



STAR GRAZING

DON BALLA Caterer to the Stars *By Guy Arseneau*

“Elizabeth Taylor was a doll... Edward G. Robinson was truly a gentleman.” Don Balla

Epic in scale, repetitive as a sunrise and a source of enlightened insights for each generation, it is a tapestry of life weaved by hard knocks. Profound yet painful, it is a rite of passage yanked hard by a wisdom gained in the arena of experience. The issue in question is the move from small towns by young adults (most often children who shave) to The Big City. In the United States, that “city” invariably means New York. From one generation to the next, and on a daily basis they arrive. Naïve, filled with hope, often poor but driven by visions of penthouse glamour and champagne living, they come in search of that elusive goal known as “success.”

While the definition of this goal differs with each individual who seeks it, these new comers are convinced they have the magic to “make it”. For many, homesickness and cultural misalignment are just too much and they quickly return to their home town communities in such places as Waterloo, Iowa, Canton, Ohio, Kankakee, Illinois or Joplin, Missouri. Some, embittered by horrific childhoods and determined to “start life over again” at the age of 20 or even younger, cling tenaciously to the city, retreating forever into the anonymity of urban living. A few, gifted with degrees in such fields as Law and Medicine, make a quiet transition and settle into routines of comfortable if sedate lives of respectability.

Some, those blessed with talent, perseverance, charm and perhaps even a pre-ordained destiny for greatness, rise to the top and become icons on a world wide scale. In this small and exclusive group, a subgroup emerges—not celebrities in their own right—but behind-the-scene witnesses to those who achieve the glamour associated with success. One such individual is Don Balla, a native of Rhode Island.

“I was 19 years old in 1960,” he recalls, “and my tiny home town in Rhode Island offered little in the way of employment. A friend of mine talked me into coming to New York City with him. I guess more than anything, I wanted to experience the ‘glamour’ and fast paced living all those old black and white movies spoon fed me on TV as I was growing up.”

A need for a place to live, plus a desire to eat on a regular basis, soon helped Balla land a job at the New York Athletic Club. “The pay wasn’t very much and the work was kind of boring, but it did provide me with a weekly paycheck. I spent that first year learning my way around the city and adjusting to the nuances of urban culture,” he remembers. “After about a year, I saw a Help Wanted ad in *The New York Times* for someone with kitchen and catering experience. Back in Rhode Island, I worked a couple of summers at upscale restaurants so I thought my background would allow me to fit right in.” The prospective place of employment was the celebrity dining room at Twentieth Century-Fox, at that time located at 46th Street and 9th Avenue. Don’s background, innate sense of correctness and low key personality won him the position of Executive Dining Room Director immediately.

“As a small town kid, I grew up watching movies, fascinated by the bigger than life persona movie stars presented. After three years of working with them five days a week, for lunches, dinners and special occasions, my youthful views were often confirmed but just as often dashed.” For most people from small towns, meeting a movie star is a once in a lifetime experience that is rarely achieved and usually relegated to a fantasy file. For Don Balla, meeting and interacting with major stars of the cinema was as much a part of his daily routine as punching a time clock is for other people.

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"I met just about everybody in the movie business," he states. "Marilyn Monroe was a regular visitor and even more beautiful in person than she was in the movies, what a figure she had. She was very friendly to me and we often talked a great deal. Marilyn had a real craving for wine and champagne, which we served to her in goblets of Austrian crystal. Peter Lawford, a celebrity in his own right, had an additional mystique since he was the brother-in-law of President Kennedy at that time. He was a big, and I mean really big drinker, he and Marilyn were very friendly and spent a lot of time together sitting and talking at the bar. Liz Taylor and Richard Burton, both of whom were surprisingly short, often visited the Executive Dining Room. Burton regularly drank to excess and usually ended up crying or laughing during these binges; you just never knew what to expect from this extremely talented but very complex man."

In his capacity as Executive Director, Balla was often called upon to exercise the diplomatic skills of Henry Kissinger, the Wisdom of Solomon and the elliptical politeness of a papal *nuncio*. "It's been known for years that Bette Davis and Joan Crawford loathed one another; stories are still making the rounds of how they acted toward each other when they made the movie, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* Although they were under contract to Warner Brothers, the studio "loaned" them to Twentieth Century for the Baby Jane movie. The dining room at Twentieth Century had six oval shaped tables that could comfortably sit up to six people. I always made sure that Bette and Joan never sat at the same table or, if possible, anywhere near each other. The fireworks would have been too explosive. Whenever they were in the room together, I tried to keep them far apart and placated them by telling each one how much I enjoyed their movies."

Among the more distinguished members of this exclusive club was Edward G. Robinson, who rose to fame portraying gangsters in many motion pictures. "In real life Mr. Robinson was truly a gentleman," Balla states. "Friendly, courteous and always grateful for even the smallest consideration, it was a pleasure to deal with him. In the early sixties, when the trade embargo began with the nation of Cuba, we obtained boxes of the finest Havana cigars for him. They were sent to a third party country and then shipped to the United States. We always kept a box on hand for him whenever he would drop in."

Although a wage of one hundred dollars a week was meager even in the sixties, Don Balla enjoyed many sidebar perks that helped him get by. "I almost never went food shopping," he states. "There was always so much filet mignon, roast beef, wine and champagne,

the staff was discreetly encouraged to take it home."

Although many of the world's most famous and wealthy people are notoriously cheap in their tipping habits, Balla fondly recalls one who was quite generous. "Elizabeth Taylor was a doll as far as tipping went," he says. "All meals were served on fine China and whenever she left, there was always a twenty dollar bill for me under her plate. She had a great personality, was very generous and a pleasure to work with. Another good tipper was Daryl F. Zanuck, one of the executive founders of Twentieth Century-Fox. Every Christmas he gave me a hundred dollars, which was greatly appreciated."

While most of Balla's interactions were pleasant, there were exceptions. "Montgomery Clift was difficult to get along with; very temperamental and demanding I'd say. He was an extremely talented and brilliant actor but a profoundly disturbed, troubled individual. On my off days, I sometimes went to the bar at the old Astor Hotel on 44th Street and Broadway; it's long gone now. From time to time, I use to run into him there and he was just as obnoxious and rude there as he was in the dining room."

In his current life style, Don Balla once again resides in a small community of Rhode Island, where he operates a thriving antique and Americana collectible business. Yet even now, he still deals with celebrities. By way of example, country singer songwriter Billy Joe Conor recently bought three antique horn phonographs from Don. "Billy Joe is quite a guy," Don asserts. "He's definitely in that class of stars who leaves twenty dollar tips at VIP dining rooms and salons."

--Guy Arseneau

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The Twentieth Century-Fox Film Co Ltd. Building Before its Demolition