

DID YOU KNOW?

He is one of the very few actors to have won both an Oscar and a Tony for playing the same role in both a film and on stage in his depiction of Mongkut in *The King and I*. The others include Rex Harrison (for *My Fair Lady*, 1964), Paul Scofield (for *A Man for All Seasons*, 1966) and Viola Davies (for *Fences*, 2016).

GETTING TO KNOW

YUL

Piecing together an accurate account of the life of Yul Brynner is not a straightforward task, discovers Adam Smith



Yul Brynner was half Japanese and was born on the island of Sakhalin. Or maybe he wasn't. His real name was Tadge Khan, he was distantly related to the infamous Mongol warlord Ghenghis Khan and had served in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. Or perhaps not. He was half Swiss and maybe his gypsy mother gave birth to him when her horse stumbled into a snowdrift. Or possibly he was Russian... The fact is that nobody told a tall tale quite as enthusiastically as Yul Brynner.

But the truth about Brynner's astonishing life is, in many ways, even wilder than the stories he furiously spun, to the delight of wide-eyed newspaper profile writers. ➤

Brynnner was close pals with legendary French poet, filmmaker and novelist Jean Cocteau. The two had met when Cocteau approached the teenage Brynnner and asked if he knew where he could score some opium.

He was, in real life, a former trapeze artist in a French circus, an accomplished photographer, a one-time opium addict, and a nude model. He had been Marlene Dietrich's youthful lover, became a global film star and won an Oscar.

Pretty good going for a man who once described himself as "just an ordinary, clean-cut Mongolian boy". (He wasn't.)

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

"Ordinary mortals need but one birthday," Yul Brynnner once told an astonished journalist who had presented him with the numerous conflicting birthplaces and dates he had provided over the years.

But the details on his passport spell out the truth, ordinary mortal or not. He was born Yuliy Bryner on July 11, 1920, in Vladivostok, Russia into a moderately wealthy Swiss-Russian family. Later, an agent would advise tweaking his name. Yuliy, they told him, sounded too much like you-all to American ears. His mother, Marousia, was an actress, while his often absent father Boris left the family when Yul was just five years old.

Yul was a precocious, adventurous, slightly terrifying child. When the family was later living in Manchuria he had a habit of turning up at the local police station and announcing that he was the Czar's grandson and lived in a palace. "He thrived on mystery and defiance from the moment he was born," his sister Vera, who herself would become a noted opera singer, once said.

The family moved again, to Paris, in the early Thirties where, as a teenager, Yul fell in with a group of Russian gypsies, played the guitar, sang in nightclubs and finally landed a job as a trainee trapeze artist in Cirque d'Hiver, one of the oldest permanent circuses in the world.

And even as a young man his romantic life was as high-flying as his day job. There was something about his athletic build, his piercing eyes, and the sheer energy he radiated, that made him irresistible to women, often significantly older ones.

So when he plunged from the trapeze and sustained injuries that put a premature end to his circus career, it was whispered that his line had been cut by an enraged husband who had found out about his extracurricular activities. "Nothing since has ever approached the joys of flying on the trapeze bars," he later said. "I felt so free. But I knew I had to find some less strenuous line of work."

The man who would provide that, and change young Yul's life, was renowned acting teacher Michael Chekov who became a hero and mentor to Brynnner, one whom he would refer to only as "The Professor" until the end of his life.



Brynnner was notoriously unfaithful to his first wife Virginia Gilmore

Brynnner followed Chekov to America in 1940, where he enrolled in the teacher's infamously gruelling classes. Soon he was getting small roles on stage and, after a few years, found himself in demand as a TV director. He met, and after just 10 weeks, married, Virginia Gilmore, an actress who was successful enough to have the pair's nuptials recorded by the notoriously waspish gossip columnist Louella Parsons. "Virginia Gilmore and some gypsy she met in New York will be married on September 6th," she wrote.

But 'some gypsy' was about to get a call from Broadway, and would become one of the biggest stars in the world.

THE KING OF BROADWAY

It is often difficult to pin down the precise moment a mere actor becomes a fully fledged star. But in the case of Yul Brynnner, there is no doubt. It was towards the end of the evening of Thursday, March 29, 1951, when the curtain came down on the Broadway debut of Rodgers

& Hammerstein's *The King and I*. The audience rose, cheering, to its feet as Yul took his curtain call. And the critics were no less enthusiastic. "The best show of the decade," wrote the Herald Tribune. "A magnificent production," agreed the New York Times. "Yul Brynnner's vehement, restless King is terse and vivid."

He hadn't been first choice. Rex Harrison had turned it down due to scheduling problems, and Oklahoma! star Alfred Drake considered himself too big a name for this untested property. Yul snagged the role when he gave an audition that was unconventional, even by his standards.

"He came out with a bald head and sat cross-legged on the stage," Rodgers later recalled. "He gave this guitar one whack and gave out an unearthly yell and sang some heathenish sort of thing. Oscar and I looked at each other and said, 'Well, that's it!'"

Offering him the role, the delighted producers told Yul he was really in tune with the character. "What character?" he asked.

Yul brought all his life experience to bear on his depiction of the King, seizing control of much of the production as well. He designed Mongkut's fearsome Kabuki-influenced make-up himself and, crucially, decided to shave what was left of his hair. Shirtless and barefoot for most of the performance, he harnessed both his own animal magnetism and

drew on the acting theories of his mentor, "The Professor", to channel the energy of wild beasts into his depiction of the volatile, charming, terrifying King Mongkut.

The word 'sensation' is over-used on Broadway. But if ever it was applicable, it was to Yul Brynnner's performance. Every night of the show's three-year Broadway run was sold out. It was perhaps inevitable that 3000 miles away, Hollywood had been watching.

HOLLYWOOD AND BUST

Negotiations with 20th Century Fox, who owned the rights for a movie version, had been ongoing, but production was delayed by a typical career swerve from Brynnner. His first movie project would not be *The King and I*. Instead he would appear as the Pharaoh in Cecil B. De Mille's remake of his own 1923 silent hit *The Ten Commandments*. Only once that was finished filming would he consider reprising *The King and I* for the movie cameras.

In fact, Yul knew that 20th Century Fox needed him and delighted in drawing out negotiations. When they stalled, owing to yet another of his demands, his eruptions were volcanic. At one point he had matchbooks made with a bawdy version of the studio logo that read 16th Century F***s and distributed them all over Hollywood.

But the film was a hit, and Yul was rewarded with an Oscar for Best

Actor. That year (1956) he had two other cinematic triumphs. *The Ten Commandments* was a success, and *Anastasia*, in which he starred opposite Ingrid Bergman, was similarly well received.

But the remarkable thing about Yul Brynnner is that despite being, to this day, one of the most instantly recognisable and cherished stars of Hollywood's golden era, he had few subsequent hits. After the annus mirabilis of 1956 his film career was bumpy at best, the result of his carelessness when assessing scripts, but also his monumental self-belief. There was the odd success: *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960 and then *Westworld* in 1973, but for the most part, his cinematic output is best forgotten.

He seemed to think that, by sheer force of will, he could transform celluloid trash into big-screen gold. "Yul honestly believed that his mere presence could improve a bad plot," said *Magnificent Seven* co-star Eli Wallach. He was the victim of his uniqueness: too remarkable (and proud) to be a successful ensemble player he was nevertheless too exotic to be easily cast as a lead in a Hollywood where the stars were still the straightforward, ethnically uncomplicated likes of Steve McQueen, Clint Eastwood and Paul Newman.

Or perhaps, as Burt Reynolds put it, "In this business, you have to expect some clunkers. Yul simply had more than his fair share." ➔

King Mongkut: Brynnner's most famous role – both on screen (with Deborah Kerr) and stage



BRYNNNER AND DIETRICH

Among the many women with whom Yul enjoyed torrid affairs was screen legend Marlene Dietrich. The pair had been introduced by Noël Coward, a close friend of both Yul's *King and I* co-star Gertrude Lawrence, and of Dietrich. The two were instantly smitten when they met shortly after *The King and I* opened in 1951. Yul's son by his first wife Virginia (to whom he was still married at the time) was often a witness to the pair's trysts and later recalled it in his biography of his father Yul: *The Man Who Would Be King*.

"It was quite unlike any other affair he had had," Rock Brynnner writes. "For the first time, Yul found himself making love to a woman he had admired since childhood. They could almost overlook the fact that Marlene was 20 years older than Yul." When conducting their liaisons in hotel rooms became too risky, Brynnner rented a pied-à-terre, to which he and Marlene would often retire after he had finished on stage. Meanwhile, Yul's marriage to Virginia crumbled. His many infidelities, together with her spiralling drinking problem, led to divorce in 1960.



His personal life was as dramatic as some of his film roles. His four marriages all finally floundered, mostly due to his incorrigible womanising. "It depends very much on the sort of wife you have," he said when asked if a man should be honest about his affairs. "With some wives, you can be quite candid. Fortunately, I have one of those."

His wife at the time was less sanguine. "Sometimes I felt like Yul's parent," Virginia said. "He'd try and justify himself like some callow teenager." Once, when she confronted him about an affair, he said, "What was I supposed to do, ignore her? Would you want to be married to a man that women didn't find attractive?" Virginia had a point.

By the mid-Seventies his movie career was all but over. "I should have retired after Westworld," he later said. His final film was *Death Rage* (1976) an Italian quickie rip-off of Michael Winner's *The Mechanic*. "I have had enough of Hollywood's chicanery!" he declared after the film sank without a trace. But he had a plan. Broadway had been where he had been born as a star. He would return to its embrace for his final years.

RETURN OF THE KING

When the curtain rose on *The King and I*'s Broadway revival in May 1977 the question was could Yul recapture the magic he'd brought nearly 20 years ago? It turned out that not only could he, but he

exceeded even the critics' wildest expectations. Age and experience now informed his performance, giving it a new depth and a level of pathos. "He feels more right for the part now than he did the first time around," said one reviewer.

After a decade in the wilderness, Yul was finally re-experiencing the unalloyed success he had enjoyed as a young man. The production toured: first Los Angeles and then over 500 performances in London. Yul was earning upwards of \$70,000 a week – enough to alleviate the money troubles he'd experienced during the fallow years.

But a slight cough began to trouble him. Then he noticed a small lump on his neck. The doctors confirmed the dire news. Yul had lung cancer, likely the result of his five-pack-a-day smoking habit. It was terminal.

On June 30, 1985 he walked onto the stage and delivered his 4,625th performance. Four months later he passed away in New York Presbyterian Hospital. That night Broadway's lights dimmed. *The King* was dead.

Yul Brynner's life had been extraordinary. He had swung from poverty to stratospheric success, and endured decades of movie failure only to be embraced by theatre audiences all over again.

Or, as King Mongkut might more economically have put it, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera!

■ All quotes from *Rock Brynner's memoir or The Inscrutable King* by Jhan Robbins.



The *Magnificent Seven* was one of the few hits Yul enjoyed in his later movie career

I know the face...

RONALD FRASER



Born: April 11, 1930, Ashton-under-Lyme, Lancashire

Died: March 13, 1997, London

Screen debut: *Orderly* in TV movie *Montserrat* (1954)

Screen credits: 140

Best known for: With a strong background in theatre and RADA training Ronald Fraser was frequently cast as a pompous upper-class gent but he was a truly versatile character actor equally at home playing nasty types as he was in cheeky comedies.

Film credits include: Jock McTaggart in *The Wild Geese* (1978), Justice Marshall in *Scandal* (1989) and Leo Lockhart in *The Killing of Sister George* (1968). Fraser was also prolific on TV, with credits including *Boon* (1990), *Lovejoy* (1986-91), *Taggart* (1992), *Minder* (1985-89), and his most famous role as Basil Allenby-Johnson in *The Misfit* (1970-71). A colourful character with a fondness for alcohol Fraser was good friends with Peter O'Toole and Sean Connery, who served as pall bearers at his funeral.

THE TEMPERAMENTAL STAR

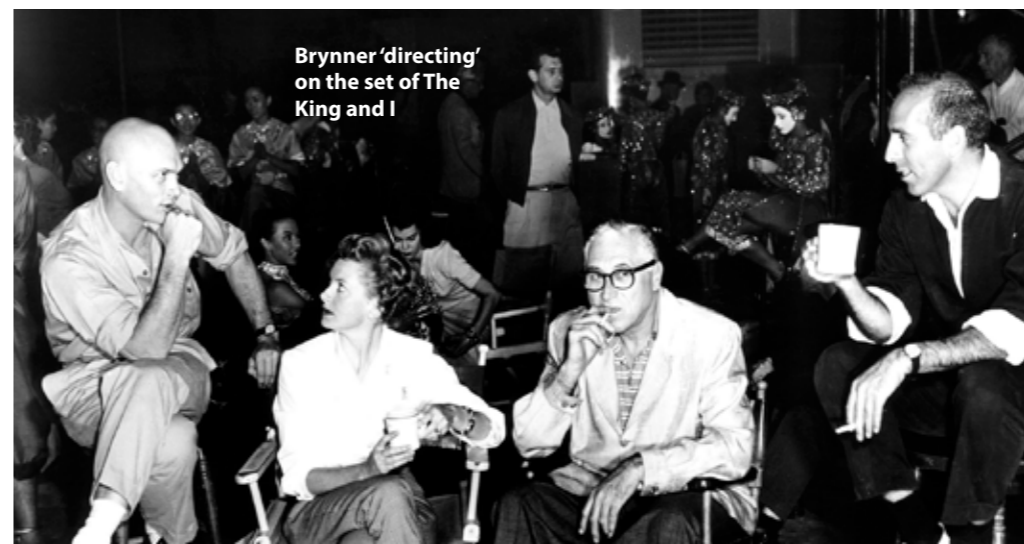
Brynner was a man noted for the strength of his opinions, and it often made working with him a challenge. Nowhere was this truer than during the shooting of *The King and I* when Yul's demands almost derailed the project from the start.

"What's left of my hair started falling out after our first meeting," remembered Fox executive Harvey Grant. "We once got close to calling it off because I had noticed a newspaper article that listed his height at 'a shade under 6ft'. I said it must be an error because I was 6ft and about 3in taller than him. You'd think I'd said his mother was

a whore from the way he reacted." Things didn't get much better during filming which was notoriously fraught, with Yul, producer Charles Brackett and director Walter Lang often clashing.

"He would goad me, threaten to walk off the set if his ideas weren't instantly adopted," remembered Brackett. "The moment he'd squat on the floor like a baseball catcher I knew I was in for a lecture."

"If you didn't agree with him you could expect to be called a bloody fool or a lot worse," said Walter Lang. "He would claim that he was the picture's real director, that I wasn't needed."



Brynner 'directing' on the set of *The King and I*