GRAND PRIZE WINNER

As a teen-ager, I always enjoyed writing and entering essay contests, and I even won a few minor prizes. In May, 1969, however, I finally hit the jackpot: I was named the National High School Movie Reviewer of the Year, which was co-sponsored annually by Scholastic Roto Magazine and the Motion Picture Association of America.

My high school was St. Francis de Sales on the southeast side of Chicago. I was on the school newspaper staff, and its moderator, Fr. William Crowley, suggested that I enter the Roto contest. I had been writing movie reviews, editorials, and news stories for the school’s monthly newspaper “Sales Talk” during both my junior and senior years. The movies I reviewed were: The Lion in Winter, 2001-A Space Odyssey, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, The Fixer, The Stalking Moon, Romeo and Juliet, The Thomas Crown Affair, The Planet of the Apes, Yellow Submarine, and several others. From Roto, I won the monthly prize of $5 for both The Fixer and The Thomas Crown Affair, and I won their grand prize for The Lion in Winter – a $250 college scholarship and an all-expenses paid trip for two to Hollywood for a week.

I was a 17-year-old senior in my morning gym class (actually bouncing on a trampoline) when Fr. Crowley came running in and said I had a long-distance telephone phone call from New York City, and that I should go to the principal’s office immediately to take it. There I learned that I had won First Prize! When asked my reaction by the Scholastic Roto officials, I said: “Smashing!” -- this being a popular young British slang exclamatory term at that time meaning excellent or wonderful. Important letters of confirmation from them and from the MPAA would be arriving soon, they announced. I went back to gym class and told Fr. Crowley the good news. Soon, the word got out around the school, and I was congratulated by staff and students for the rest of the week. My family was quite surprised too.

The confirming letters arrived in short order. I was asked to choose the trip dates and the airline flights. Because the win was for two persons, I initially wanted to take my 17-year-old girlfriend, Vivian Davis, along – but I was informed by the officials that wasn’t possible because we were both minors and unmarried(!) They suggested instead that any family member over age 21 could accompany me. I asked my older sister, Jan, but her work schedule wouldn’t allow it. However, her husband (my brother-in-law) Glenn Yerby was able to get off of work at General Mills for a week in July, so that settled it. I requested 2 round trip, first-class tickets on United Airlines to Los Angeles, and the contest officials agreed.

Before the trip, I was featured in the Chicago Tribune (see “Motion Picture Magic” written by me, winning a Certificate of Merit in their Voice of Youth column on May 11, 1969) and the Chicago Sun-Times about my award, and was photographed by the press. I was also interviewed on WBBM/CBS radio by Norman Mark. This was memorable because we did a thirty-minute ‘dry run’ of questions about myself and my movie opinions before we actually went ‘live’ on the air. (This was helpful for me because by then any awkwardness or nervousness had vanished.) Norman was also a writer for Panorama Magazine, which interviewed me in print. It was really fun going downtown on the IC train and being accepted as a V.I.P. at these various newspaper and media offices. People actually seemed interested in my ideas and opinions about movies and current events!

When mid-July rolled around, Glenn and I boarded our flight and I got to experience ‘first class’ flying for the first time. But being under age, I could not part-take in any wine or champagne. Glenn and I were more casually dressed than the suited businessmen and finely outfitted ladies flying first class, yet we were still treated like royalty.

When we arrived at LAX, we were met by a chauffeured limousine and our guide/host from the MPAA, John M. Pavlik. John was an easy-going public relations man in his early- 30’s. After greeting us, he pulled a wad of $100 bills from his pocket and peeled off five bills and gave them to me, “… in case you need a little extra spending money.” He also gave me a booklet of taxi vouchers, so that Glenn and I could travel any time on our own; you just filled in the fare and any tip and signed your name and gave the slip to the cab driver. John outlined our week of included activities, and off we went to our hotel, the famous and historic Hollywood Roosevelt across the street from Grauman’s Chinese Theater, which featured hand and foot prints in its cement sidewalk from classic movie stars.

Over the next week, we were regularly luncheoned and dined, and I was again photographed and interviewed (see the Chicago Sun-Times article by Kathy Orloff - “Chicagoan in Hollywood” - August 3, 1969). We were taken to the studios at Paramount, Universal, 20th Century Fox, Walt Disney, and Hanna-Barbera. We toured USC’s Cinema School and met with young filmmakers. We enjoyed a fun day at Disneyland. We saw some taping of two new television shows: Room 222 and Land of the Giants. I met actors Michael Constantine at the UCLA football stadium (filming Room 222) and Mike Conners (filming his series Mannix). Mike had about a quarter-inch of faux tanning make-up on his face, I recall. When I asked if it was hot in the summer heat and uncomfortable, he casually replied, “Not too bad…it goes with the job…you get used to it.” At Fox, we saw them filming a scene from the Mike Nichol’s movie Catch 22, where Alan Arkin unzips the flight suit of an injured airman on a WW 2 combat bomber and all of the man’s bloodied intestines spill out! It was, of course, done on a sound stage in a suspended mock-up fuselage section, using animal entrails. We also saw two stars from TV’s Mission Impossible – Martin Landau and (his real life wife) Barbara Bain – at the Academy Awards Theatre, after a private preview screening of two new movies: The Learning Tree and Justine. We even got to sit in on a board meeting of the Motion Picture Code and Rating Administration, newly established to rate movies: G (General) – M (Mature, later changed to GP and then PG-13) – R (Restricted) – X (Adults Only). I then had a short private session with MPAA president Jack Valenti in his office, who congratulated me on my contest win, then asked me how young people in Illinois were reacting to the new movie rating system. Recall that these were the days of student protests and activism and rebellion against authority. I was impressed how he really seemed to care what I thought on the matter!

On our rare free time, Glenn and I saw the musical play Hair at the Aquarius Theater, and John got us rare tickets to see the ballet Swan Lake at the Hollywood Bowl, starring the legendary pair Rudolf Nereyev and Margot Fonteyn. Walking one sunny afternoon down Sunset Boulevard, we saw singer Johnny Mathis driving his white Rolls Royce convertible down the street. I spontaneously called out: “Like your songs, Johnny!” and he smiled and waved and replied “Thank you!” Just another day in Hollywood, I guess…

One memorable night back in our hotel suite, Glenn and I watched the fuzzy black and white television coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing on July 20, 1969. It was incredible, and I recall looking up at the moon one night afterward and realizing in amazement that men had actually walked on its surface!

When our festive award week was over, Glenn had to return home and get back to work, but I was basically free until college began in September. I boldly asked John if I could stay in Los Angeles at my own expense for another week and if he could change the date on my return air ticket. He readily agreed, and kindly offered me the use of his apartment in Santa Monica, just two blocks from the ocean and its golden beach. Being a bachelor, John was staying with a girlfriend at her place at the moment and was rarely home, he explained, so he gave me his apartment key and said to help myself to any food, and to have fun and to please drop the key in his mailbox when I left to return to Chicago. Such trust! Such generosity! So that’s what I did.

My additional week in California was pure bliss. Ideal weather. Palm trees. Beautiful, tanned young women. I went to the beach every day to swim and sun bathe and people-watch. I talked with surfers. I walked around and explored the streets and avenues nearby. I used the last of my taxi vouchers to see Griffith Park and Observatory, Beverly Hills and Rodeo Drive, and even the La Brea Tar Pits. I tried different restaurants and ate most of John’s pro-offered apartment food. I slept peacefully and dreamily. I loved California, and felt I should be living there instead of in Chicago. I didn’t want to leave!

When I finally did return home, I wrote a summary article of my award adventure for Scholastic Roto Magazine (the hand-written original copy which I still have). Even back in Chicago, I pleasantly recalled my Hollywood trip in my mind in finest detail, up until the time I turned 18 and left for Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, where I enrolled as a freshman English major. My life’s larger adventure was, in fact, just beginning…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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