

Remembering William Holden

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WILLIAM HOLDEN had some favorite projects, aside from the movies, in his work with animals in Africa and his interest in environmental problems.

Kenya project, with photographs that showed him helping in the roundup of animals.

Then we began to talk about the sea. When he heard that my books and magazine articles focused on this subject, he began to speak animatedly of a terrestrial/marine preserve he was developing on Wuvulu Island, a tiny coral atoll in the Bismarck Archipelago near New Guinea. With him in the project was marine architect Jean-Michel Cousteau, who was attending to the establishment of the underwater preserve, where divers could look but not touch. Holden was responsible for the topside part, importing and establishing a population of animals and plants. Although Wuvulu was small and isolated, he felt it was important to contribute something to the planet, to help make it a better place.

As he talked about Wuvulu, I had the distinct feeling that Bill Holden's heart was more for this work than for film, that the cinema was a means to that end. During our two months in Munich he occasionally referred to the reckless abandon of his earlier days and how glad he was to have escaped the noisiness of those times. After "21 Hours" was completed he planned to check into a German spa in the country outside Munich, to regenerate soul and body and to have a bit of time alone. He was now reflective, contemplative, eager to have a quiet evening either in conversation with one or two other people, or to stay alone in his rooms with a good book.

He loved books, and during our Chinese dinner he spoke animatedly of one he had just finished the night before, called "Time and Again" — a time-warp story set in New York of the 1890's. He thought it should be made into a film, it was that good. I was interested in what he said about it and told him so.

The next morning, when we all arrived on the set, he gave me the book, with a card that not only encouraged me to enjoy the book but to continue my own writing. Thoughtful, caring — he was that kind of man.

Chow mein in Munich. When I think of that, I think of Bill Holden and an evening of thought-sharing. The William Holden theme, as I saw it, was privacy, concern for others, and conservation of the worthwhile things in the world. Thus: Kenya, Wuvulu, and a good book in the peace and privacy of one's room.

I remember the night I ate a Chinese dinner with William Holden in Munich. Everyone from the cast and crew of an American film project had been feted and feasted by the hospitable Muenchners day and night for almost two months — and the Germans have a certain affinity for pork.

"Schwein — everywhere schwein," said Holden, picking up the menu. "I never want to see it again. Now let's see, what will we have?"

With that, we ordered pork chow mein and got down to business.

Business, at that point, was to get away from fanfare and hoopla. There were three of us — the director, Billy Graham, who had invited me to the Munich shoot, me, and Holden, who had asked the two of us to go with him to a quiet dinner. He was tired of the organized parties, the adulation, and wanted to get down to earth — to a quiet evening of normal conversation.

Bill Holden saw himself as an everyday, ordinary man, and that — according to film critics — was why he fit so well every role he played, which ranged from vagabond drifter to cop.

The role he was currently playing in Munich was that of police chief Manfred Schreiber. The film was titled "21 Hours at Munich" and was about the massacre of the Israeli athletes by PLO terrorists at the 1972 Olympic Games. The dramatic recreation of that sad piece of history was being done in the Olympic Village apartments where the actual event had occurred, and the story followed the actual incident.

The Germans had thought if they could get the terrorists and their captives out of the confines of the apartments and out in the open somewhere, they'd have a better chance at staging the ambush, and therefore the entire burden was on Manfred Schreiber. At the last minute he staged the showdown at a military airport outside Munich, just as the Israeli hostages were about to lift off in helicopters. The end of the tragedy was the bombing of the helicopters by the terrorists — and the death of all Israeli athletes.

The shooting of "21 Hours" was a complicated business because most of the filming had to be done in the close confines of the Olympic Village apartments and the Germans didn't like the project because it was a reminder to them of how badly the incident had turned out under their direction. Many times, as cameras and sound were rolling, someone in the apartment complex would turn up a stereo or start yelling so that everything would have to be started all over again.

Therefore, there were many starts and stops, and tempers flared. Through all of this, Bill Holden not only maintained his own calm, but helped others to keep theirs, too. For a star of his stature he was immensely unspoiled — always ready, good-natured, helpful to others, and deeply interested in what went on around him.

One day, as the filming proceeded inside the apartments, I sat with him outside and we began to talk of his conservation work in Africa. For years he had been devoting his time and energy to saving the big game animals of Kenya, developing a preserve where wounded, sick or endangered animals could be brought to live out their days unharassed by man. He had with him several published articles about the