work this out of her. And then he would push Gene Ritchie, when he was supposed to shoot the pictures.

Q. Because I do remember Clara Bow, with warmth and affection, I was always very sad when I recognized that somehow or other, her life became tragic and this wonderful, extraordinary quality and presence on screen... And you used the word earlier, talking about that she "exuded happiness." And I suddenly found myself recognizing, that's exactly what it was. You felt happier when you watched her, and it's so sad to think that that didn't go on for her the rest of her life. What happened to her career?

A. She did the same picture for five years. It was practically the same picture. I mean, this is the "cute girl." Maybe she's in a store. Maybe she's in Hawaii on a trip and she's always... You know, there's some (?)... and then she gets the boy and that's the end, and that's it. And, of course, there was nobody...

You see, B.P. Schulberg was head of the studio and he brought Clara over there. But he was interested and... His
protoge was Sylvia Sidney. You see, he kicked Clara out of "City Streets" with Gary Cooper, and put her in the minute she got there.

Q. I had always heard, John, that Clara was ill, and had to withdraw. That wasn't the reason?
A. No. Not at all. He was just...I don't know...Well, I'm sure they were shackled up...

Q. I know about that, I know about that.
A. She got Dressing Room #1; she got Clara's dressing room, because...Right after that she started to go down.

Q. It's almost unbelievable, because at that time Clara Bow was an enormous star. I mean, this was one of the best known faces around the world. She and Chaplin were known by everyone. Everybody identified with them. What caused this downfall? What started this?
A. Her private life...See, nobody could control Clara, really. And...It was sad: I mean, I loved Clara. But she got fat, she put on weight. And she...I told you before....She said to me once, "John, you know, I just used to love to come to work. I couldn't wait to get here. Now I hate to come." And so she was late and...You know. She needed help. She needed what Norma Shearer got from Irving Thalberg. She got what John McCormack gave to Colleen Moore. You know. You have to have somebody...Either your mother or your father or your husband, or somebody helps you. She had nobody. Daisy "Devoe" stole money from her. You know, the secretary. "Carrie Richmond" and all
these people she was going around with. You know. Nobody helped Clara, you see, and she hadn't had enough... She was true grit... In a book I read Victor Fleming said she would have been one of the greatest dramatic actresses of the screen....

Q. And she was...
A. He was the guy that did "Gone With the Wind," and he knew her...
Q. It's so fascinating. Because when we read about those stars that started in the silents and bridged over into the talkies, the implications and the rumors frequently are that it was sound that destroyed them; that their voices didn't record well, or the voices were sometimes anachronistic to the person that they were betraying on the screen. It wasn't her voice? Sound didn't defeat her?
A. Oh, not at all. Absolutely not. No. She had a marvelous voice. A charming, light... As you said, it was Clara's voice. It was a lovely voice. Almost singing. She almost...
[Imitates her]
Q. Obviously you had a very strong relationship, a strong feeling to Clara Bow. But what about other people. I know Gloria had already left the studio. But wasn't Pola Negri there? Did you have a relationship to her?
A. Yeah, but (?)...
Q. Oh, really?
A. She had all these things around the sets. Nobody ever spoke to her. You never even looked at Pola Negri. When
she walked out of the studio at night there would be her car...See, you couldn't drive on the lot at Paramount. The cars would come up in the front. Her Rolls Royce would come up in front of the studio. And they had a whole procession, who went first? They all went single file out of the studio. There was Pola Negri, there was "Dubonnet," who was her husband.

Q. Oh, Prince "Dubonnet," yes.
A. And there was the maid, and there was the chauffeur. And they were carrying boxes, and her lunch baskets, and the robes and her car. And nobody spoke. They just went single file out of the studio, and they opened the door and went out on the street, and they opened the door and she got in and that was it.

She never ate in the restaurant. She was always eating in her room. They always said she had a glass of bourbon for lunch. And you couldn't even...You couldn't see her work....

(End Side 1, start Side 2)

Q. Am I wrong, John....Sometimes I get confused about what happened when. But isn't this pretty much the time when Gary Cooper came to Paramount?
A. Well, Cooper was first time was...I read about him in the paper. And I don't think "The Winning of Barbara Worth" had been out yet. Paramount signed him. They were fortunate that they got him. And he was playing a bit in a Clara Bow picture. He was a reporter...
Q. "Children of Divorce."
A. No.
Q. "It."
A. "It." He only was a reporter. He just walked up the back...I was out there and I happened to see this...He was talking, asked her a question. That's all he did on "It." Nothing. Some people say now he was in "It." But it was nothing. And he was in "Children of Divorce." And that was, of course, with Frank Lloyd and Esther Ralston and Clara Bow. But, at that time, he had all these marvelous suits made for him and everything, and of course he was just nonplussed. He didn't know what to do with all this. And I think...I remember one time he left. He was going to go down to the bus station to get a bus back to Montana, and somebody caught him and brought him back. He was really gonna leave. He'd had too much of this stuff. You know...He was quite a stud.

Q. For those of us who plunge regularly into the world of Hollywood and its history, one of the things that stands out, of course, is that everybody seemed to be in love with Gary Cooper--Clara was in love with him, Evelyn Brent was in love with him--which brings to mind: Did you ever know Evelyn Brent. Did you photograph her? What was your relationship to her?
A. Yes. But she was stupid. In a way. Evelyn Brent was married to "P.G. Fein," who was assistant head of...Schulberg's assistant. And that was Fein. And she was a big star. And I
remember her coming in to the publicity department one day. And "Julie Lang" was handling the magazines at the time, and she was handling the sittings. I didn't do the sittings. So she came up to Evelyn and she said, "Evelyn, they'd like to make a portrait sitting of you," and Evelyn said, "Oh, fine, that's all right." She said, "Well, we'll do it Friday at 2:00," or something, with Gene Ritchie, "Oh, yes, yes, yes. What'll I wear?" And Julie said, "Well, can't you bring some of your dresses or something to wear."

"Why," she said, "I wouldn't dream of wearing my clothes in front of the camera. These are... I buy these at I. Magnin's. These are $500-600-$1,000 a piece. If you want to buy one, you can buy it and I'll pose in it, but I'm not going to use my own for the thing."

Well, she had only been doing "The Last Command" and that kind of thing and she didn't have any clothes at the studio. So Julie said, "Well, I'll see what I can get from the wardrobe." And Evelyn said, "Look, I'm not gonna wear anything cast off by Louise Brooks or Clara Bow or any other of these... I can't do it. So you'll have to figure out something I can wear." And Julie said, "Well, what if I just get some furs?" So they got furs and they sat her in furs, and then they sent the furs back, and that's how they did the sitting. But you know, this was stupid, this woman. No one else had ever said this. And "B.P. Fein" was standing right beside her, and you'd think he'd say "Why don't you do it?" I'll never forget this.
And then, of course, you know, she went down two or three years after that. Nothing. And she came back a lot... She did a little tiny bit in a picture and Travis Banton called me up, because he loved Evelyn, you see. She was very chic, you know. And he said, "Look, Evelyn's in this and she needs a couple of pictures. Could you have Gene make a couple of pictures of Evelyn?" And I said, "Sure." But then she used her own clothes. But then it's too late, you see.

Q. It must have taken a great deal of time to do some of the stills, because the quality of those pictures, of all the great photographers in Hollywood, are quite extraordinary. Were the stars aware of the value of that? I mean, did they have an understanding of how important taking stills and getting them out to the media was?

A. No, they didn't. You see, it was all free, and anything that's free you don't give a damn about. I used to have to argue and argue and argue. I had the worst time with some of these people. I mean, not for portraits, but Bing Crosby. I have things here I've kept. I'd get him to write contracts. I'd get him to sign things: "To John Engstead: I will come into the gallery on so and so and so and so date, and if I don't, I'll give you a quart of Cutty Sark, or you give me a quart of Cutty Sark." Something like that. I have these here. You know, just documents, and he would sign them. And I got one, his father witnessed it, in his office one day. He used to drive me crazy because he was so lazy.
Q. John, were the women as bad as your description of Crosby?
A. Oh, no. See, the trouble is, they all (?)... They all wanted to have their picture made and they were just doing their hair all the time. They were in my office all the time, all the girls. Toby Wing and... All of them. And then when they got to be a star--Martha Raye--But then once they got to be a star, it was hard. But you see, you've got to remember too. There was one thing in their favor. Paramount, and all the studios, used them all the time. They sometimes... If they were successful, they didn't have two weeks or a week between pictures. And if they did, they were damn tired, because they would work them late and they would work them hard, and they wanted to go to Palm Springs, or they wanted to go someplace. And I would have to get them on those days off. Even in between pictures if they had a day off, they wanted to go to sleep. They had a lot of things they wanted to do. So, it was really quite difficult to get them in. But the only thing I really had to have were all the special stills. Now, these were the stills for all the main characters in the film. Come into the gallery, and you'd make the big heads that are in front of the theatre and on the billboards. The advertising department would give us a couple of ideas, I would have all the scripts, I would read the scripts, I would get all the ideas together, and I would have to get them together and make the picture. Direct the still.

Yeah. Sometimes they were just marvelous. On "A Farewell to Arms," they had all the... They had Gary Cooper's costume
ready. As a lieutenant. Beforehand. And they had Helen Hayes's nurse costumes. And she was marvelous, and Cooper was awed by Helen Hayes, because she was a great star from New York. So, I wanted to get these stills from them, and I did. I got them in before the picture. This was ideal. I read the script and I said well this is a big love story so you have to get these love pictures of them together. So I thought, gee, this girl from New York, this lady...So I got in the gallery and I said, the first thing I said was, "Would you please lie down on the floor?" So Helen Hayes got right down on the floor. And Cooper sort of looked at me, and he got right down with her. And they lay on the floor, and they did these marvelous love pictures. He thought it was really...It was wonderful...Marvelous. Really great of me to think of it because it broke the ice. And I'll never forget later, Gary Cooper, oh, five or six years before he died, had a story in the "Saturday Evening Post," and he said that when he started that Helen Hayes, in the movie, the first thing that "Brent Prezaggi" (the director) did, was to put them on the floor together. Because it broke the ice between the two of them. And "Prezaggi" didn't do it at all. I did it, and Coop forgot. You see.

But anyway. "Prezaggi" was a very nice guy and "Prezaggi" got a lot of the pictures and he took them and used them on the screen. You see. Some of the poses that we did, because they were so good. But this was complete cooperation from Hayes, who was a wonderful, darling woman.
Q. That's a lovely thought. I do think it's marvelous in one's life to recognize that sometimes we, in the normal professional activities of our lives, create situations that are truly creative. I think it's terrific that "Porzaggi" recognized that what you had done with your stills was something he could translate, and capture the same sort of intimate relationship and the adoring love relationship between these two people. When you think about Cooper's height, and Helen Hayes's lack of height...That was absolutely brilliant to put them on the floor, to say nothing of "breaking the ice," as you call it, because she was an established Broadway actress, and also married to one of the great scriptwriters that Hollywood's ever seen, MacArthur. And...Did you have any other experiences of that nature? Did you take stills where other directors might have felt the impact of what you had achieved, or the very special essence of what you managed to translate into film, that they could understand would be very effective if they could capture it in the motion picture itself?

A. I did all that stuff with Katharine Hepburn...Whatever that Chinese...?

Q. "Dragonseed?"

A. Yes. For her...I gave her a set of these little proofs, and she said she would show these to the director, "Because I think these are wonderful. We should try to get some of these on the screen." This is what Katharine Hepburn said. But you see, I had a terrible time...Some of these people...
Madeleine Carroll was just a lazy blonde. And it was just hell to get pictures of her. And she was deceitful. I mean, she would go to...She had some boyfriend in Paris, she'd go there...And in one of her portrait sittings beforehand--she was in the gallery or something--She only came about an hour at a time. I'd say, "What do you go to Paris so often for? Do you buy clothes?" She said, "Oh, no. I don't need clothes. All I need is a nightgown." And, you know, but then she'd come back just in time to make the picture, and not in time to do it, but she'd stop in New York and she'd have cocktails or dinner with Bob Dillon, who was head of publicity in New York. And during their drinks and dinner and stuff, he would say, "Now I want to do this kind of...We have to have a lot of pictures of you, Madeleine. We have to have a portrait sitting and we have to have a home sitting, and we have to have pictures of you doing this, etc.," so he would outline all these things--the interviews and all these things for me to do. And then they would send it to me. I'd call her up and she'd say, "Oh, John, don't be a fool. I'm not going to do that. Don't be silly." And then...She lived down at Palos Verdes, and she'd come in in her Rolls Royce, and she'd be in at 2:00 in the afternoon, and then she'd have the makeup put on and the hair, and she'd be in about 4:30, and at 5:00...And I had a whole list of pictures. Everybody wanted different kinds of pictures of Madeleine Carroll--this magazine, this paper--And she'd do about four pictures and then say, "I'm sorry, I have to go for cocktails,"
you knokw. Just unbelievable. We had to do a session once with Fred MacMurray...

Q. "Cafe Society?"

A. Huh? No, it was (?). That was the first one she did. It was a big success. You know. But anyway... She was... He had finished the picture. And he had it in his contract that he had to have two weeks off between pictures, or else they couldn't start another picture. So he was on his two week layoff, and the director.... The assistant director called me up and said, "You can make these stills this afternoon." He knew I'd been trying to get him. "But you've got to get Fred, and you have Madeleine at 3:30 or 4:00, and then take her into the gallery. So I called Fred's house and "Lily" said, "He's out at Lake Sherwood and he's fishing with Zeppo Marx," who was an agent. So I called up Lake Sherwood and he came in. They chartered this boat and got him in. He came in and answered the telephone and I said, "Fred, we gotta have these pictures of you and Madeleine."

Now, Fred has always been a nice friend of mine. When he first came to the studio. He didn't work for four or five months, he'd just come to see me. So, I said, "I gotta have these stills," so he said, "Oh, well, I guess I can do that." He said... I said, "Fred, you can't tell that it's on your layoff, because you can't break your layoff on this picture." So he said, "Okay, but call Lily and tell her to bring a dark suit to the studio, because we're gonna have a
dinner afterwards and we'll go right from the studio to dinner."

So he came in, and I went up to the set about 3:30 and Madeleine said, "Nobody told me about this. I'm not going to do this today. I couldn't possibly." I said, "Fred's coming in, the assistant director..."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going to do it." And off she walked. And this poor guy is standing there. He had come in to do this, and she had done this! But this is, you know, this is just being a bitch.

Q. Absolutely. Absolutely.
A. I was just disgusted with her, I want to tell you. I had a lot of them. Jeanette McDonald. She was a shit too, I can tell you.

Q. Really? Was she?
A. Well, you see, Chevalier didn't want her in his last two pictures. They had let her go. She was through at Paramount. She went over to Paris and she sang in this Olympia whatever-it-is, and she sang her French songs with an American accent, and she was a great success. So (?) said, "Well, we've made a mistake." And I guess she wired or talked to Hollywood and they signed her for two more pictures and brought her back, and Chevalier didn't really want her. And so...But they did the first one, and she was being paid $5,000 to go right straight through with no stopping in between the pictures, so they had to do one right after the other see. So I forget which one it was, but one of those pictures, she knew she was
not going to stay there any longer. So I'd been trying to get the stills, and they had pushed up the release date of the movie. So they said...They sent a note from New York and they said, "We have to have new pictures of McDonald and Chevalier by New Year's--January 2nd, or something.

So, anyway. I went out on the set and the assistant director said, "This is New Year's Eve. Chevalier's through at noon and Miss McDonald will be through at about 4:00." So, I talked to Chevalier, and Chevalier was then quite close to Dietrich. So I went over to his room, and Miss Dietrich and Chevalier were in his room, talking, and I said I wanted to do the pictures and...And you know, he's a businessman. Absolutely a businessman. He said yes, he'll do it, he'll wait. So he waited in his dressing room. And at 3:00 or so I went out to the set to get Jeanette, and I walked over ....to the door...and I said..

Now, you have to remember I had done, I had arranged pictures for nothing for her sister (the one that was later the witch in that "Munsters?" I had done a sitting of her.) We did pictures of her dog. She had a big Australian sheep dog, and we made prints for Jeanette. You know, we did everything to try to get...You know...

So we're leaving the set and I said, "Jeanette, Chevalier's on his way here and we're going to shoot a few pictures." And she said, "Well, that's fine for Maurice, but he's not going to a party tonight and I'm going to go home,
I'm not going to make any stills!"

Q.        John, how did you feel about that?
A.        I never asked anybody at the studio to do anything personally. This I never, ever did. Because it wasn't for me. But I finally said to her, "Would you do it as a favor to the publicity department, because we really have to have these stills." She stood in the door, as I opened the door and she walked out...She had little tiny feet--Size two or something--And she stamped her foot and said, "If Adolph Zukor got out here and fell on his knees on the ground here, I wouldn't come in and make these stills!"

Q.        Why?!  
A.        And off she went.
Q.        Why would...
A.        She was going to a party! She was just being a bitch, that's all. See, Jeanette really never had a lot of talent. She was cute as she could be around the directors. She would practically be kissing their ass. You see her coy....She and Miriam Hopkins had her out-bitched.

Miriam...You should see how cute she was with Ernst Lubitsch. And Lubitsch never saw through Miriam Hopkins. She was a good actress, Lubitsch is a professional, and Lubitsch was a marvelous man. Really. I loved Ernst Lubitsch. But... See, Paramount...B.P. Schulberg never knew what Jeanette McDonald could do. Look at when she went to MGM. She made up on all this phony baloney. She was a terrible actress. Absolutely awful. I mean, she talked every line as if she was
gonan sing the next line. "Oh, come with me, etc. [imitates McDonald.]" All this shit. She was an absolutely manufactured product. She took a singing lesson every single day of her life. Every day she took a singing lesson. To get that poor little voice where it was.

Q. Well, all right, John. Obviously, if we were to do a small summing up of all this: You were a kid reporter, and then you got a job in the publicity department playing gopher, etc., office boy, and then had the relationship to Clara Bow on those pictures, which of course caused immediate reaction to management, to understand that you had a lot of talent. But this...Was this a plan? Were you taking it step by step to get into photography?

A. Oh, I didn't think of this at all. I never thought of this. If I did, I would have taken the offer in 1934 when I did the sittings for a month. Right away. You know. I had never shot a picture. I had a brownie camera, so I...And... But I knew how to light, and I knew the mechanics, but I didn't know Stop 11 or 16 or anything. So, when all the guys walked out, they just said, "You're gonna photograph." Tom Bailey was head of publicity then. "You're gonna go in and do photographs." I said, "My God. Well...I can..." He said, "Get somebody in tomorrow morning. Get your sister, I don't care who you get in. Practice." So I thought; well, I do good sittings. Why the hell do somebody who can't use it?" So I called up Cary Grant, and I said, "Cary, would you like to
come in and make some pictures for me. I have to take some pictures in the gallery and I have to learn how to do it. Would you come in and just pose for me?" He said, "Sure," so he came in. He could use the pictures...Well, he was a very nice guy, you know.

So, he came in and we worked for two or three hours and he was so excited the next morning, after we...(?) .. cigarettes...He came in at 9:00 in the morning to see the proofs. And by this time Tom Bailey had wired New York and they had wired back and...(that day)...and said, "We've got a new portrait photographer at Paramount. It's going to be John Engstead from now on. Either "Walling" or Ritchie will go."

Well, I didn't want to get in the gallery. I didn't want to sit there, like they do. Besides that, I...They...I would have kicked them out of a job. They never knew this. See, "Walling" was always a little antagonistic to me, and Ritchie sort of hated me too a little bit. Because I had to tell them what to do. But I could usually get people to do things, what I wanted them to do. And I would do things for them. A feeling you get, with people. I loved the stars. You know...Joel McCrea and Gary Cooper...Gary Cooper was lazy too, you could hardly ever get him in. But he would come finally. You know, after he left, I did all his sittings. I did the last sitting he ever did with him....Three or four sittings with him.

Q. I know.
A. And he paid for the sittings, you see. So that shows he liked me.

Q. One of the people I've been totally fascinated by and keep anxiously pulling pieces out of the world of Hollywood and the people that were involved in that world, back in the '20s and '30s, is information about Louise Brooks. Did you know her?

A. Louise always seemed to be a bit lazy. I don't think she ever thought of being a big star. I don't think this was in her schedule. Because she was very arrogant. She never... She didn't sort of work with them. If it pleased her, she would do it. She just knew what she wanted to do. And, of course, when you're in that position, and you're earning $750 a week, they give you a lot of little...You know, like with Thelma Todd, like Evelyn Brent, they put her as (?) once. Well, this was the worst thing they could possibly do. They killed Evelyn Brent with that one movie.

Q. Why?

A. Schulberg didn't know what the hell to do with these people, half of them. You know, I told you he never knew that Claudette Colbert could play comedy. He didn't know Carole Lombard could play comedy. I mean, this was beyond him. He got a set image of these people and pushed them into that image, those images, you see...

Q. I just had a rush of memory. An actress that I haven't thought about in years. Was this happened...Was there a
similar reaction by Schulberg to Nancy Carroll?
A. Well, Nancy you see was a little bit of a bitch. She was a very talented woman. Very talented. But she always went around with a chip on her shoulder. Like somebody was going to do her in. Coming around the corner. And she approached everything that way. She was a very good dramatic actress and a very good dancer and she could sing. Nancy Carroll could do almost anything.

Q. I can see by your face, John, that somehow or other... Should we get back to Louise Brooks?
A. She was as smart as they come. Very few people had her... I hate the word "chic," but she was just elegant. Elegant. Her legs, her ankles, her hands. Her body, the way she held her body, the way she walked, the way she dressed—furs over her shoulder, off her shoulder, this hat—She was like Lombard. Lombard could do the same thing. Put anything on her and it was right. Dietrich could do that too, when she wanted to.

Q. It just occurred to me, John, that all this talk about the "golden days of Hollywood," and all those fabulous people that entered my life as I was first introduced to films: We haven't mentioned the ultimate. Did you know Garbo?
A. She came over to our place once. Not to make a movie. See, Maurice Stiller, they kicked him out over there and he came over and I think he was at the Hotel Imperial...

Q. With Pola Negri.
A. Pola Negri. And he was a crumb. The ugliest man in
the world. Great big, gross features. But a sweet man. Nice face, but God made him, like, out of putty?

So, but Garbo...The girls in publicity and the wardrobe department came in and said, "Well, Garbo's here today." She had just begun. I remember that first movie, I remember seeing it, on Sunset Boulevard, (?)... this thing down. "The Tempest" or "The Torrent," or whatever it was, the first one....

Q. "The Tempest."
A. She was absolutely marvelous. Her reviews were just great. And the way she walked. She was a completely new thing on the screen. She changed everything. She changed the thing from...

Q. Pickford to Garbo.
A. Well, no, there were the flappers. You know. Crawford was a flapper, Norma Shearer was a flapper, Colleen Moore was a flapper, Eileen Herlie was a flapper. They were all flappers. That was the day of the flappers. And all of a sudden, the flappers are gone and she's in! Everybody wanted to copy her. It was Constance Bennett and that kind of stuff.

Q. Of course, one of the fascinating things about Garbo was that she was the originator of a whole force. Mostly, I think, just because she was a unique individual with great personal style and extraordinary beauty. But she really reflected the best of "they had faces then." And I've always been curious...When Dietrich arrived at Paramount, when she
first arrived there, did she have a similar impact? I mean, were there people trying to imitate Dietrich?
A. It was really exciting, because she was something. She once had a little stock girl that she'd bring over for somebody...A second rate actress...She had done "The Blue Angel" and they'd seen it, see, and they also...This big new star is coming...But Sternberg would control everything. I would ask him to do a sitting and of course they would say yes or something. Then they would come in the gallery, but, you see...And I don't know if I was even doing stills when she first came...She came in 1930 I think it was. I think somebody else did those, so I was never in on the first sittings...
Q. John, in your mind, would you think of Dietrich as being somebody who was natural, or perhaps, as Louise Brooks defined her, that she was a concoction. Was she something that was invented?
A. I'll never forget...I was handling the fan magazines and I went to the preview of "Morocco," and I didn't think "Morocco" was this great, great movie, you see. I thought she was marvelous and I liked Coop, but I don't know...So, when I came in the next morning, or the next day, she was at the mail desk, and our office was right down from the mail desk, and you had to pass by the mail desk. So I saw her and I stopped and I said, "Hi, I saw your picture last night."
"Vat deed you think of it?"
And I said...
Q. This is Dietrich.
A. Dietrich. I said, "Well, I didn't think the picture was great, but I really enjoyed you very, very much. And Coop too. I thought he was very, very good."

So, about ten minutes later, my (?) rang, and it was von Sternberg's secretary. "Ritchie McGarry" called up and said, "Would you please come over and see Mr. von Sternberg?"
So I went over to see him and he said, "And you're handling all the magazines. All the fan magazines. I don't want you ever to tell any of them that you didn't like my picture last night." I said, "Mr. von Sternberg, I'm working for Paramount the same as you. I wouldn't dream of telling anybody this. Why would I say this? I'm working the same as you." That ended that. So I said, "Well, whenever you're running 'Blue Angel' I'd like to see it sometime." And he said, "Well, you're not interested in my work, and I don't care if you see 'Blue Angel' or not." Listen, I was handling all the fan magazines. I was doing a lot of important stuff at the studio. He wasn't stupid you know.

She had a certain...She had the legs, she had the body, she had (?) .. But the makeup really, from the first pictures, the makeup that evolved, that fantastic thing that she evolved, that masked face, you see, that she developed over the years. Of course, she was fascinating. We always took her as a big, big star. A big star. We just...She was very kind you know. I was on the set one day, "Dishonored Woman," and I
Mamoulian was directing...

Q. Yes.

A. ...and Mamoulian was a very good friend of... He liked me. Once he stopped me on the set and he said, "You shouldn't be doing this. You shouldn't be in this department, you should get out of there." But then, Dietrich... I was on the set, and she said, "Johnny, do you have my record of 'Johnny?'" And I said, "No, I don't." And she said, "I'm going to give it to you." I said, "My land, there's no use giving it to me, because I don't have a victrola. I thank you very much..." I got back from lunch that day, and on my desk was a portable victrola and the record. She had bought me.

Q. Really.

A. Amazing. And I felt terrible because I thought, "My God, I asked her for it." You know...I felt like...I didn't mean it that way at all. I said, oh, my land, I didn't mean this this way. At all.

Q. Sometimes we color our relationships to people as through the time tunnel. John, can you be honest about your relationship to the other photographers? For instance, what was your relationship to George Hurrell?

A. He remembers a lot of things. He remembers that I worked for every single magazine and he didn't. I mean, I just...I almost couldn't do them fast enough. I mean, all the time for "Ladies Home Journal," for 20 years. And I'd go to New York, they'd fly me to New York for two or three days.
They'd fly me to Washington, to Dallas, everywhere. London. I'd go to London, I'd go to Paris, with McCall's for five years. You know. Every single magazine. All of them. "Mademoiselle," "Charm," I worked for everybody except "Vogue" and "Harper's." I told you that "Vogue" wanted me for New York. That's when I just began. And they'd seen my work in "Harper's," and I'd done one sitting for "Vogue," here. They asked me to come to New York to come and see them. So when I was in New York, an extra three months, I had lunch with Jessica Bates and Alexander Leibman. And they said, "We'd like you to come to New York and work for us here in New York." But I had a house, the war was on, I had two cars--I had a station wagon and a Cadillac--I had a dog. I couldn't drop all this. So I stayed here and worked. And then Selznick wanted me to be on motion picture camera.

I was influenced by all the other photographers. I was influenced by Steichen, by Beaton, by all the people. By "Moonkashi(?)", by all the things. The only thing I never did was photograph with the small little cameras. And I should have done that early...

Like, see, Avedon started out in New York when I did. He photographed...And I always pissed off because they would send me clothes to photograph out here, and I would have to photograph them on some actress who really didn't know how to pose. And in New York, he would have, you know, Suzy Parker, the best models. And he had gone to school with (?), who was the art director on "Harper's," so "Babage" was always with
Avedon and not with me, see. So I resented all this, because they never helped me. See, they didn't like what the studios designed for clothes. They never used those. Nothing that came from Hollywood was good enough for "Vanity Fair" and "Harper's." See, "W." All the things that are in "W," they're all Adrian. All the things, the same things. I threw away a lot of crazy things I should never have thrown away, that I thought were too fantastic, that Adrian did and I photographed. But, you know, crazy things...

Q. I suppose I should tell you, John, how I first became aware of you, and I first became aware of the name John Engstead...I realize, in looking over your enormous collection of star shots, that there were many pictures that I had seen that I didn't know who had taken them. But I did, and was, so enormously fascinated by the extraordinary pictures of Dietrich in those Jean Louis gowns, when she played "Vegas," that I made a great effort to find out who had taken them, and, of course, discovered that you did. How did that come about?

A. Her hair dresser called me and said Marlene had just opened. And I had seen her picture in the paper in the morning. "She just opened in Las Vegas and she wants you to come up to Las Vegas and take some pictures. Immediately."

So I said, "Well, sure, I will." So I put all the lights in the car and...In the Cadillac, and my assistant went with me, and we drove up to Las Vegas and did it. Right away. Did these pictures and rushed them back. Van Johnson was there and we
went up....There was a place in Las Vegas where we could develop them, and after we...You know, we couldn't shoot until after she got through at night, and we shot at, you know, 12:30 or 1:00. At 3:00-3:30, we took the negatives into Las Vegas and developed them and made proofs, and then I came back at 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning and she was there with Van Johnson, talking, and they said, "Lovely pictures." We marked them and we drove back to Hollywood, retouched them ...Like this...And sent them out. Because, you don't hurry with Dietrich. You know. She's slow. She'll do things...She knows what she's doing. She knows the tempo of an 8" X 10" camera. She'll say, "Oh, you can't shoot it like that..." With the flash and all this stuff going on...

Q. Yes.

A. No, you're lighter. You go up on the stage and you light this picture. She stays there. And then I had to go back, and sometimes I'd be on the stage and sometimes I'd be out in the audience. They had big tables. For me...Tables with an 8" X 10" camera, tables for me to stand on, and stairs to get up, so I wouldn't fall. Like, I would be there and then he'd have to go up and arrange the lights, and then he had to come back and hand me (?)...It takes time. She's a very definite woman. And I'd say..."Well, do this...Do it over here, do it behind the piano," and, I mean, she trusts me. So, there aren't a lot of great photographers around, believe me. I'm not great, but I mean, I'm capable, and I work hard, and I work
as hard as I possibly can on the sitting. Whenever I work. There's nothing like to get through fast or anything. And she knows that. I'm a professional. I really am a professional photographer. And I hate people who aren't; people who are late. This annoys me. When I say I'll be someplace at a time, I'm there. I'm there 15 minutes beforehand. You learn this. I learned this from Barbara Stanwyck. Barbara Stanwyck...I learned this at Paramount from her.

Gene and I were waiting for her one day for a sitting and we had everything ready...Oh, I don't think we did have everything ready. And she walked in the gallery, right at the time, right on the time or five minutes before and she was all ready. And we weren't quite ready. Well, right away... And here I had done six sittings of her...And she says if she's to be there at 2:00, "I'm ready at 1:30, and at 20 minutes of 2:00, she's there." And if somebody's going to bring clothes...

Q. It's wonderful to hear you talk, John, about somebody as professional as Barbara Stanwyck, and wouldn't it be wonderful if our lives were so touched that...with good fortune...that every relationship that we had was with people who were totally prepared and ready and cooperative and just went about their business. I have a feeling that isn't always true with...It certainly isn't always true with great stars. Would you say it was true with someone like Dietrich?

A. I would say she's professional. She doesn't have
the inspiration that Clara Bow had, or Carole Lombard. But
she's a very nice, very good subject, and she's untiring.
And she's very cooperative. I mean, you could shoot with her
for five hours. You know, she used to clean her own house
when she used to have a house up here. She probably still
does.

Sometimes the dresses wouldn't be ready...Otto had
to take one of them up on the plane to Las Vegas because it
wasn't finished when she was ready to go. She always had two
dresses, she always had two. And she had a duplicate, this is
four or five days of fittings. Eight o'clock in the morning
or eight o'clock at night, absolutely...She had Claudette had
to get those things out. But Claudette wouldn't do (?)...
Marlene would say, "Well, can't they make a second dress from
the first dress? They've got it." No, she said, "I've tried
that, they never get it right." I mean, 8:00 in the morning
she was there. She had that German, teutonic thing that..
Nothing is too unimportant...

Then we'd go up there and I'd do it the day before.
And the last show had just finished its last performance. And
that's at 12:30 or 1:00. Then, she would come in. She'd be
starting at 10:00, 9:30, she got ready; at 12:30 or 1:00 she'd
be ready. And I'd go in, and we couldn't get into the casino
until after everybody left. She was ready to work, and we
worked. We'd usually do it the day before the show opened.
I always felt that Marlene, up in Las Vegas, never had anything
to do in the daytime. I mean, she'd go to sleep at 3-4:00 in the morning. But she'd go out...I mean, I don't know how she did it (?). but she'd go out after the show. So finally she would go to bed, and then she'd get up at 3-4:00 in the afternoon. So she'd take these pictures and start to work on them, for an hour, (?) . . . work, work, work (?) for her to do. She loved Marlene Dietrich's face.

Q. She did.

A. Oh, sure. She was...She had made a great thing out of this, and this was her creation. And she was going to be sure...I helped her as much as I could. . (?) . . I think more than anybody else I ever worked with...Claudette (?) . . . but she'd do it pretty fast and that was it. Claudette said to me once...I called her when I was in Paris...To call up when I was (?). . she said, "Oh, come for cocktails," so I went over, and there was Richard Avedon and there was Marlene Dietrich and Madame "Spanet," and Estelle Brent, who was the fashion editor at McCall's that I was working with. So we went and we...I didn't particularly notice it but (?) . . came in and sat down and she sat with her legs so perfectly closed; I mean, they were the most beautiful. And of course...You know, her shoes and her hose and her dresses were all the most marvelous colors. She loved beige, sandy, warm, orangy--beige--and she sat with these beautiful shoes and these beautiful legs, sitting there, she just sat there with her legs pointed. And "Lynette" said, "I don't know how
she did it for half an hour." She sat in this one pose for half an hour. And you know, everything was right. This is Marlene Dietrich.

Q. It's wonderful to have these images, because my image of Marlene is, I suppose, the perfect Marlene. The totally pulled together...Because one of the great things about her photographs: No matter how much time she took to do them, you always got the feeling that they were just snapped, and there she was. But that's very different from the earlier Marlene.

A. Dietrich just was fat in Germany, and she was fat when she got here. Travis Banton had a problem with her. They had a cocktail party for her when she first arrived, for the press, at the Coconut Grove. And Marlene came and she didn't know how to dress at all. She came in in this....She must have weighed 150 pounds. She came in in a chiffon dress, with little things hanging off the dress, printed, and a great big (?) and her hat. Well, this is (?)...Introducing her to the press. But she had that face when she came..

Q. I've often wondered, John, when you describe the length of time Marlene would take and be willing to take, to do stills in these shoots: Did she chat? Did she talk? Did she involve herself professionally? Did she try to direct you? What did she do?

A. She had a mirror. She photographed with a mirror at all times. In Las Vegas she had "Nellie Banner," the hairdresser, get a mirror out of her room, hold it right next to
where I'm shooting with the camera, at the right angle so
she can see it.

Q. One of the things that all of us became aware of
as time began to pass, was that she had a real hangup about
her age. Did she have a hangup at that time, earlier in her
career as well?

A. She also originally (?) . . and that was the truth.
She was older. Von Sternberg's secretary, I said it to her
one day, "How old is she?" And she said, "She's older than
you think." Her passport (?) . . wanted her to change the
date on her passport. How am I going to do it? I called up
the advertising agency downtown I worked for and the art
director who does all our work, negatives and everything. I
said what I wanted and he said, "Oh, John, you're absolutely
crazy. You know that's a federal offense. You can't do this."
So I called "Laurence Amelian," and say I can't do this. Okay.
And she wanted to change it a couple of years.

I was up at Las Vegas once and "Ellie" said, "Well,
this is her birthday. She just had her birthday." It was
around the first of the year, or something. And she said...
I said, "Well, how old is she?" And she said, she was on the

Q. The more one reads about Dietrich, the more one
hears about her directly from people such as yourself who
were closely related to her, the more you become aware that
this was a very complicated lady in her identification with
her body and her face and her professional role. Nothing was very simple, as you describe it. Were there other actresses who did the same thing? Because I've heard stories about Claudette Colbert.

A. When she was about 15, she was run over by a truck (?) ... school and had a broken nose and broke her back.

Q Oh.

A. And that's why the back's a little funny, you see. And broke her nose. And she said when they fixed it up, she liked to be photographed this way. This side is swollen so that when you light her from this way, the nose (?) ... all of her face. And when you light it from this side it's okay because you get the shadow down the side. And Claudette I did it once the other way. She was in the gallery and I said, "Oh, Claudette, you look so good that way."

"Shoot it," she said. She said, "Okay." And she marked it, and they used it even for a fan mail picture.

Q. I guess the question that comes to mind is why, when or how did you finally split with Dietrich?

A. Well, she wanted me to come back because she said she looked like a female impersonator, and I didn't go back. I said, "I can't do it, Marlene." You know, in 1959, I was busy every single day, all day. When I would go to New York to work for the "Ladies Home Journal," I would have to cancel sittings. But I liked to go, because I wanted to see a show in New York and work for two or three days and fly back.
I'd work in the daytime here and take a night flight to New York and work the next day in New York. And I'd do that for two or three days, and I'd take a night flight back and I'd work the next day here. When I was young I could do it.

Q. We all have to be very grateful to the talents of these early photographers, because what they've done for the culture is that they've etched, permanently, through their camera and through their individual talents, images that capture the essence of these actresses that affected all of our lives, and the actors, who were seen all over the world. The deepest forests of Africa, the extraordinarily plains of Russia. Everybody knew these...
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