

TV GUIDE

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James Arness: A Different View

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'I can't live up to what people think I am'

A prankster on the set, a recluse off it, James Arness is overshadowed by the larger-than-life characters he created



By Dick Russell

Last August, enclosed by vermilion cliffs and a cloudless sky, a towering figure in fringed buckskins rode into a cavalry camp and stopped beside a wagon where an Indian was being held at gunpoint. "Hold on there! Put them rifles down!" he cried. Almost instantly, he was standing with a knife at the cavalryman's throat, saying: "You give that order to fire, mister, and I'm gonna gut you neck to knees."

It was almost noon on a Kanab, Utah, location of ABC's *How the West Was Won* series. James Arness, after 20 years as *Gunsmoke's* Marshal Matt Dillon, had begun filming for his third season as mountain man Zeb Macahan. Now he donned a pair of sunglasses and hastily began to remove a thick brown mustache, his day's work already complete. "This is good livin', isn't it?" he said, turning to the crew and offering a high-pitched cackle of a laugh. Then favoring a limp that has plagued him since he was hit by a burst of German machine-gun fire at Anzio Beach, he walked with a rolling gait toward his waiting camper.

Inside, his companion for the past five years-32-year-old Janet Surtees, an attractive dress-shop owner whom he would make his bride in December -was waiting with her young son, Jimmy. Bending his 6-foot-6-inch frame, Arness reached for a "slug-a-water," then sat down.

Now, giving his first and only interview of the new TV season, Arness began by talking of this Utah location, and about a time years ago when he'd watched an old actor on horseback plunge four feet "into this crickbed of quicksand here" before the crew could rescue him. Sometimes, as he went on to speak of visiting nearby Indian ruins and fishing on Lake Powell, he'd draw out his words-"Surre, oh yeaahhh"-perhaps as his own Norse grandfather had done in the old country.

At 55, Arness's face was branded now with crisscrossing lines that evoked an old man of the mountains, just as

his wide-brimmed smile still brought to mind *Gunsmoke's* lawman. He spoke, finally, of the two TV characters that have made him (in the words of executive producer John Mantley) "the most exposed man in the history of any medium-there's more film on Jim Arness than any other human being."

"Zeb Macahan," Arness said, "came from an era when men were the law unto themselves. He was a free spirit, made his own rules. He was used to taking everything over and not consulting anybody. Except that after the Civil War-the stage we've got him at now-it's more civilized times and he's running into a little trouble.

"Matt Dillon," he continued, "was the opposite-a guy who not only had to see that the laws were carried out, but live by them himself. He had to do the right thing. As a consequence, he always had to hold his own personal feelings or desires in restraint."

For most of his life, consciously or not, James Arness has sought a life style that embodies the qualities of those two Western archetypes. Part of him, like mountain man Macahan, has always been a roving spirit. Even 'in his Minnesota youth he was hopping freight trains, shipping out on an ocean freighter, working in a logging camp. Later, as *Gunsmoke's* success turned him into a multimillionaire, he still found his release in sailing, surfing, skiing and flying.

Yet, if one side of Arness is a man of the open spaces, another part has seemed bound to a 'rigid personal code that largely avoids press or public or any open space at all. Even from cast parties he has kept his distance. His longtime actor friends, who can recount numerous anecdotes about Arness as a practical joker and a bawdy storyteller, don't readily recall many personal moments of a more serious nature between them. While he's regarded as being intensely loyal to his co-workers once the day's work is done Arness will retreat alone to his →

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sprawling ranch outside Santa Barbara.

The contrast between the gregarious Arness and the man once labeled as TV's version of the reclusive Garbo is shown by an incident that occurred some years back, on the occasion of refilming *Gunsmoke's* opening shoot-out sequence in living color. Vincent McEveety, the director that day, recalls:

"Jim steps out into the street, draws his gun, shoots right past his hip-pow! It's timed just right-except it's Jim who falls over dead. Well, I ran over in shock at first, He'd secretly exploded a blood capsule inside his shirt, which made it look frighteningly real. But then some of the crew started laughing. Jim had done this as a joke on me. He'd told the crew to let the camera run and see what I'd do. He's been doing things like this for years to charge me up, make me laugh. But that was a classic moment. You really should see it sometime." That, unfortunately, is impossible. It was destroyed at Arness's order.

"After about the first five years, Jim got very protective about Matt Dillon's image," remembers Amanda Blake (Miss Kitty on *Gunsmoke*). "He didn't want Matt to make a mistake. It certainly didn't hurt the show, but I remember thinking sometimes, why doesn't he ever allow himself to be on the other end of the pole? Why not let Matt be wrong once? Might've been interesting. But Jim would never hear of it."

At the beginning of his TV days, Arness hadn't seemed to care much, one way or the other, about his character's image. In fact, John Wayne—who, ironically, shares the same birthday with Arness—still enjoys telling the story of what happened when he himself turned down the *Gunsmoke* part and recommended Arness, then a minor actor with Wayne's film company. Jim, fearing a TV role would typecast him, responded: "You've ruined my career!"

Once he decided to heed Wayne's advice and accept CBS's offer, Arness's TV GUIDE FEBRUARY 24, 1979

initial attitude apparently left a lot to be desired. "We didn't get along too well in the early days," remembers Milburn Stone, *Gunsmoke's* Doc Adams. "He used to annoy me, because at rehearsals he'd sit there and whistle or make all kinds of silly noises. So one time I started in on him really screaming and yelling. Jim's got a frightening habit in such circumstances. When he gets really tense, he kinda winces and bites his front teeth together real fast."

But when Stone's tirade had spent itself, he recalls Arness looking at him for a long moment and then replying: "Milburn, you are absolutely right." Adds Stone, "I had embarrassed the hell out of him, but Jim stood there and took it and then had the guts to say that. You think this didn't make an impression on me? As the years went by, I realized that he's the most un-hypocritical guy I ever knew."

Arness's playful attitude has never really changed. He still regales the crew by substituting lusty lines or bursting into sudden yodels and mock choruses from religious hymns. Life on an Arness set occasionally gets so hysterical that everyone's forced to close up shop for the day. Now, though, there is method to his zaniness: he's learned to wait for dull moments when the crew's spirits need a lift.

Indeed, as *Gunsmoke* prospered, Arness seemed to grow with it. Director McEveety now calls him "the most professional man I've ever worked with." Milburn Stone believes Arness's acting came to reach "classical proportions."

For years, Arness has rarely read an entire script ahead of time. He'll simply fish in his pocket for the day's work, saying: "Let's see, where'd I put my road map? OK, let me run this through the IBM." Yet he's a student of his own characters, and directors consider his judgment almost infallible. When Arness whittles a long-winded speech down to its core with the flick of a pencil, nobody offers much argu- →

ment.

Like his Dillon and Macahan characters themselves, Arness has assumed a role as protector of his own little acting community. When *Gunsmoke* was canceled and then reinstated some years ago, Arness insisted that the entire crew be brought back intact. Many of those faces are still around, filming *How the West Was Won*. So are many of the same guest stars.

But as his protective responsibility for his co-workers has grown, Arness's guardedness about his characters' images-and about his private life-has increased as well. As a personification of absolute justice, probably no TV-Western character was ever so pure as Marshal Dillon. Nor have many possessed the raw strength of a Zeb Macahan. Arness himself, as one close friend describes him, "really believes in the law of the West-what's right is right, and wrong is wrong; there are no grays." Perhaps, in measuring himself against the righteousness of the characters he plays, Arness has both sought their standards and feared that he couldn't possibly meet them. "I can't live up to what people believe or think I am," he once said.

Throughout his career, Arness's personal life has often been a struggle for him-his first marriage ended in divorce in 1963. Even in his acting life, Amanda Blake recalls Jim as "the most difficult of the cast for me to cope with-because the rest of us were tight, but Jim didn't really relate to me except professionally." Around women he has always been shy, and most comfortable with rugged, fun-loving men like his stunt doubles. According to Amanda, a shared sense of humor was what salvaged their own working relationship. In awkward situations-whether forgetting a line or overcoming his shyness-Arness generally would crack a joke. "It's really his way," says director Bob Totten "of trying to cover up self-consciousness."

But once the cameras begin to roll, none of that makes much difference. "Trying to get him to hold hands with Amanda was a monumental task," says director McEveety, "yet we're still constantly doing shows where Jim has close personal relationships with people. Because even though he's shy about them, and makes jokes about them, he *plays* them exceedingly well."

Today, as the Macahan character, Arness is finally able to express the less restrained side of his nature-the outdoorsman who delights in high surf and high slopes, fast cars and wandering ways. At the same time, in his personal life he has settled down for the first time in 16 years. Fittingly, his new bride was introduced to him by a member of the *Gunsmoke* crew. His best man was a son, Rolf, by his previous marriage. Another son was the wedding photographer. No one outside the family attended.

For this most private of men, another director, Ted Post, offers this summation: "This guy's long suit as an actor is the compassion that comes out in a poignant look that I call *Weltschmerz*-world pain. Gary Cooper had it. So did Bogart and Spencer Tracy. Jimmy Stewart and Fonda have it. So has Arness, and he doesn't even know it."

For nearly a quarter-century, as the star of TV's first big Western and now of TV's latest, the Arness presence has captivated millions. As actor Victor French describes his appeal, "He's never had to be fast on the draw. There could be 10 men facing him and he says, 'Hold it right there!' Things just stop. He has that feeling about him."

Some call it strength, others call it innocence. If Arness has not personally always lived up to the image of the Western hero, in our time he has been the strongest instrument of its expression. In his virtues-loyalty, honesty, humor-and in his reclusive, protective nature, he has also been simply who he is. End