

Hanging With the King: An Interview With Burt Reynolds

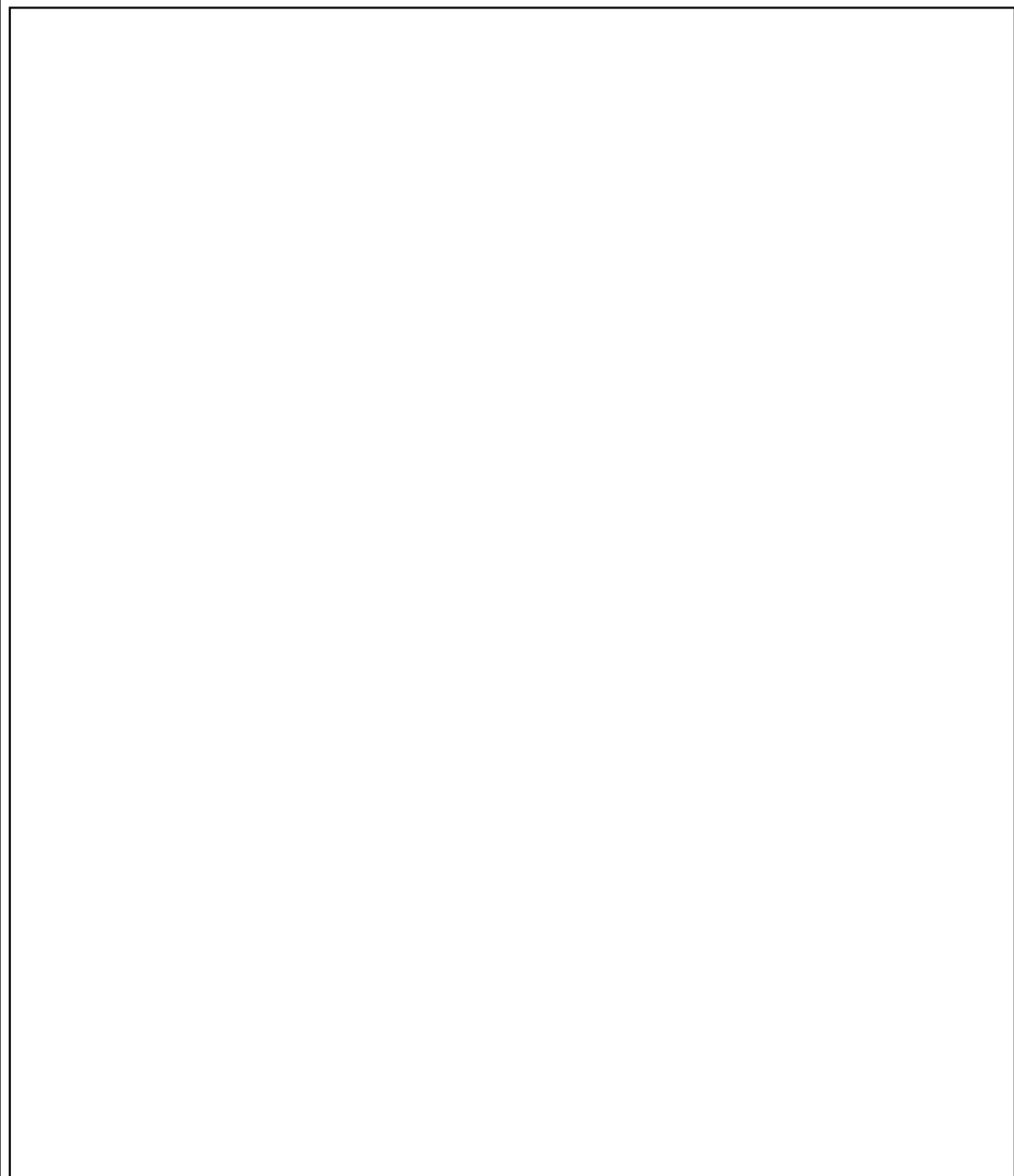
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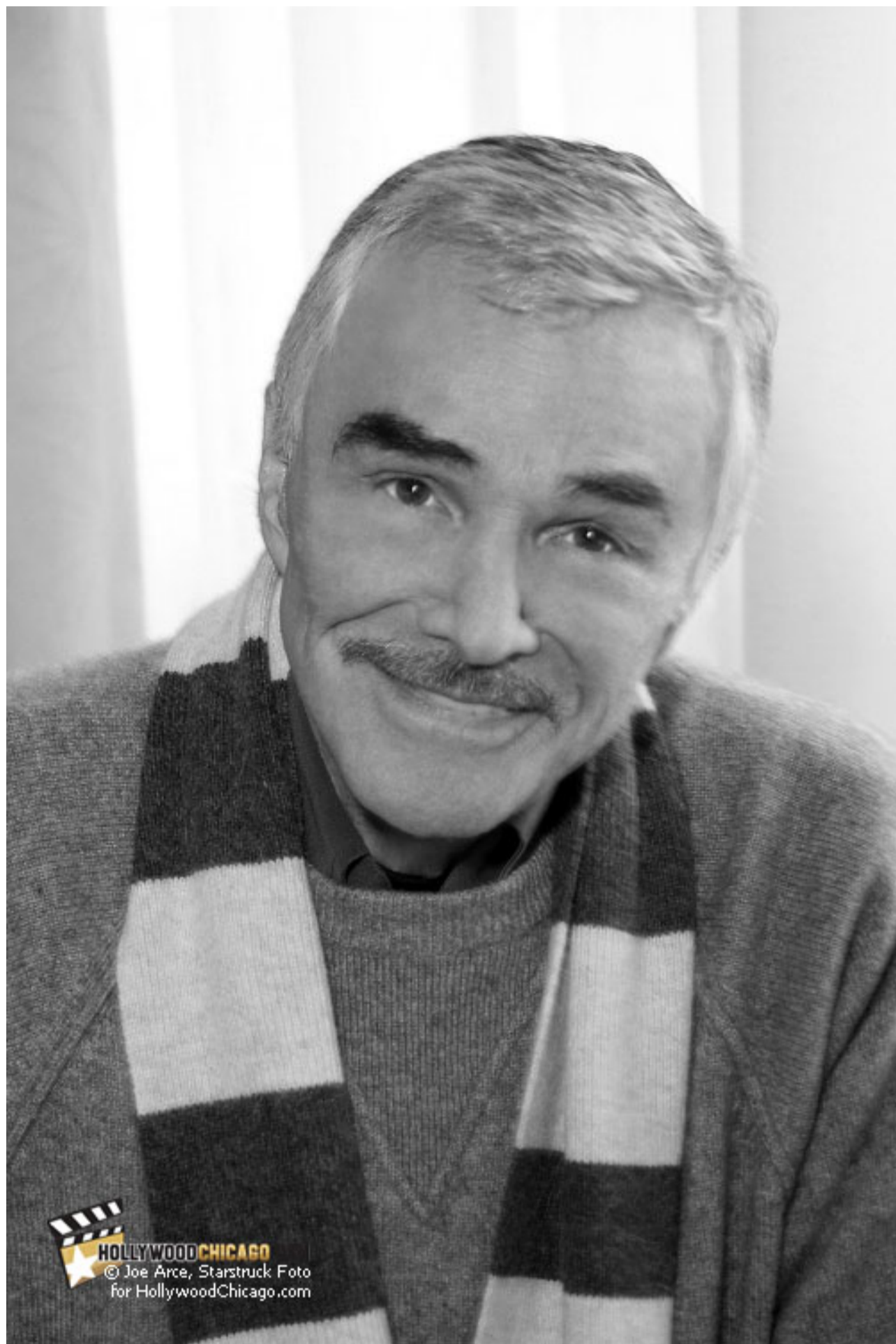
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CHICAGO – There is a certain royal atmosphere when a true movie star walks into the room. Burt Reynolds is that type of star, and his presence has the history of popular movies about him, the journey of a career spanning 50 years.

Burton Reynolds, Jr. is a Florida native, raised in Riviera Beach, where his father was the Chief of Police. A stellar all-state football player in high school, Reynolds got a scholarship to Florida State and played halfback. An injury ended his football dreams, but a chance meeting with a play producer afterward launched Reynolds into the acting profession.

He won the Florida State Drama Award, which included a scholarship to be on the summer stock stage in New York State. From there, he worked his way up the theater ladder in New York City, finally getting a break co-starring with Charlton Heston in a revival of the classic stageplay 'Mr. Roberts.' The director of that play, John Forsythe, arranged a screen test for Reynolds in Hollywood.





The King: Burt Reynolds in Chicago, April 14, 2011

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

He started there in TV around 1961, taking on parts in dramas and westerns primarily. This led to a part in 'Gunsmoke,' where he played blacksmith Quint Asper from 1962 to 1965. Along the way he dipped his toe in films, doing mostly b-movies and an infamous spaghetti western, "Navajo Joe" (1966). He kept building TV popularity and box office until his big break, the classic "Deliverance" (1972).

The 1970s then belonged to Burt Reynolds, culminating in his status as the number one box office draw in film. The films were popular and steady: "White Lightning" (1973), "The Longest Yard" (1974), "Gator" (1976), "Smokey and the Bandit" (1977) and "Starting Over" (1979). He even directed Gator and "The End" (1978, with Dom DeLuise). Throughout his career, Reynolds has been directed by such diverse talents as John Boorman, Woody Allen, Peter Bogdanovich and Blake Edwards.

After that career period, Reynolds went back to television with "Evening Shade" (1990-94), for which he won an Emmy, and was nominated for an Oscar for his performance in "Boogie Nights" (1997). He is also known for dating notable female celebrities such as Dinah Shore, Sally Field and Loni Anderson (who was his second wife). He continues to work, appearing recently in the TV show "Burn Notice." Through his 50 year career, he has 90 feature film and 300 television episode credits.

HollywoodChicago.com got the honor of talking with Burt Reynolds, before his appearances last week at the Hollywood Palms Cinema (Naperville, Illinois) and Hollywood Blvd Cinema (Woodridge), where he introduced his favorite films.

HollywoodChicago: What was your biggest fear in making the transition from high level athlete to actor, and how did you get over that fear to get to the next level?

Burt Reynolds: Well, there are levels, and then there are 'levels.' The first fear is 'what the hell am I doing here,' as in I really must be

crazy. The thing about athletics and being in over your head, there are many similarities between that and acting. There is a guy over there on the other side that is trying to take your head off. [laughs]

When you go out in the hallway at an audition and you see 37 guys that not only look like you, but they look a helluva lot better than you. They are a helluva lot taller, more handsome, bigger and they sound better than you do. Your voice suddenly sounds seven octaves higher than their voices. And you think it's over, before it even begins. You have to get past that.

Then you get past that, and then you get to the next reading, and the next reading and finally you get to the reading where you walk on stage and in the back row is José Quintero [Broadway Producer and Director] saying, 'read it again!' Then you read it again. Then you hear him say, 'read it again!' And you read it again. You do this about seven times. And finally I walked down to the front of the stage and yelled, 'what the hell do you want?' And he said, 'That. Thank you.' [laughs]



Burt Reynolds in a Casual Mood
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago: And that was 'Mr. Roberts'?

Reynolds: Yes.

HollywoodChicago: You spoke on Turner Classic Movies of your admiration of Spencer Tracy as a role model for you as an actor, which film director – either having worked with them or just in cinema history – do you admire or try to emulate as a pure filmmaker and why?

Reynolds: The best film director I ever had, without any question, is John Boorman ("Deliverance"). He takes chances, but he takes the same chances that you do. When we went down that river in a canoe, which we had no business going down, but he was in a canoe right beside us. Obviously you couldn't take a normal size crew down the river, so we took seven guys maybe. We also shot it all in sequence. And I remember one day I said to John, 'This is great, shooting it in sequence. Why don't they do more pictures like this?' And he said, 'this is in case one of you drowns.' [laughs] All he had to do was rewrite, 'Lewis [Reynold's character] drowned yesterday, he was a good guy.' [laughs] But really, I do believe that's what he thought. He was amazing.

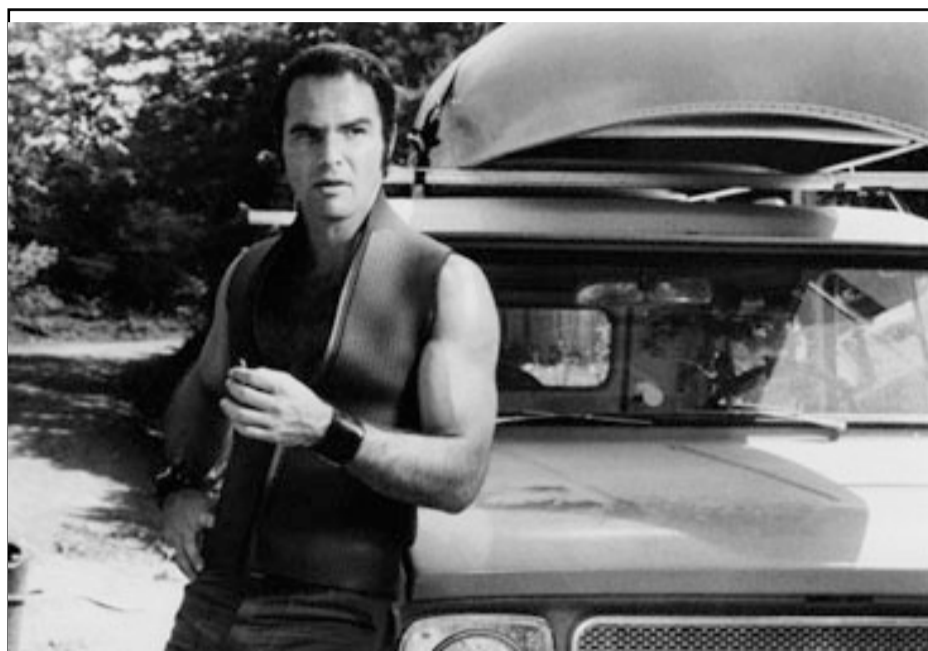
The best director, in regard to communicating with actors, was Elia Kazan. I did a film with his wife, and we were right next to each other at this crummy little motel in Mohave. Every morning, I'd try to get up early enough so I'd time it to have breakfast with him. I heard that as soon as you sit down with him, you'll tell him the story of your life. And I thought to myself, 'I'm not going to tell him the story of my life, what are you crazy?' I just wanted to meet the man. Three minutes after I sat down, 'well, my father was born....' [Laughs] He just had that ability to get every drop out of you, and make you feel like it was the most important thing he ever heard. Which is why he was so wonderful with actors.

HollywoodChicago: You started in television around the time when episodic westerns and scripted dramas were the kings of the tube. How important was it for you, and Clint Eastwood, Bruce Dern, Robert Redford, all the guys you came up with, to have that opportunity to work in

television at that time?

Reynolds: For us, it was going to school. Clint wasn't in the Actor's Studio and hadn't been to New York that much, Bruce and I were in the Actor's Studio. But I learned really the same way the two of them did, by doing. After doing a hundred television shows you either learn something or you should become a housepainter. [laughs] I think I learned my craft by doing.

I remember doing a scene with a guy in 'Wagon Train,' and I thought he was pretty good. And it was Bob Redford. It was that way all down the line. We were all in the same period, the same time in our lives. And there were a lot of guys who were pains in the ass on the set, and I thought 'I hope I never see this guy again.' And you know what, I never did.



Burt Reynolds in 'Deliverance'
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

HollywoodChicago: What was the best decision you made between 1960 and 1970 that propelled you into what would become your eventual number one box office status?

Reynolds: First, I'd done a lot of bad pictures. You can learn from bad pictures. Sometimes you learn a helluva lot more from a bad picture than a really great picture, because in a great picture you have a wonderful director who is your safety net. When you are asked to do a triple [act, do stunts, etc.], it's nice to have a net. I've been asked to do a triple, and there was no net. But I was young, crazy and it seemed like a good idea at the time. Sometimes I missed and landed wrong, and in this cold Chicago weather I can feel when something hurts, 'ooh, yeah, that's The Longest Yard.' I can name the pictures from what hurts. [laughs]

I guess the best part is when a script comes along, after you've been doing a lot of stuff, a 'Deliverance' crosses in front of you and you think, 'Wow, if they can put this on-screen with the right people, this could be something that lasts forever.' Because it's timeless. The wardrobe will be timeless, because they'll be wearing the same wardrobe a hundred years from now when they go down the river. Guys might be smarter than us, and wear life vests, but...[laughs]. It was an amazing time. Plus the fact that Jon Voight and Ned Beatty, still two of my closest friends, were extraordinary. Ned Beatty should have won an Academy Award, it was an atrocity that he didn't.

HollywoodChicago: You were a favorite of the golden age of 'The Tonight Show' with Johnny Carson. What was the hardest thing to figure out about the King of Late Night?

Reynolds: I was told there were certain rules. Don't touch his pencil, don't move the drink and don't touch him. So the first thing I did was break the pencil, drink from his mug and slap in on the shoulder with, 'it's a pleasure to be here.' From there, everything went crazy, and fun, and wonderful.

HollywoodChicago: Of all the people you have known, famous, family, friends and lovers, who have now passed on, who would you like most to call right now, and what would you talk to them about?

Reynolds: I'd call Dinah. I'd call Dom. I'd tell them that every day I think about them, and every day I wish that they were here, and every day I say, 'you were right.'

The Hollywood Palms Cinema (Naperville, Illinois) and the Hollywood Blvd Cinema (Woodridge) continues to offer special events and a unique theater experience. [Click here](#) [18] for more details.



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