



**INTERVIEW WITH
AN UNASHAMED ACTOR**

As an actor, Biff Elliot managed to carve a special place for himself as the first actor ever to play Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer in the 1953 movie (made in 3D) 'I, the Jury'

His other movie work includes such films as: 'Between Heaven and Hell', 'The True Story of Jesse James' and 'The Enemy Below' but it is perhaps for his work in television that he is better known. Genre fans may remember him from the Star Trek episode "The Devil in the Dark" as Schmitter, the mining colony crewman who is dissolved by the title creature in the pre-credit sequence.

Biff appeared twice in the POTA TV show, first as Zaius' human servant, 'Ullman' in the pilot episode 'Escape from Tomorrow' and once again as 'Key orangutan' in 'The cure'.

Biff lives in California with his wife Connie where fortunately, for Simian Scrolls, they happen to own a telephone...

Hi Biff! How are you?

I am very well, thank you. It's a glorious day here in California and Connie is sitting in the other room reading a newspaper. She's told me to be very nice to you! She gave me that copy of 'Simian Scrolls' that you so kindly sent and I was reading your interview with Beverly Garland. Bev has a hotel just around the corner from where we live. In fact, Connie and I had lunch with Beverly just the other day!

I also recently bumped into Marvin Paige, who was the person responsible for casting me in the 'Apes' series. Marvin has kept me very, very, busy in employment over the years.



Poster art for 'I, the Jury' a movie that earned Biff the distinction of being the first actor ever to play Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer.



Poster art for 'The true story of Jesse James'. In the background you can just make out Biff and Sunshine trying to overtake Robert Wagner.

So what was it like working on the 'Ape' series?

Oh, it was such fun... I am one of few actors to have played both a human and an ape!

It's strange, having played the part of 'Jim Younger' in "The True Story of Jesse James" alongside Robert Wagner (who was 'Jesse') I was used to spending a lot of time on horse-back, however, when I accepted the role in "The Cure", I didn't expect to be playing an orangutan on horse-back!

That episode was all shot out at the Malibu Ranch and it's so funny, when it came to being on the horse's back, I turned to the horse and said, "Look, I know I'm playing the part of an orangutan, but this is me, 'Biff' - a human! So I don't want you to get frightened or spooked with me on your back!".

The horse behaved itself then?

These horses are better trained than you think! When I did Jesse James we did a robbery scene where the gang runs out of the bank, gets on the horses and ride out of the shot. The only problem was that I couldn't get onto my horse! It turned into a comedy, with me running alongside trying to get into the saddle! I said to the coaching crew "Look, I don't want any trouble, you knew when you hired me that I had lines so you hired me as an actor, not as a stuntman!".

So, they pulled out a horse called, Sunshine. I said to Sunshine, "You can handle this," and can you believe it, he immediately let me jump on his back, he then looked right and left, jumped right in the air kicking his feet, nearly knocking me out of the saddle! He then ran out of the shot. I tell you he made me look great!

The only trouble was, Sunshine was a lead horse and I was like the fourth guy in the picture, and he (the horse) kept on always wanting to run into the lead position. I had to hold him back all the time because being the fourth guy in the group I couldn't ride out of the shot first, I had to ride out behind Wagner!

So you did all your own stunts in those days?

Oh yeah, of course. Isn't that just ridiculous - but I did!

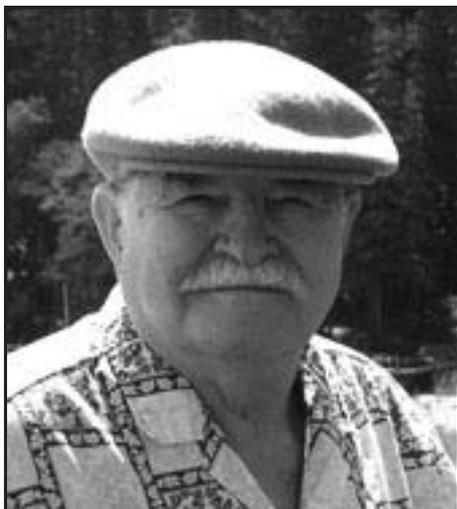
Do you have any anecdotes or amusing stories relative to either 'Escape from Tomorrow' or 'The Cure'?

I remember when doing "The Cure" - my brother's* family were there during the filming. We were on the back-lot and I was standing right next to his wife, Rita. I didn't say anything but just kept nudging her. Finally, she looked at me and saw this orangutan looking straight at her! She then realised that it was me and she said something that I have never forgotten, "Biff, I didn't realise how pretty your eyes were!".

(* Biff's brother was the late "Win" Irwin Elliot. Best known for his 18 year award winning broadcasts of Sports Central USA on the CBS Radio Network - horse racing's Triple Crown, football's Superbowl and baseball's World Series.)

If you were a featured player, you had to check-in at four in the morning to get your make-up on! The background guys just wore basic rubber masks but you had to sit there while it was applied layer by layer. Your mouth was about three inches out from your original mouth, so, when you broke for lunch you could only drink your food, you couldn't eat it! You couldn't put any food in your mouth, it would screw-up the make-up!

Do you remember the sequence where Zoran announces to the council that the ape deaths were caused by a mosquito? In that sequence, Mark Lenard and I worked out this thing where we look at each other in puzzlement and start to laugh! Well, during the original recording the director yelled, "Cut! You can't do that !" We asked, "Why?"



Biff today, at eighty-three years young.

to which he replied, "'Cause, apes don't laugh," and I said, "Of course they do!" So they had a general discussion to decide whether apes could laugh or not and eventually they left that in the shot.

So that 'incident' was never in the original script?

No, it was just something that Mark and I had rehearsed privately together.

There's another scene where Urko comes riding down on his horse after it had been voted to burn the village. I didn't have many lines in that particular scene and you just don't want to stand there like a dummy, you want to participate! So, after they had discussed whether or not to burn down the village I quickly said, "Perhaps another vote?".

My brother's kids have always remembered that line and when we get together they'll say in unison, "Perhaps another vote!" But, sadly it was cut out of the sequence! It was only one second more but they didn't leave it in. That's the story of my life, being cut-out of things!

Another thing I remember well was when I first went to the wardrobe department. The guy said to me, "What part are you playing?" - I said, "An orangutan" - which, he replied, "Yes, yes, orangutans are always dressed in brown". I'll never forget that!

Oh yeah - and how could I forget David (Zoran) Sheiner's walk !

David initially struggled with his 'ape' walk. When he first walked onto set his walk looked like a cross between Chico and Groucho Marx, we couldn't stop laughing! We said, "C'mon, that's not an ape walk, you're doing Groucho!" To which he replied, "Well, I better go back and get my moustache painted on then!"

Some of your scenes in "The Cure" were external, at the ranch, and on horseback. How difficult was that considering you wore both the make-up and costume?

Oh that Californian golden weather! Boy, did you sweat! You've got to understand that you were in that costume all day long, from four in the morning.

I remember my good friend, Jimmy (James, 'Ursus') Gregory, a wonderful character actor, upon hearing that I was to play an ape, told me that, "it's not a wrap until all your make-up and appliances have been removed from your face and you can then go home". And, this is precisely what happened when we came off the set on the very first day. A rather thoughtless Assistant Director said, "OK ! That's a wrap everyone, we'll see you all tomorrow". To which I replied that I wasn't going to go home looking like an orangutan and therefore the day certainly hadn't finished!

So, you're still on the clock, and later, when the make-up is finally all off... then it's a wrap! I was on golden overtime during this period. I almost made as much money in overtime as I did my original salary!

Incidentally, the make-up was taken off in such a way that it could be put back on the very next day with ease, without having to start again from scratch.



From the pilot episode, Biff as 'Ullman' is asked by a gorilla postman to sign for the safe delivery of Zaius' Sideshow Lawgiver statue.

How long were you on set for "The Cure" ?

Oh, about six or seven days.

It's so good when you're in the 'first' cabin, you get your own trailer with a shower and everything. You're driven up to the set in a limousine and regardless of how late you worked, you're driven back from the Malibu Ranch to the studio where you parked your car! I loved doing that show. Do you know how much fun it was to play an orangutan alongside such great actors as Booth Colman and Roddy McDowall?

The big concern I had was, how do you act with all that make-up on? How do you express? Well, I considered the most important aspect would be the eyes, and, if it was the eyes it would involve lot of close-ups. So, to express anger, joy and everything, it would have to be through the eyes... and obviously your body language.

And walking like an ape was very, very, important. Part of the acting obligation was to study how an ape walks. I spent many hours at our local zoo watching the chimps, taking note of their motions, the way they used their bodies and their arms, and, especially the way they would express their differences. It was a great challenge to come up with a believable ape-like character. It was fun.



A portrait of Biff as 'Schmitter,' the miner who is killed in the pre-credit sequence of the Star Trek episode "The Devil in the Dark".

Did you get any 'tips' from any of the other ape cast members ?

Well, I was in most scenes with Booth, so, I watched him like a hawk! I just watched what he did, but mainly I did my own thing. I was very proud of what I was able to accomplish. I earned every dollar I made on that picture! And not just me, there was not one bad performance. We all worked our asses off, to give them what they wanted for their money. It was our pride that was involved.

Did your orangutan character have a name at all ?

No, not really! (laughs) I was just referred to as the 'key' orangutan. Do you know, I'm having such a ball talking to you about this and I now understand what an important part of my life it was! It's great to get the chance to re-live it all!

Did you manage to get any time with Roddy McDowall?

A little. Roddy was one of the most sweetest, wonderful and giving guys that I have ever worked with in my life. We had a ball! He was a great English actor with a wonderful sense of humour (laughs) he was always fooling around and had us rolling on the ground laughing! He used to drive Booth Colman crazy!

Roddy was always trying to interpret the behaviour of chimpanzees, in fact, on one particular occasion, he wanted to mimic a chimp masturbating! The Assistant Director shouted, "No, Roddy ! You can't do that - it's a family show!" to which Roddy replied, "Why? Everytime you go to the zoo the chimps are always playing with themselves!"

Roddy was making top dollar on that show, literally, laughing all the way to the Bank!

Did you get to meet Ron Harper and James Naughton, the two astronauts?

No, I'm afraid I didn't, as far as I can remember I didn't share any set time with either of them. Most of my scenes were with my 'fellow' apes.

What was your initial reaction to having the make-up applied for the very first time? Was make-up a nightmare?

When you're walking around with 90% make-up on your face, it's very, very... *different!*

It's been said that those playing different species tended not to mix at meal times! For example, the gorillas would all band together? Do you recall this ?

Lunch? You couldn't eat much lunch. Everybody drank their lunch! Some of them even drank a little alcohol along with it (laughs). No, I wasn't aware of any segregation going on, we loved each other! We had one thing in common, we were all actors.

Was the mood on set for the later episode, "The Cure" any different from that of the pilot. Now the ratings were coming in was there any sense of impending cancellation?

No, I certainly wasn't aware of any.

Biff, would you 'sum-up' your life ?

Well, I'm now aged 83. I've lived a wonderful, marvellous life. I was an infantry soldier in World War II. Mainly in Africa with the 34th Infantry Division. I was just an eighteen year old kid who had no choice but to go and fight! I spent over three years in Africa being a soldier. I shot at people and they shot at me! I'd never do it again 'cause, I'd be scared shitless!

Then, when the war was over, I got to spend the remainder of my life acting, now, that's quite a life!

Actors are strange creatures that sometimes wish to keep their profession quiet! When asked, "What do you do for a living?" an actor might say, "Well, I'm a piano player in a whorehouse!" 'cause he'd be too ashamed to admit that he was an actor! I don't say that anymore. I was an actor then and I'm an actor now! Acting is the world's greatest job! It's not prostitution, 'cause, you're not being used!

You've certainly had a good life, Biff!

Well, thank you for that. To be fair though, the two best things in my life have been the two lovely women I married, and that's the God-honest truth! Two great women! I've never been blessed with kids, although, I've got grandchildren coming out of my ears from my brother's side!

Well, Biff, it's been a great honour talking with you, thank you very much indeed!

Thank you for letting me share, it's been great to reminisce! You're now a member of our family and you can put your shoes under our table anytime. But listen... If you don't send me a copy of the interview, I'll kill ya!

I'll definitely send you a copy, that's a promise.

God Bless, ya.

*Interview between Biff Elliott and Dean Preston
22nd September 2006*