

A STAR REBORN



How 'Falcon Crest's' Jane Wyman helped Rod Taylor

by Roderick Barrand

Rod Taylor is scratching his head over the irony of it all. It took someone else's television show—Jane Wyman's "Falcon Crest"—to bring him raves and attention on the small screen. When they gave Taylor his own TV shows (he's starred in four), the actor says he couldn't get arrested.

"It's a royal pain to be doing this well in Jane's show and to have had such rotten luck with my own," jokes Taylor with an easy chuckle, a one-time two-fisted actor who these days takes life with laughing eyes and a grain of salt.

"I'll tell you what, though, it's amazed the hell out of me that I've

found so much on 'Falcon Crest' to sink my teeth into. We're doing some fine work on that show, and I'm getting a charge out of it like you wouldn't believe."

Taylor is doing so well, in fact, that besides getting a healthy paycheck and a steady stream of admiring letters for his role as "Falcon Crest's" Frank Agretti—the only man strong enough for hard-headed Angela Channing to listen to—there's all sorts of scuttlebutt from CBS-TV that Taylor's character will get an expanded, Lorne Greene-style "Bonanza" treatment, with Agretti and his offspring, Ben (Brandon Douglas) and Nick (David Beecroft), setting up their own winery on Falcon Crest's boundaries.

"Satisfying, darn satisfying," repeats Taylor as he pours himself a beer on the patio of his Spanish-style, oasis-like Palm Springs, California, estate where he spends long



Taylor (with Wyman) then and now.

hours painting, with his young, beautiful Japanese-American wife, Carol Kikumura Taylor, beside him.

"I've seen that attitude where actors will complain, 'This soap opera crap, who needs it, I'm only doing it for the paycheck,'" Taylor says. "I tell you though, if someone pays me to do a job, they get my best!



Taylor in *The Time Machine*.

Period! And with Brandon Douglas and David Beecroft as my son and grandson, we've done some bloody good acting on that show."

Taylor leans forward and stabs the air with his glass. "I'm every bit as serious about 'Falcon Crest' as I was doing *Young Cassidy* 24 years ago [arguably Taylor's finest film] with Michael Redgrave, Maggie Smith, Flora Robson, Julie Christie and Edith Evans.

"And when I hear that maybe they are planning to turn a little corner of 'Falcon Crest' into a sort of Lorne Greene-and-sons 'Bonanza,' well, I know our honest work is paying off."

Taylor says it wasn't until last year that it occurred to him to be a player on a nighttime serial. It was then that "Falcon Crest" kingpin Jane Wyman initiated an offer.

"I'd always liked Jane's work—and unbeknown to me, she'd always liked mine, too," reveals Taylor, who says he gets on with his co-star "like a house on fire."

The point is, however, that during the past ten years, Taylor—still broad shouldered and good looking at age 60—has had perhaps more time available than he would have liked.

The Australian-born Taylor came to Hollywood in 1954 and, after brief appearances in *Long John Silver*, *The Virgin Queen* and as Elizabeth Taylor's boyfriend in *Giant*, found legitimate stardom in a string of worthy films (1960's *The Time Machine*, *The Birds*, *Young Cassidy*, *Do Not Disturb* and *The Glass Bottom Boat* with Doris Day and *Hotel* stand out among the 50 or so movies he's

made). His career—for an assortment of self-inflicted reasons he readily acknowledges—went up and down like the proverbial yo-yo.

Taylor can laugh about it now—and does. But as he says, "In a nutshell, I was just a spoiled brat who loved to party and have a good time. Actually, if the truth was known, I was simply a nervous kid who was acting very tough."

Taylor is still wearing a grin the size of Texas, but now he's tapping his head as though knocking on wood. "I made all the decisions myself. Why else do you think I hate myself so much?" he says. "[Director] Cubby Broccoli, he's a dear pal of mine, he wanted me to test for James Bond. I said, 'That'll never bloody well work. You can't put something that belongs on TV on the big screen!' Even I can't believe I said that!"

While the actor was off in the U.K. making such hard-hitting thrillers as *The Liquidator* with Trevor Howard and Jill St. John (films that were seldom hyped in

I had to do it over, I wouldn't have spent so much time away. Even today people say to me, 'Do you still live in Spain?' Hell, I never lived in Spain!"

Still, Taylor was undoubtedly a big-screen favorite—something that didn't automatically transfer over to television. While his 1960 series "Hong Kong" (about an American journalist battling unscrupulous Easterners) did well in its two-seasons-long run (particularly in foreign markets), Taylor's western follow-ups ("Bearcats!," 1971; "The Oregon Trail," 1976; "Outlaws," 1986) barely got out of the box.

"I thought 'Outlaws' was a sure-fire winner," Taylor says of his last outing, an imaginative series that had him playing a fast-on-the-draw western lawman mystically transported to the present, along with his hard-bitten posse. "It was as funny as hell. We'd face a band of fifty terrorists with great bravery—but a pop-up toaster would scare the living daylights out of us. We had a cult following that was tremendous."

Cult followings don't build Nielsen ratings, however. "For three weeks, we were the number-one rated show," says Taylor. "Then CBS had a massive shake-up—they swiped all our writers and bounced us from one time slot to another. We sank like a lead balloon."

Still, Taylor doesn't hide his delight at his present prosperity on series television—even if he isn't "Falcon Crest's" heaviest hitter. His laugh is unrestrained.

"The little old ladies are coming up to me in the markets again," he cracks. "It's as if I hadn't left." ☆



Mr. and Mrs. Rod Taylor at their home, surrounded by his paintings.

America), back in Beverly Hills (where Taylor had always lived since arriving in the U.S.) he was now thought of as a "foreigner" who was never around when casting agents made their calls.

"They all thought I'd disappeared," Taylor recalls glumly. "If

