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The Elephant to Hollywood

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The Twilight Zone

When I finished my first autobiography *What's It All About?* 1992 seemed like a good place to stop. I had a great film career, a worldwide bestseller, some restaurants, a beautiful house and most importantly of all, a loving family. Christmas and New Year's Eve 1991 had been spent in Aspen, Colorado, as guests of Marvin and Barbara Davis, the Texan oil billionaires and socialites. We stayed at the Little Nell Inn (which Marvin happened to own) and we were surrounded by friends including Lenny and Wendy Goldberg, Sean Connery and his wife Michelene and Sidney and Joanna Poitier.

It was a fabulous group to spend a holiday with. I don't ski but I have really worked hard at developing my après ski skills and that is what Aspen is all about. As we sat around, enjoying the sunshine, gossiping about old times and eating fabulous food with this great group of people, I felt pretty happy with my lot. Everyone there had been part of my life since I first got to Hollywood – although in fact I'd met Sean in London back in the late fifties at what was then called a 'bottle party'. If someone was giving a party in those days and couldn't quite afford it, the invitation would be to 'bring a bottle and a bird'. I was so broke

that I couldn't afford to bring a bottle, so I brought two birds. And they were both very beautiful girls. I walked into this party and there was Sean, who seemed enormous compared with the rest of us weedy actor types, and he saw me with those two girls and I became his instant new best friend. That period, back in the 1950s, was a tough time for me – perhaps the toughest I've ever known – and I was living hand to mouth through much of it, owing small sums of money to people all over London and often having to cross the road to avoid creditors. Of course, what I couldn't have foreseen was that not so many years later, Shirley Maclaine would choose me to play opposite her in *Gambit* and give me a welcome to LA party, and in would walk Sidney Poitier. And that Sidney would become my instant new best friend.

Aspen with old friends was followed by a period back in Hollywood. I felt on top of the world. Things could only get better. I was completely oblivious to the downturn in store for me. My wife Shakira and I had bought a small house with a fantastic view, not on a Beverly Hill but in the more modest district of Trousdale. It was a holiday home, really – our main base was back in England – but we wanted to be close to our dear friend Swifty Lazar whose wife, Mary, was very sick.

Apart from Mary's illness, there were no signs of impending doom. Nothing seemed to have changed. Our old friends were all in town. As with our New Year at Aspen, the dinner we had one night at Chasen's restaurant in Hollywood with Frank and Barbara Sinatra, Greg and Veronique Peck and George and Jolene Schlatter, seemed to reflect all that was good in our lives. It was a great Hollywood evening, full of

in-jokes including a prime one from George that seemed to sum up perfectly the relationship between actors and their agents. George is one of the great TV producers, the man who discovered Goldie Hawn in his fantastic show *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, and every bit as funny as the shows he's produced. I've been lucky – my agents have always been close friends – but the relationship between stars and agents is usually quite distant socially. The joke goes, an actor gets a telephone call to say that his house has been burnt down and his wife raped. The actor rushes home and a police officer meets him outside and tells him that it is his agent who has come to the house, burnt it down and raped his wife. The actor's jaw drops and he turns to the policeman and says, completely astonished, 'My agent came to my *house*?'

In fact, that dinner at Chasen's, and one the following week at Barbra Streisand's (all Art Nouveau, and sensational Shaker furniture), were to be the last highs for quite some time. Looking back to this period I can see now what I couldn't see then: the storm clouds, as they say, were gathering. A movie I had made the previous year, *Noises Off*, had come out and gone out just as quickly. I wasn't too bothered. Everyone has a flop movie now and then, I thought. But it was another little sign.

I took no notice. I had become part of Hollywood history. Completely out of the blue, Robert Mitchum, the great 1950s movie star, asked me to present his Lifetime Achievement Award at the Golden Globes. I loved Bob Mitchum and was honoured that he should ask me, but I didn't know him and had never worked with him and I was curious. 'Did you pick me because I had heavy eyelids like

you?’ I asked him. And he said, ‘Yes. You’re the only one, you know. People were always talking about my eyelids and then I saw you in *Alfie* and I thought to myself: this guy’s got heavy eyelids, too. They’re not as heavy as mine, of course, but they’re quite heavy. It’s all to do with the eyelids.’ A charming story – and Bob was a charming guy – but I began to wonder if it was really because everyone else turned him down.

Whether or not that was the case, I’ve always liked the Golden Globes because you can sit at tables and get a drink and move around and talk to people. Burt Reynolds once pointed out something that everyone in the business knows but which is rarely mentioned: the class distinction. At awards ceremonies all the television people are seated at the back and the movie people at the front. It’s absurd, really – you get TV stars like those on *Friends* who are earning a million dollars a week, and their tables aren’t at the front. And I’m thinking – wait a minute – I’ve never earned a million dollars a week! I asked one of the organizers of the Golden Globes about it and he said simply, ‘Movies come first.’

I was just about to find out how true that was.

Back in England, my book came out and went straight to Number One. And I embarked on a world tour to publicise it – what could possibly go wrong?

For a start, doing publicity on a book tour turned out to be just like doing publicity for a movie, which is something I have done and hated all my life. People tell me that movie stars are overpaid. Well, I disagree. Movie stars only get a thousand dollars a time for the hard work: the hours in make-up, the endless takes, the craft, the experience, the star billing – the other million is for the publicity and believe

me, we earn every cent. When I first went to America on a publicity tour for *The Ipspress File* and *Alfie*, it came as a big shock to be bundled out of bed at six in the morning by my press agent Bobby Zarem and told that I was appearing on the *Today* show at seven-thirty. ‘Seven-thirty?’ I said. I’d only flown in the night before. ‘So why do I have to get up at dawn for an evening show?’ He looked at me pityingly. ‘It’s seven-thirty this morning, Michael.’ ‘And who on earth’s going to be watching at that time of day?’ I demanded. This time Bobby was a little firmer. ‘Twenty-one million people,’ he said. ‘So if you want to be a star in America, you’ll have to get up!’ I’m used to the 24/7 publicity machine now, but it doesn’t mean I like it and this tour was no different. It consisted of me giving jet-lagged interviews to journalists who hadn’t even bothered to read the book, then getting on another plane and doing the same thing all over again in a different, equally fascinating and equally beautiful country that I only got to see from the car window to and from an airport. There were some really great places I never quite got to see on that tour – Hong Kong, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, America . . .

I remember Chris Patten, the then governor of Hong Kong, sending an official to whip us through immigration and customs so we wouldn’t be late for our first-night dinner with him. We stayed in the Regent Hotel (now the InterContinental) and Shakira and I had a jacuzzi together in the most romantic setting ever – in the middle of the roof of the penthouse apartment thirty storeys up. There was nothing but the jacuzzi and a 360-degree view of the city – we spent hours in there. We must have been the cleanest tourists in the whole of Asia.

Spectacular though it was, that was pretty much all we saw of Hong Kong. We went on to Bangkok. As we came out of the airport we saw a Rolls Royce with a police escort waiting for someone. That someone turned out to be us. It all seemed a bit over the top until we hit the traffic on the freeway – I had never seen anything like it. It didn't seem to matter to our policemen whether we went on the off ramps or off the on ramps, we just ploughed our way into the city, doing what normally would have been a four-hour trip in under an hour. When we got to the Oriental Hotel we were ushered into the Somerset Maugham suite – more than a bit intimidating for a first-time writer!

On to Australia, New Zealand . . . and then to Los Angeles for the first stop in a whirlwind publicity tour, punctuated by something that was beginning to happen more and more frequently in my life: a memorial service.

I suppose if I'd been looking for signs that there was a downturn in store for me, I might have taken one from the death of John Foreman, a friend and the producer of one of my favourites among my own movies, *The Man Who Would Be King*. I gave one of the eulogies at his memorial service and others also got up and spoke, including Jack Nicholson. John Foreman was a very special kind of guy and I'd put him in the category of the 'nearly greats' – I think he died just before he reached his full potential, although *The Man Who Would Be King* is more than enough to confirm his reputation.

Sitting in the packed chapel and listening as friends paid tribute to a wonderful man, I couldn't help thinking back to that film and what it had meant – and still means – to me. Not only was I working with a man I regarded as

God – director John Huston, who had directed three of my all-time favourite films including *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The Maltese Falcon* and *The African Queen* – but I was playing the part of Peachy Carnehan, a part Huston had planned for Humphrey Bogart, my screen idol. I thought back to the first time I saw *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, that great film classic about a bunch of misfits searching for gold, a dream as impossible as mine to be an actor seemed then. As a teenager I had identified with the Bogart character completely and now I found myself in a movie directed by Huston, playing a part intended for Bogart. It seemed as if impossible dreams really could come true.

The other thing that made *The Man Who Would Be King* so special was that I was playing opposite Sean Connery. Working with him proved to be a real pleasure and we became even closer as a result. Sean, like me, felt he owed a great deal to John Huston and we were both very sad to hear the news, many years later, that he was on his deathbed. The two of us went to Cedars Sinai Hospital in Hollywood to say goodbye. When we got there John was rambling. ‘I was in a boxing match,’ he was saying, ‘and it turns out the other guy had razors sewn into the gloves and that’s why I’m here. He finished me off, that guy – that’s why I’m here.’ He went on about this boxer for twenty minutes and Sean and I looked at each other and we were both in tears – and I’ve never seen Sean in tears. We left the hospital, very upset, and the next thing we heard was that John Huston had got up out of bed and made two more movies. When I saw him again I said, ‘The next time I come to say farewell to you, you’d better die or I’ll bloody kill you. You don’t

know how upset we were.’ He said, ‘Well, Michael, you know how it is – people get upset. And people die.’ ‘Well, yes,’ I said, ‘but not twice.’

Back at John Foreman’s service, we had some laughs, told some stories and shed some tears and then it was on to New York for yet another book launch evening. This time it was at my friend Elaine’s restaurant and guests included Gloria Vanderbilt, Lauren Bacall, David Bowie and Iman – these legends just floated in front of my jet-lagged eyes. I had a mind that couldn’t think – not that it mattered, my tongue and lips were too tired to speak anyway.

If Chasen’s symbolised my Hollywood life and was the meeting place for so many of my LA friends, then Elaine’s was its New York equivalent. Elaine’s is more than a restaurant: it’s a New York institution, almost a salon. It was the perfect place to hold a book launch because it’s always been a place where writers, actors and directors gather, from Woody Allen to the people from *Saturday Night Live*. Elaine herself would flit from table to table making sure all her guests were all right. One night there was a guy bothering me and she came over and grabbed him by the collar and threw him out on the pavement – all on her own. I protested, ‘That’s a bit drastic – we could have got rid of him.’ And she said, ‘Nah – I don’t like those sons of bitches!’ Elaine is a close friend and I have lunch with her on a Saturday when we’re in New York. It’s always caviar, which she pays for in cash that she keeps in her bra. She says, ‘I’ll get this,’ and she dives in and pulls out this wad of cash!

The party at Elaine’s was the last of the tour and from New York I went back home to England. I was absolutely shattered but scripts had arrived while I was away, it was

time to get on with the day job. Eventually I picked myself up and sat down to read one. I was appalled. The part was very small, hardly worth doing at all. I sent it straight back to the producer, telling him what I thought of it. A couple of days later the man phoned me. ‘No, no – you’re not the *lover*, I want you to read the part of the father!’ I put the phone down and just stood there, shocked. The *father*? Me? I headed into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Yes, staring back at me was, indeed, the father – and so was someone else. In the mirror was a leading movie actor, not a movie star. I realised the only girl I’d ever get to kiss in a film again would be my daughter.

The difference between a leading movie actor and a movie star (apart from the money and the dressing room) is that when movie stars get a script they want to do, they change it to suit them. A movie star says, ‘I would never do that’ or ‘I would never say that’ and their own writers will add what they would do or say. When leading movie actors get a script they want to do, they change themselves to suit the script. But there’s another difference, and this was a difference I knew I could work with. A lot of movie stars can’t act and so when the big roles dry up they disappear, insisting they won’t play supporting parts. All leading movie actors have to act or they would vanish completely.

I had always known that this time would come. I was fifty-eight years old. Should I give up or keep going? Decision time. The question stayed with me for months. It stayed with me every morning as I opened the packets of crap, coffee-stained scripts with the pencil markings that other, younger actors had made before they turned the parts

down. I could see that things were going to be different now, more difficult.

I had reached the period of my life I called the twilight zone. The spotlight of movie stardom was fading and although the slightly dimmer light of the leading movie actor was beginning to flicker into life, it all seemed very gloomy. There were some bright spots. Out of the blue I was made CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List – a great honour and a beautiful medal. I was now a Commander of the British Empire and very proud of it, although an unkind journalist pointed out that I'd been made a commander of something that no longer existed. So even the stuff that was going right for me wasn't perfect . . .