

TOM HUTCHINSON



ROD STEIGLER
Memoirs of a Friendship

'A fascinating,
turbulent life'
Total Film

Brought up by an alcoholic mother in New York, Rod Steiger escaped at sixteen to become a torpedo man in the Navy. It was with his veterans' grant that he was able to study at the famous Actors' Studio, learning Method acting alongside Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe. His career was dramatically established by *On the Waterfront* with Brando, followed later by the Oscar-winning *In the Heat of the Night* and the scathingly funny *No Way to Treat a Lady*.

But then Steiger sank into a depression that lasted several years, eventually coming out of it with the help of his fourth and youngest wife. Then he had to re-establish himself as a star – a traumatic task when studios knew he'd had two major operations. He appeared most recently in *Mars Attacks!* with Jack Nicholson and Pierce Brosnan.

In this first biography of Steiger, Tom Hutchinson, a film critic who has known Steiger as a friend for thirty years, is in a unique position to assess the life and work of this troubled but immensely talented man.

'Tom Hutchinson's memoir is less biography, more assessment of Steiger's work, laced with reminiscences, and explains why Steiger failed to occupy the heights that should have been his . . . The author does not gloss over the hard times, but discusses them with an understanding not previously expressed in print' *Sunday Time*

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ROD STEIGER

Memoirs of a Friendship

Tom Hutchinson

Foreword by Ray Bradbury



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John Walker was my saviour and shaping arbiter in assembling these reminiscences. Saints of patience were my editors and my agent who had such faith. Rod Steiger is the icon I have tried to make human.

To them all my gratitude, and to others too numerous to mention. They know who they are – and how grateful I am to them. And that, dear friends, will have to suffice.

I owe heartfelt thanks not only to Rod Steiger, who supplied me with most of the photographs, but to the British Film Institute and the National Film Theatre for letting me have the transcript of Steiger's lecture to the NFT. The usual gratitude is offered to the film studios for whom Rod worked – from United Artists, via Paramount to MGM – besides others, and to Ruth Jacobs and photographer Chris Cornwell of London's Langham Hilton.

My dedication is to my wife, Pat.

Rod Steiger's dedication is to Anna and Michael.

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Foreword

You do not introduce Rod Steiger. You light the fuse and stand aside.

I remember one of our first collisions thirty years ago, when Rod drove up in front of our house in a spanking new Jaguar twelve-cylinder beauty, jumped out and yelled to us, 'Eat your heart out!'

Simultaneously I recall how our friendship began one night, thirty-five years ago, at James Whitmore's Santa Monica Canyon home. Introduced for the first time, we talked on until two in the morning. You name the subject, we took off its skin and settled its hash. From then on there were intermittent dinners, lunches, theatre dates and visits to Hollywood movie sets. You name it, Rod had an opinion. But then I am absolutely the same. We were a counterbalanced, opinionated, but friendly duo.

When Jack Smight called me wanting to buy the rights to my book *The Illustrated Man*, I said, yes, he could buy them – if he hired one of the actors on my shortlist: Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster and, you've guessed it, Rod Steiger. A week later Rod called me with the news: 'Smight wants me to appear in *The Illustrated Man*. And he wants Claire to be with me.' Two talents, Rod and his wife Claire Bloom, for the price of one.

I called Smight immediately and said, 'Buy the rights!'

With mixed results. The performances by Rod and Claire were fine, the photography lovely, the music by Jerry Goldsmith superb, but the screenplay was stranded out in some New Jersey cowpatch.

Rod came to me during the first week of photography and said, 'Have you read this screenplay?'

'No,' I replied.

'Why not?' Rod asked.

'Nobody asked me to read it,' I said. 'I want the courtesy of someone wanting a response from me. No one asked, so there was no response.'

'Do you mind if I rewrite the script, day by day?' Rod said.

'Bless you,' I said. 'Whatever you do will be better than what's there. Be my guest.'

So, as the weeks passed, Rod did what he could to aerate and align the garbled words. He did not, of course, fully succeed. It was a job for a true screenwriter. There was none, including myself, at hand.

The opening night of *The Illustrated Man* was at a cinema near my house. When it was all over and my fans left the theatre, dejected, a nine-year-old boy approached me and, looking up at me with a pale face, said, 'Mr Bradbury. What *happened*?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'Nothing at all.'

To counter despair with celebration I bring up the memory of *In the Heat of the Night*. I lunched with Rod and Sidney Poitier, and saw that the film was headed in absolutely the right direction.

The following year when it was nominated for an Academy Award, fearing that the film might be neglected by the voting members, I prepared a bottle of Mumm's champagne with my own awards plastered all over it and dropped it by Rod's house, telling the maid to stash it in the fridge – just in case.

My gesture was not needed. At the awards ceremony that night, Rod's name was announced and he walked out to seize his Oscar.

I had heard rumours that over the years, playing fast and hard at tennis, Rod sometimes yelled at his opponents, the same sort of yell he had flung at my wife and myself all that time ago. In

his moment of triumph I half expected and half hoped he might lift his Oscar high and shout across the tennis net, or up from his new Jag, 'Eat your heart out!'

He earned and deserved it. What could have been better?

Ray Bradbury

Introduction

Rod Steiger was loaded when he came to spend Christmas Day with us in the mid-seventies. Not only was he stooped under the growing weight of Hollywood celebrity, but he was laden with gifts as a kind of passport and introduction to our festive cliché of family.

He had rung up on the morning of Christmas Eve to tell us that he was in London – and alone. For some reason he couldn't be with his daughter, Anna Justine, his beloved child by former wife, actress Claire Bloom. And there was no other woman to minister to him. He is a man who likes ministry, and there was Pat, my wife, whom he has always insisted on formalizing as Patricia. (That way he thinks he is putting on his Sunday-best Christmas accent just for her. He's very polite like that.)

So, of course, we invited him for Christmas lunch, remembering that he had once told us that Christmas was usually an unhappy affair for him. When he was a child his mother went out on a three-day alcohol binge over Yule and left him alone with a bereft Christmas tree and an even emptier heart. We could but try to give him a good time.

There were, of course, Christmas rituals to go through, Pat told him – carols to sing, funny hats to be worn, presents to be opened after the meal. 'I know all about that,' he grumbled. 'Not that I always do them.' This time he had to, he was told. Even superstars had to conform.

Chauffeur-driven, he arrived on the sliced-fine stroke of noon.

The driver came in, had a drink and then went away to his own celebrations. Steiger drank to each and every one of us and we were off on the annual journey of enjoying our family's company, this time though with a superstar along for the ride. We drank La Tache, a red wine he always insisted on buying me, although I once found out how much it cost and, disconcerted, realized it amounted to nearly as much as my second mortgage. I didn't refuse it, though.

Years later he was to relate his account of the meal to his fourth wife, Paula.

'Yeah, we had all the trimmings – roast goose and Christmas pudding, that sort of thing. Yeah, goose! Not that the grown-ups saw much of it. Those three kids of theirs dived in as though they hadn't eaten for years. Perhaps they hadn't, I don't know.

'They were terribly polite about it, you know, in that very English way that takes its hat off before it knocks you down and boots you. That goose vanished as quickly as anything at the Cratchits'. I remember being asked if I wanted another slice of goose. I scarcely remember having one. You know, Paula, the Hutchinson hunger is legendary.'

We had honoured Rod Steiger by treating him as though he were a human being. It was something he remembered for years after. So did we. The man who came to dinner . . . and stayed on.

We played Christmas music and Steiger, echoing the vocals he had as poor Judd in *Oklahoma!*, hummed along with it. Simple, corny things like that. And then we were into late afternoon and opening our gifts to each other. Steiger had bought his presents at the last moment: they were all expensive pens. My sons promised to pass examinations with them; our daughter did the same, only she had an extra treat. Remembering that she is left-handed, as he is, Steiger had bought her a book, *The Natural Superiority of the Left-Handed*.

We started talking about the word 'sinister' and how it was associated with being left-handed and how this applied to