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Big Stars on the Small Screen

The general assumption that most of us have about film stars on television is that they simply don't belong there, that something odd or exceptional must be going on if we see a legitimate film star do a television show or a commercial. We figure, he's only doing it for a big paycheck, or she's only doing it because she owed someone a favor, or most commonly, well, I guess his career is washed-up. There must be an explanation like this, we assume; after all, why would a film star appear on television if she didn't have to? When I first started seriously considering these issues, my curiosity led me back to the 1950s, to the first full decade of American commercial television. I had assumed, in fact, that this would be an era of minimal participation in television by film stars, since on the one hand, television had yet to prove itself to the public as a legitimate entertainment medium, and on the other, the film industry largely feared TV as a challenge to Hollywood's dominance of popular entertainment and responded by trying to be as different from television as it could, as the 1950s saw the movies explode in widescreen, stereophonic sound, and Technicolor. With these developments, one could easily assume that no self-respecting film star would be caught dead on television in the 1950s.

However, in perusing *TV Guides* from that era, I found just the opposite. In fact, a television viewer could have sat in her living room during the middle two weeks of April 1955 and seen a plethora of stars originally associated with the film industry, including Ronald Reagan hosting *General Electric Theater* and presenting Jimmy Stewart in his small screen acting debut, James Mason hosting *Lux Video Theater* and introducing Claire Trevor as guest star, Gary

Merrill starring in the dramatic series *Justice*, Groucho Marx hosting *You Bet Your Life*, Lon Chaney, Jr. unmasked on *Masquerade Party*, Claudette Colbert featured on *Climax*, James Cagney touting his new film on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Charles Boyer acting on *Four Star Playhouse*, Ray Milland starring in *The Ray Milland Show*, Ann Sothorn featured in *Private Secretary*, Cornel Wilde guest-starring on Lucille Ball's *I Love Lucy*, and Judy Holliday performing in the special *Kaleidoscope*.¹ Clearly it's not the case that most film actors, and even true film stars, avoided television in the 1950s.

This situation therefore gives us a handful of intriguing historical questions to answer: why did these particular actors appear on television? When was it deemed "safe" for a film actor to do TV, what types of shows were stars most likely to appear on, and how did television present these larger-than-life figures on the small screen? How could film stars, even washed-up ones, help to establish television as a credible entertainment medium? I will spend the next half-hour or so answering these questions for you, and then I'd love to hear any of your questions or recollections.

Most truly big film stars avoided television in its first commercial decade. For instance, Katharine Hepburn, Clark Gable, Cary Grant and Rita Hayworth never did appear on 1950s television with the exception of appearances outside of their control, such as in news reports and at events like the Oscars, and Gene Tierney, Marilyn Monroe, William Holden and Rock Hudson made only one or two appearances across the period. These figures were among the biggest stars in 1950s Hollywood, and television was considered well beneath the stature of a true film star. Even a lesser star like Robert Young felt this way, saying of his move from film to television, "When we had the chance to take [*Father Knows Best*] to TV, I thought it was a step down, a sign that you couldn't work anywhere else."²

This attitude was partly drawn from the medium's chaotic and low-budget identity in its early stages. Plus, stars eyed the commercial basis of television with suspicion, for fear that an association with commercialism would denigrate a star's image. Actor Dana Andrews expressed such a sentiment in regard to stars like Sterling Hayden selling watches or Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz selling cigarettes, when he told a newspaper in 1957:

I particularly dislike the practice of having the actors do the commercials. It is a prostitution of their art, and they must lose the respect of the audience. If an actor is going to pitch commercials, he may as well be working in a store.³

Overexposure was also viewed as a potential blow to a star's status. It was felt that film stars were so famous partly because they had rarity value, meaning that spectators were fascinated with them because they could only see them on periodic occasions, an unpredictable handful of times a year, and only by leaving their homes and going out to a public theater. Television, of course, changed that whole equation. Now, a star on a television series could be seen with scheduled regularity every week for over half of the year and in the comfort of a living room space. Bing Crosby, for one, described his concern that appearing on a season-long television series would cause audiences to tire of him: "Anybody who goes into TV should be sparing in how much work he does. If a new motion picture of mine were released [every] week I soon wouldn't have many friends coming to theaters to see me. They'd [tire] of my mannerisms, my voice, my face."⁴ This was a fear not only for stars, but for the movie studios as well. In fact, it was common for the major studios to forbid their contract stars from appearing on the small screen in the early 1950s based on the assumption that television viewers would not show up at the box office if they could regularly see stars at home for free. The studios also threatened not to hire for new projects any actors who had appeared on television.

Also problematic for many stars was the comparatively poor quality of early television images—small, black-and-white, and grainy, especially inferior to the richly detailed images that could be seen in movie theaters. Joked Humphrey Bogart: “I look awful on television. Every pore on my face can be seen by those home screens. And you can imagine what I look like on sets with bad reception.”⁵ Furthermore, the first half-decade of television was dominated by live productions, and this presented a challenge for actors used to working in film. The immediacy of live production was especially demanding, as scenes could not be redone and mistakes could not be cut out as was the case in the movies.

With all this in mind, you might be wondering how it is that any film stars ended up on early television, and I’d like to now turn to why it was actually common for many film actors, if still not the top tier of stars, to move over to TV by the mid-1950s. First, the film studios increasingly began to appreciate television as a publicity outlet, and the ban against their stars-under-contract appearing on TV was largely lifted by 1953. The two staunchest holdout studios, Warner Bros. and MGM, began to relent in that year, allowing their stars to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, provided the stars received the opportunity to plug the studio and their recent films. Plus, the studios increasingly cut contractual ties with many of their stars across the 1950s, for reasons I won’t bother with here, and thus stars were increasingly freed up to do television across the fifties if they chose to.

And in being freed up from the studios, stars could take advantage of a major attraction of television: production control. Stars had very little freedom in the classical, pre-fifties days of filmmaking, from choosing the films they starred in to the clothes they wore, and many stars yearned for creative input into the nature of their acting appearances and the ways in which their images were publicized. Thus, early television’s still-developing production environment offered

ambitious stars a place for creative control of their images and acting roles. Actors such as Ann Sothern, Loretta Young and Robert Montgomery formed their own television production companies, thereby gaining a level of creative freedom they could have only dreamed about in the film industry. Former Hollywood crooner-turned-tough guy Dick Powell actually became one of the most successful producers of any sort on fifties television, and his Four Star Productions was one of the most dominant companies of the period (and as a testament to his importance to the company, it virtually folded when he passed away from cancer in 1963).

Powell also became a very rich man from these endeavors, and money increasingly became a draw for film actors to turn to television. While TV had muddled along in the red across its first half-decade, the medium turned a profit in the mid-1950s, even out-earning radio by that point, and stars could now be paid reasonable dollars for their efforts. While not many would garner the \$50,000 that Ginger Rogers received for a single appearance on a special 1954 (and that would be about \$360,000 in today's dollars), decent paychecks were available for most. Said Henry Fonda of a mid-fifties TV offer, "I wasn't too interested until I saw the dollar sign at the end of the telegram."⁶

In fact, the job that Fonda took in 1955 was as the host of an NBC anthology drama called *Rheingold Theater*, and it was the anthology drama, a bygone genre where each episode presented a different story and a different set of actors, that became a key site for film star appearances. The live anthology drama especially was considered a prestige format, as critics defined it as high culture entertainment akin to Broadway theater. Thus, hosting anthology programs put forth the actor as a figure of prestige for what was often very little work, and high-level stars could appear on these shows while seemingly remaining true to their star status. Fears of overexposure would also have made acting appearances in anthology dramas attractive, as

they enabled only periodic appearances. These shows also frequently offered challenging, distinctive parts that stars might not have gotten in films. For instance, June Allyson told *TV Guide* just before starring in her own anthology program: “[I don’t have] to play the girl next door [on this show]. [Instead I can] play a conniving socialite who deserts her husband. And there goes the sweet June Allyson we all knew and loved. Good.”⁷

And finally, there certainly was a significant number of film actors on television who were basically washed-up in the movies and who turned to TV simply to keep working. Movie stardom was, and is, an incredibly fickle phenomenon, and once an actor no longer had “It,” whether because of advancing age, changing public tastes or simply bad fortune, Hollywood quickly dismissed him. For those faded stars who didn’t want to let go of this public exposure, and who at the very least just wanted to keep acting, they suddenly had a new safety net in television.

David Niven was one of many who benefited from this safety net. His film career had faded out by the early 1950s, so he joined up with Dick Powell to star in the anthology program *Four Star Playhouse*. He not only enjoyed great success in this capacity, earning an Emmy nomination in 1954 for Best Actor (role depicted in slide), but he also briefly rejuvenated his film career, even winning a Best Actor Oscar in 1958 for the film *Separate Tables*. It was almost as if television had reminded everyone that Niven was still film star material. In fact, one TV critic penned an article in 1954 defending television’s judgment of stars in comparison to the movies, writing that “TV [is] proving that the movie studios [have] scrapped actors whose talents were far from being played out. [These actors are not] has-beens. It might be more apt to describe them as mistakes made by the movie industry and rectified by television.”⁸

And for its part, television did greatly embrace stars that Hollywood had written off. A recognizable star, even a washed-up one, was essential to distinguish a sitcom or drama within a sea of similar programs, and a star name was usually a guarantee that viewers would tune in, since it was an undeniable thrill to see a movie actor on television. One successful television producer from the 1950s, Frederic Ziv, said of the importance of featuring established stars in his programs: “[We] tended to pick a name that needed no additional words to describe. If you said ‘I have a show with Ronald Colman,’ you didn’t have to add any words. Stations were receptive, networks were receptive, sponsors were receptive, audiences were receptive.”⁹

Film stars were also useful to help upgrade material that might otherwise be viewed as low-culture programming. For instance, low-grade B-film Western heroes like the Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy had roamed the television range since the late 1940s, but their shows were largely dismissed as kiddie fare. So when the new so-called “adult Western” genre emerged in the mid-1950s, in order to be taken seriously as legitimate entertainment and to attract affluent adult viewers and deep-pocketed sponsors, it had to definitively separate itself from these previous incarnations of the TV Western. Perhaps the best example of this process involved one of the pioneers of the adult Western genre, *Gunsmoke*, which used John Wayne as a host for its premiere episode. Wayne’s presence as a legendary movie star was an essential badge of legitimacy for *Gunsmoke*, which of course became one of the longest-running shows in television history.

The attraction of film stars even influenced one of the most popular shows in television history, *I Love Lucy*, as the 1955 season presented Lucy and Desi moving to Hollywood for Desi to star in a film for MGM. This brought out such guest stars as Rock Hudson, John Wayne, William Holden, and Van Johnson, stars who were almost never seen on TV otherwise. Given

the prominence and popularity of *I Love Lucy*, this was likely deemed to be “safe” appearances for them, and it allowed their fans to see them in a new light, displaying their comedic skills. And for *I Love Lucy*, it brought even more excitement to an already beloved show.

Ronald Reagan provides a good summary example for this topic since the pattern of his television career was quite typical (though what happened after it certainly wasn't). Throughout the forties, Reagan's film career was based mainly in B pictures and secondary roles in A films; perhaps his most famous role, especially in these parts, was as George Gipp in *Knute Rockne--All American* (1940). By the early fifties, though, his film career had largely dried up. His agents encouraged him to give television a try, but Reagan feared that this would officially signal the end of his film career. However, after saying no to television a few times, and then hearing no from the film studios even more times, a fear of the end of a paycheck weighed on him more heavily, and he thus tested out television with acting appearances on such anthology dramas as *Ford Theater* and *Schlitz Playhouse of Stars*.

An even more attractive opportunity then opened up when the anthology program *General Electric Theater* began searching for a host in 1954. *GE Theater* had been on the air for a year without a host and without good ratings, and its producers felt that a film star host would help the show to stand out within the crowded field of anthology dramas.¹⁰ The show's producers especially wanted a star who could project a prestigious image to bolster the reputation of the General Electric corporation; one producer said that the type of host they were looking for show should have “[g]ood moral character, [and be] intelligent. Not the kind with the reputation for social ramble.” Reagan's star persona certainly fit that description, and he was offered the job. For his part, Reagan agreed to do the show mainly because he had been looking for an outlet to

help him begin constructing his political identity, and in placing him as an authoritative figure on a prestigious program, *General Electric Theater* gave him just such an opportunity.¹¹

Reagan's involvement with General Electric even went beyond the television show. Throughout the 1950s, he went on factory tours for GE to foster positive community relations, and Reagan was especially enthusiastic about this part of his job since it allowed him to hone his communication skills. One producer revealingly described Reagan's public speaking success: "The fact that he was a movie star gave him the entree so people would listen. Then what he had to say was so compelling that people were, for the most part, convinced and supportive."¹² One could say the same for his role as host on the television show and, later, his role as politician, and I don't think you can underestimate the importance of this television show in helping to pave the way for Reagan's political endeavors.

In turn, Reagan's presence helped to boost *General Electric Theater's* ratings,¹³ and the show also relied heavily on many Hollywood guest stars for its popularity. Guest stars on *General Electric Theater* included Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck, and the Marx Brothers., and the program presented the dramatic television debuts of Myrna Loy, Jimmy Stewart, Joseph Cotten, Bette Davis, Fred Astaire, Fred MacMurray, and Alan Ladd.¹⁴ In fact, no less than 33 Academy Award winners had appeared on *GE Theater* by 1961.¹⁵ Thus, as this example and the many others like it illustrate, by the mid-1950s Hollywood film actors readily could be found on a variety of television programs.

However, the uppermost tier of stars still was reluctant to appear, and the stigma did linger throughout the fifties that television work simply was not appropriate for an elite film star. Said one talent agent at the time, referring to Ingrid Bergman and Marilyn Monroe: "[T]hese stars shouldn't appear on television. They are too big and important. Such exposure would only dilute

[their stardom].”¹⁶ And in fact, this actually became a challenge that television had to deal with, the very impression that film stars on television were washed up, that any star on television whose audiences were familiar with from the movies had to be a failed film star, and that as a result, television was clearly an inferior medium in comparison to film. Thus, because it was essential in this early stage for television to establish itself as a legitimate medium worth public attention and advertiser dollars, those who produced its programs had to do whatever they could to stress the unique value of the medium presenting these stars and to counter any negative impressions associated with these appearances. I believe that the concept of “authenticity” became the key to doing exactly that, and I’ll use my remaining time to discuss this aspect.

By authenticity (or even ‘reality’ in the sense that it’s often used in reference to television today), I mean that television purported to deliver the genuine people behind the film star images, the “ordinary” part of their star personae. This facet of the “ordinary” had actually always been a facet of film star publicity—countless fan magazine articles from the thirties and forties showed stars doing everyday things like gardening and cooking, and these elements helped for spectators to connect personally and emotionally with the otherwise distanced, unattainable, extraordinary star figures. But television took up this partial component of movie publicity and made it the central element in its presentation of film stars, and it did so especially to showcase the unique attributes and even the supposed artistic value of television in comparison to film.

As such, many programs featuring film stars explicitly counterposed the negative contrivances of artificial, big-budget Hollywood filmmaking to the positive climate of liveness, intimacy and genuineness that early television was trying to cultivate. As an example, the show *Playhouse 90*, which premiered in 1956, was touted as the most prestigious of all anthology

dramas, and its star logo was designed explicitly to give the impression that this show presented stars. But since the level of star that the show's exalted concept aspired to, such as Cary Grant, was unavailable, the program's producers used a technique termed "stunt casting" to buttress this status. Stunt-casting meant putting a well-known, if fading, film actor, into a role that was completely different than his typical star role, and then publicizing that performance as unveiling the true acting talents of a star. For instance, in a 1957 episode entitled "The Comedian," affable former child star Mickey Rooney played a cruel, megalomaniac TV performer hated by everyone around him. This approach and the way it was publicized implied that live dramas like *Playhouse 90*, and television by extension, presented genuine artistic challenges that could uniquely allow the true talents of its actors to emerge.¹⁷

In this sense, television tried to put forward that what spectators were getting from TV was true and immediate visual access to their favorite stars, the likes of which no other entertainment media form could offer. Radio couldn't offer you what we are all so fascinated by, stars' faces and bodies; magazines couldn't offer them acting and moving; and movies couldn't offer their real personalities. Only television could offer all of this. Thus, it became crucial for early television to boost the images of its moonlighting film stars and the stature of the TV medium by extension through highlighting authenticity as television's superior value and by underscoring television's ability to rediscover or uncover the genuine talents of the film world's castoffs and supporting players, thereby granting audiences a level and range of access to film stars that they had never received before.

The most obvious instances of this measure of authenticity and access can be found on variety and talk shows, where due to the very nature of the programs, stars appeared as "themselves," performing their genuine personalities. But what's quite intriguing is how often

these appearances were not just of stars being themselves on a stage, but actually appearing either in a home setting or even in their very own home, as if showing that television was providing access not just to the performative side of a star but to their true, personal, private self. Edward R. Murrow's interview show *Person to Person* is an ideal example. On this program, Murrow conducted live interviews from New York with celebrities from across the country, including film stars in their own Hollywood homes, thereby showing how television had the power to enter the personal life of a celebrity and display its truths to the audience with great immediacy and intimacy.

And even in variety shows, where the purpose was not to inform but just to entertain, stars were often presented within the domestic realm, as if granting the audience an opportunity to see how these stars really acted in their private lives. For instance, Jack Benny was famous for presenting skits with guest stars on a living room set, and perhaps his most star-studded of such scenarios presented of Benny inviting a group of Hollywood friends over for a jam session, which included film stars Fred MacMurray, Dick Powell and Kirk Douglas (making his television debut here and one of only two TV appearances he made in the 1950s, the other being an episode of *Person to Person*).

Again, it may seem natural that stars appearing as "themselves" would act like "themselves" on such genres as the talk show and variety show, but even when the stars turned to playing fictional characters on sitcoms and dramas, they were still frequently presented and publicized as playing versions of the true selves, or more accurately, the "everyday," private half of their well-known public star images. Donna Reed is an ideal example of this. She was most well-known to fifties audiences for her film roles as the wholesome, loving wife, perhaps most familiar to today's audiences from *It's a Wonderful Life*. *The Donna Reed Show*, which

premiered in 1958, then took up Reed's film persona and married it to the character of housewife Donna Stone. The publicity articles depicted here show how she was equated directly to the character, as they connect both her TV and real families and also stress her as wholly ordinary, just like you. What is implied here is that we could more or less watch Donna Reed act out her real, ordinary life on the small screen. Again, no other medium could offer such an impression.

Correspondingly, advertisements, publicity articles and fan memorabilia all echoed these impressions for crossover film stars, especially in stressing television's versions of film stars as down-to-earth people who really did belong in your living room. Advertisements also took advantage of this personal connection to offer the classic celebrity sales pitch; your favorite star really drinks/eats/wears this, so if you want to be like him, you should drink/eat/wear this, and here we see Dick Powell and David Niven from *Four Star Playhouse* being offered as examples. Finally, memorabilia was often connected to these connotations, such as the material related to one of the landmark celebrity events of the 1950s, the birth of Little Ricky (Little Desi in reality). You could even bring home your own Little Ricky (currently available in either doll or hand puppet form on ebay), implying that you could own a piece of their real life, at the same time that you watched it unfold on your television screen.

Of course behind the scenes, as we all later learned, the Lucy-Desi marriage in real life wasn't remotely as idyllic as the Lucy-Ricky marriage on television would have us believe it was. Plus, as most people knew, Jack Benny was actually an accomplished violinist, and as maybe less knew, *Person to Person's* interview guests were coached beforehand on how to respond to Murrow's questions. As such, one final thought I'd like to leave you with today is that there was really no such thing as stars truly being themselves on TV or really giving viewers true access to their private selves. This was all an act, by the stars and by television, a constructed

presentation meant to enhance the stature and drawing power of television. But while it may have been an artificial construction, it certainly was an enjoyable performative game to play and to watch, and it ultimately left everyone involved feeling satisfied: television, film stars, and most of all, audiences in living rooms across the country.

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¹ All of these episodes appeared between April 10 and 24, 1955, according to *TV Guide* and *Variety* listings.

² Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television 1920-1961* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 337.

³ Hal Humphrey, "TV is Like Working in a Store, Says Dana," *LA Mirror* (May 29, 1957).

⁴ R.D. Heldenfels, *TV's Greatest Year: 1954* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 157.

⁵ A.M. Sperber and Eric Lax, *Bogart* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), 505.

⁶ Jack Holland, "Henry Fonda Speaks His Mind," *TV-Radio Life* (August 27, 1954), 40.

⁷ "The Girl Next Door Gets the Glamour Treatment," *TV Guide* (October 3-9, 1959), 11.

⁸ Hal Humphrey, "TV, the Great Rejuvenator," *LA Mirror* (September 9, 1954). Article located in Hal Humphrey Collection, Cinema-TV Library, University of Southern California.

⁹ Rouse interview with Mr. Ziv, August 6, 1975.

¹⁰ Molden, 119.

¹¹ Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 233, 236.

¹² *Ibid*, 30.

¹³ Tim Brooks and Marsh, Earle, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable Shows* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 389.

¹⁴ Molden, 114.

¹⁵ "No Place for a Ho-Hum Attitude," *TV Guide* (May 27-June 2, 1961), 10 (from 9-11).

¹⁶ Dan Moldea, *Dark Victory: Ronald Reagan, MCA and the Mob* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 150.

¹⁷ *Playhouse 90* publicity pamphlet, released by CBS Television, located at Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland at College Park.