

RUNNING THE RACE



The “Public Face” of CHARLTON HESTON

BRIAN STEEL
WILLS



Savas Beatie
California

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Proudly published, printed, and warehoused in the United States of America.

To our youngest grandchildren,

Reid, Vivian Briana, Mikayla, William, and James, Jr.,

in the hope they will enjoy the movies as much
as their “Grandpa”/“PawPaw” has through the years.



Charlton Heston in the movie *Ben-Hur*.

Author's Collection

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Abbreviations

AC/AJC: Atlanta Constitution/Journal-Constitution

ALJ: Charlton Heston, Actor's Life Journals

BD: Charlton Heston Beijing Diary

BG/BDG/BSG: Boston Globe/Boston Daily Globe/Boston Sunday Globe:

BHC: Bristol Herald-Courier

GBPL: George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, College Station, TX

CHA: In The Arena

CHCF: Charlton Heston Clipping Files

GH: Good Housekeeping

LAT : Los Angeles Times

LJPL: Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX

HL: Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA

NYT: New York Times

RNPL: Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA

RTD: Richmond Times-Dispatch

RRPL: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA

SEP: Saturday Evening Post

UCLA: University of California, Los Angeles

VP/VPLS: Virginian-Pilot/Virginian-Pilot and Ledger-Star

WHORM: White House Office of Records Management

Wills: Brian Steel Wills, Charlton Heston Collection

PREFACE



As far back as I can remember the movies have been a part of my life. They represented both special family time on given Sundays after services and social outlets throughout my teenaged years. Most often, I preferred historical dramas, or at least those with context from the past, and few actors seemed to embody that connection as clearly as Charlton Heston. One of the earliest volumes in my possession was a compendium of Heston films by Jeff Rovin.¹

The actor's most well-known roles came as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* and as the principal protagonist in *Ben-Hur*. Likewise, Heston's engagement with British troops threatening New Orleans, in the Sudan against the forces of the Mahdi, defending the legations in Peking from the Boxers, holding the Moors out of Spain, or painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, evoked a fascination that remained long after the screen, large or small, went dark. In addition to these portrayals, several Heston motion pictures have remained memorable for me. The Western *Will Penny*, in which a hard-boiled cowboy views life's opportunities through eyes wizened by age and experience, is one. Another, with a particularly well-crafted opening sequence, is *The Mountain Men*, heightened by the presence of another favorite actor, Brian Keith, and the chemistry between the principal performers. Heston's jaded police officer Thorn and his resource with a memory, Edward G. Robinson's Sol Roth, in *Soylent Green*, as well as astronaut Taylor's visit to the *Planet of the Apes*, or the apparently "sole" survivor in the streets of Los Angeles in *The Omega Man*, demonstrated that he could fit into the science fiction genre, too. I made sure that whenever *Ben-Hur*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Khartoum*, *El Cid*, or virtually any other Heston movie came on television I tried to watch, even if he would have winced at the depiction of these big motion pictures

1 Jeff Rovin, *The Films of Charlton Heston* (New York, 1976).

on small screens. I also really enjoyed the actor's successful foray into comedy in *The Private War of Major Benson*, in which his hard-nosed professional soldier runs into formidable challenges from the cadets, Julie Adams's Lammy, William Demarest's caretaker, and the "ladies" of the convent. Heston demonstrated that he could make his serious persona work against these lovable foils in an endearing way.

Framed as a race, this volume pays homage to the depiction of the intensely personal contest between Judah Ben-Hur and his long-time friend Messala. For those desirous of examining the whole *Ben-Hur* story in minute detail, Jon Solomon has written a thorough treatment of it in *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*. That work allows the reader to examine the impact of the novel as well as the 1925 and 1959 films. Elements of Solomon's work appear here as they pertain to Heston and his image/persona but interested persons should read his fascinating account in full.

Readers of this volume should note that it is not intended to be strictly biographical, although there are significant biographical elements about it. The book is also not meant to serve as a primer for creating, developing, or maintaining a "brand," although that, too, is present. It contains many of the details of the creative process Heston pursued, so that readers can follow his journey and understand better the nature and demands it exacted of him and his loved ones. The subject is unique, following Heston as he generates his own "public face" and finds ways to utilize it for multiple purposes. Just as someone studying coaching or gridiron leadership can learn from and quote the legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, or specific political and military figures, so can one follow the life and career of Charlton Heston with benefit. He strove for perfection in his craft and, like all humanity, fell short. He knew better than most what it meant to be frustrated or disappointed, especially when he began directing and casting others rather than worrying about being selected himself. His desire and effort to do his best and keep his promises remain inspiring.

A family man who nevertheless put strains on the loved ones he cherished as his focus turned repeatedly to his work and its tremendous demands on his time, attention, and energies, Charlton Heston managed to keep a marriage intact while serving his industry and the public causes he embraced. He became a celebrity and international superstar in an era in which he thought it was just as important to be responsible and accountable as a member of his profession and a representative of the performing arts. His service in World War II and his many endeavors on behalf of the various agencies of the United States government and charities demonstrated a sense of devotion to America. While he considered the

stage his home, the cinema brought him international fame; it has continued to be richer for the presence of the powerful physical force with the resonant voice whose roles ranged from Moses and Judah Ben-Hur to the ordinary individuals so often confronted by extraordinary circumstances.

As anyone will say who has engaged in such a project, this one would not have been possible without the help of others. Many individuals and institutions have assisted with the research for this work. My colleagues in the Department of History and Philosophy and the Dean's Office in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University have been supportive. The Center for the Study of the Civil War Era at KSU, of which I have had the privilege of serving as director since 2010, has allowed me the freedom to engage in research and writing when not involved with activities in support of the Civil War Center's programming and operations. In Wise, Virginia, my wife, Elizabeth Wills, has remained a necessary foundation of support for all the projects I have undertaken, be it this one or those connected with the Civil War Center.

Thanks also go to Theodore P. Savas of Savas Beatie for standing by this volume when the Coronavirus pandemic threw enormous challenges into the process. Its publication depended upon his perseverance, for which the author is appreciative. Thanks also to the team at Savas-Beatie that saw the project through to fruition. Special appreciation goes to Joel Manuel for his meticulous and attentive copy-editing of the manuscript. It was a pleasure to work with him.

I have dedicated this volume to the next generation of our collective families. We who have preceded them now stand on their shoulders.

Filmography and Characters of Charlton Heston

Peer Gynt (1941) (Peer Gynt)
Julius Caesar (1950) (Mark Antony)
Dark City (1950) (Danny Haley)
The Savage (1952) (Warbonnet/Jim Aherne, Jr.)
Ruby Gentry (1952) (Boake Tackman)
The Greatest Show on Earth (1952) (Brad Braeden)
The President's Lady (1953) (Andrew Jackson)
Pony Express (1953) (Buffalo Bill Cody)
Arrowhead (1953) (Ed Bannon)
Bad for Each Other (1953) (Dr. Tom Owen)
The Secret of the Incas (1954) (Harry Steele)
The Naked Jungle (1954) (Christopher Leiningen)
The Private War of Major Benson (1955) (Major Bernard "Barney" Benson)
Lucy Gallant (1955) (Casey Cole)
The Far Horizons (1955) (William Clark)
Three Violent People (1956) (Colt Saunders)
The Ten Commandments (1956) (Moses)
The Buccaneer (1958) (Andrew Jackson)
The Big Country (1958) (Steve Leech)
Touch of Evil (1958) (Ramon Miguel "Mike" Vargas)
The Wreck of the Mary Deare (1959) (John Sands)
Ben-Hur (1959) (Judah Ben-Hur)
El Cid (1961) (Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (Bivar)/El Cid)
Diamond Head (1962) (Richard "King" Howland)
The Pigeon that Took Rome (1962) (Captain Paul MacDougall)
55 Days at Peking (1963) (Major Matt Lewis)
The Patriots (1963) (Thomas Jefferson)
The Agony and the Ecstasy (1965) (Michelangelo)

- The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) (John the Baptist)
Major Dundee (1965) (Major Amos Charles Dundee)
The War Lord (1965) (Chrysagon)
Khartoum (1966) (General Charles “Chinese” Gordon)
Planet of the Apes (1968) (George Taylor)
Counterpoint (1968) (Lionel Evans)
Will Penny (1968) (Will Penny)
Elizabeth the Queen (1968) (Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex)
Number One (1969) (Ron “Cat” Catlan)
Julius Caesar (1970) (Mark Antony)
The Hawaiians (1970) (Whip Hoxworth)
Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970) (George Taylor)
The Omega Man (1971) (Robert Neville)
Skjacked (1972) (Captain Henry “Hank” O’Hara)
Antony and Cleopatra (1973) (Mark Antony); also director
The Call of the Wild (1973) (John Thornton)
Soylent Green (1973) (Detective Robert Thorn)
The Three Musketeers (1973) (Cardinal Richelieu)
Earthquake (1974) (Stuart Graff)
Airport 1975 (1974) (Alan Murdock)
The Four Musketeers (1975) (Cardinal Richelieu)
Two-Minute Warning (1976) (Captain Peter Holly)
Midway (1976) (Captain Matt Garth)
The Last Hard Men (1976) (Sam Burgade)
Gray Lady Down (1978) (Captain Paul Blanchard)
Crossed Swords (1978) (King Henry VIII)
The Awakening (1980) (Matthew Corbeck)
The Mountain Men (1980) (Bill Tyler)
Mother Lode (1982) (Silas McGee/Ian McGee); also director
Chiefs (1983) (Hugh Holmes)
Nairobi Affair (1984) (Lee Cahill)
Proud Men (1987) (Charley MacLeod, Sr.)
A Man for All Seasons (1988) (Sir Thomas More); also director
Original Sin (1989) (Louis Mancini)
Treasure Island (1990) (Long John Silver)
Solar Crisis (1990) (Admiral “Skeet” Kelso)

- The Little Kidnappers* (1990) (James MacKenzie)
Almost An Angel (1990) (God) (uncredited)
The Crucifer of Blood (1991) (Sherlock Holmes)
Crash Landing: The Rescue of Flight 232 (1992) (Captain Al Haynes)
Wayne's World 2 (1993) (Good Actor)
Tombstone (1993) (Henry Hooker)
True Lies (1994) (Spencer Trilby)
In the Mouth of Madness (1994) (Jackson Harglow)
The Avenging Angel (1995) (Brigham Young)
Alaska (1996) (Perry)
Hamlet (1996) (The Player King)
Gideon (1998) (Addison Sinclair)
Any Given Sunday (1999) (AFFA Football Commissioner)
Town & Country (2001) (Eugenie's Father)
Planet of the Apes (2001) (Zaius) (uncredited)
The Order (2001) (Professor Finley)
My Father, Rua Alguem 5555 (2001) (Josef Mengele)
Genghis Khan: The Story of a Lifetime (2010) (Trogul)

INTRODUCTION

A Public Life for a Private Person: “The Look of Eagles”

“What’s in a name?”

— William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii)

“The Look of Eagles.”

— Description for a confident racehorse



Charlton Heston’s path in life required that he undergo multiple identifications. Born John Charles Carter, he became “Chuck” to his friends and close associates. To his wife, Lydia Clarke Heston, he occasionally became “CH” or “Charlie,” although he professed to find little joy in the application of the latter version of his identity. In his autobiography, *In the Arena*, Heston noted pointedly, “I *hate* the nickname ‘Charlie.’ No one ever calls me that more than once except Lydia.” Even her use of this version of his name prompted a visceral response. “When she says it, my heart shivers. To this day.”¹

For so much of his life, however, “Charlton Heston” was the name and “face” instantly recognizable to the public and fans of his work. Writer Helen Van Slyke of *The Saturday Evening Post*, which a young Heston had once sold “from a canvas bag when it cost five cents,” captured the essence of this phenomenon: “Charlton

¹ Charlton Heston, *In the Arena* (New York, 1995), 47. Lydia referred to him as “old CH” in a 1981 “This is Your Life” episode. “This is Your Life (TV) transcript,” 17, Charlton Heston Papers, f.369, HL.

Heston. Even the name rolls like thunder on the tongue, evoking images of the mighty characters with whom he's identified."²

Supplementing a name that could distinguish him, Heston also grew into a distinctive physical frame as an adult. His early associate and director David Bradley later jested about a scouting expedition to New Trier High School in search of prospective talent for his projects. "I was looking for a tall, good-looking Nordic type guy. I had to settle for Chuck Heston." Bradley remembered, "I looked and he's towering above anyone else and I said this guy will do." This striking characteristic became crucial to establishing a lasting film persona. Writer Donald Spoto observed, "Heston's large form is magnified more, indeed, on the big screen," where this quality became "extended," embodying "the pure form of [a] man of power." Film critic Robert Osborne explained, "Timing and facial structure pushed him into the big-time."³

As an adult, Charlton Heston was always appreciative of the raw materials with which nature and heredity blessed him. He recognized the advantages of his physical attributes and worked diligently to maintain them. In addition to a 6'3" frame and a camera-friendly visage, he benefitted enormously from a rich resonating voice, which he labelled a "useful bequest to me" from his father. Heston recalled later that in Michigan, "they used to call me 'Moose.'"⁴

The actor refused to rely on his physical attributes alone. He never lost the desire to achieve perfection in any role he undertook and employed stringent means to accomplish that standard. This level of commitment ensured that he thrived in every arena he entered. "Charlton Heston is stimulated by a hard day's work and carries his job home with him, where he primes and polishes the next day's schedule," one writer explained in 1958. John Henry Steele quoted Heston

2 Helen Van Slyke, "From 'Moses' to 'Midway,' Charlton Heston is Larger Than Life," *SEP* (Jan./Feb. 1976), 46.

3 "This is Your Life transcript," 13, HL; Quoted in Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington, IN, 1997), 155; Donald Spoto, *Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man* (New York, 1978), 214; Robert Osborne, *Academy Awards Illustrated: A Complete History of Hollywood's Academy Awards in Words and Pictures* (LaHabra, CA, 1966), 245.

4 *CHA*, 18, 37. This physical description was published in 1950: "For those who cherish such information, he is 6 feet and 3 inches tall, weighs 205 pounds, has gray-blue eyes and blondish hair, wears size 12 shoes and a 7½ hat." Morton Elliott Freedgood, "Big Man, What Now?" *NYT*, Oct. 15, 1950, Heston Clipping Files, HL.

as saying, “I don’t see how a perfectionist can automatically shut out his work at a given hour.”⁵

“Mr. Heston” carried his weight beneath a sturdy and studied persona that, while seemingly stiff and distant, covered a man of integrity and humor. His professionalism and perfectionism often meant that he suffered fools less than fulsomely, and they as well as others, some of whom recognized the fact, expressed themselves accordingly. Even so, any reading of his private correspondence and interactions readily reveals a sophisticated, thoughtful, and generous individual. Heston’s devotion to his wife and family became legendary in a Hollywood world in which long-term marriages and strong nuclear families were uncommon.

A man of both contradictions and consistencies, Heston could be satisfied and disappointed with equal fervor. This complicated quality exhibited itself in an often-busy public life. As a writer observed of one aspect of that active existence, “He enjoyed being a political independent who made up his mind on an issue-by-issue basis.”⁶ Heston wanted to project himself as thoughtful and inquisitive, in addition to being creative and artistic, in all his pursuits.

In a free flowing, stream-of-consciousness piece that appeared in *Photoplay* magazine in 1958, Heston exposed these complexities. Labeling himself a shy individual who “dislikes large parties, prefers entertaining small groups of friends, and has a congenital distrust of flattery,” he offered a contradictory possibility as a career, should acting fail him. “When the day comes that I’m no longer working at my trade, don’t be surprised to see me try for the diplomatic service or even politics. I like talking to people.” This same private person understood that his public life required transformation and sacrifice that he had to be prepared to make. “The day when an actor ‘wants to be alone’ is over,” he observed. “Fans like to feel they know you personally, and I must confess I get a big kick out of making friends with people I’d never have the opportunity to meet if I shut myself up.”⁷

Heston recognized the contradictory forces at work in his life and career. “I suppose the primary difference between the public’s perception of who and what I am and my own perception of me is that I remain a shy person,” he told an interviewer. “I have learned to be a public actor because I have been doing it for so

5 Joseph Henry Steele, “Unmasking Charlton Heston,” *Photoplay* (Jan. 1958), 52.

6 Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (New York, 2011), 288.

7 Steele, “Unmasking Charlton Heston,” 74. On another occasion, he suggested “Carpenter” as a possible choice of career. “Front Row Center,” *Atlanta Weekly*, Aug. 11, 1985.

long.” Yet even as Heston touted a latent desire to create new friendships easily, he acknowledged the on-going struggle this level of contact with others required. “I’ve got self-confidence, true,” he explained. “You can’t succeed as an actor without that.” Still, the exposure he allowed to occur through his work did not entirely mask the struggle within. “The image so many of the parts I’ve played has created in the public mind can serve as a refuge for a shy man.”⁸

Through much of his life, the game of tennis provided Chuck Heston with an essential outlet, one that could be a source of fitness and a refuge from outside intrusions at the same time. “I think I used it as a cover-up when someone invited me to dinner—to change the subject you know,” he explained to an interviewer.⁹ He battled constantly with the need to build and maintain an audience while also keeping anyone outside a few select family and friends from getting too close.

Writer Ed Leibowitz captured the complicated nature of the private man as public figure after witnessing a Heston appearance at a National Rifle Association gathering. “If only Heston were the ideological parody political opponents would like him to be,” he insisted. “Instead, he’s as wildly divergent as the sober NRA set and the architectural triumph on the ridge,” he noted of the Heston family home in California. “Yes, he is an implacable conservative, but almost all his closest friends are liberal Democrats, and he counts his participation in the 1963 March on Washington, where he led the artists’ contingent, among the proudest moments of his life.” From the writer’s perspective, the actor was “a pious scourge in public, but at home he’s the well-traveled connoisseur with not a trace of ill temper, who’s prone to profanity and tears.”¹⁰

Charlton Heston seemed to be happiest when ensconced in the refuge he had built after *Ben-Hur* on “my ridge” above Coldwater Canyon overlooking Beverly Hills. As he noted, “Most of the people I want to see, the things I want to do, happen right here.” He craved the sense of privacy the property offered him and enjoyed “time alone, all by myself.” Heston understood that the source of this desire arose from within him, dating back to his earliest years. “As a guy brought up in the Michigan woods,” he explained, “I *really* need it.”

At the beginning of his Hollywood career, he acquired his Michigan home place and the deep woods that surrounded it. “I own one of those lakes now, Russell Lake,” he told an interviewer. “It was one of the first things I bought with

8 Roberta Plutzik, “Last of the Epic Heroes,” *Horizon* (Mar. 1980), 33.

9 “Keeping in Trim,” MGM Pressbook for *Skyjacked*, 1972, Wills.

10 Ed Leibowitz, “Charlton Heston’s Last Stand,” *Los Angeles* (Feb. 2001), 63.

my movie money.” After the success of *The Ten Commandments*, another writer observed, “Moses Hides Out in the Woods Instead.” Describing the purchase as occurring, in Heston’s words, “with the first dough I made in pictures,” Earl Wilson added that he “sells Christmas trees off the timberland, leases hunting and fishing rights, and rides and skis when he is there—meanwhile reading scripts . . . and remembering his boyhood.” Another article reiterated the fact that “he does a lucrative Christmas tree business,” and also referenced his aspirations to “build a 300-seat repertory theater” on the land as well. Through the years, Heston remained connected to the region, with a Christmas tree brought down annually for the holiday celebration in Beverly Hills. Co-star Donald Pleasance captured several layers of this symbolism when he described the role he played as Heston’s nemesis in one of their films. “In ‘Will Penny’ I was *really* wicked. You can’t do anything worse than burn Charlton Heston’s Christmas tree.”¹¹

The creation of the Russell Lake Corporation was another manifestation of this phenomenon. In 1956, Heston unveiled his plans. “While the Charlton Heston company, which he calls Russell Lake Corp., was formed to control his timberland interests in Michigan,” a description of the project noted, “he intends also to use its facilities for picturemaking as well as summer stage undertakings.” The design was ambitious. “He plans to maintain a footlight establishment at St. Helen’s, Mich., and undertake a picture next summer. Heston has one more film to do under contract at Paramount. He may add TV to the other activities of his own organization.”¹²

Heston intended the Russell Lake Corporation to serve both as homage to his past and as a hedge for the future. His vision, boldly touted in a 1959 *Los Angeles Times* report, was supposed to begin independent film production after he had fulfilled his contractual commitments, but the dream of a fully functioning entity failed to transpire. Heston ultimately dissolved the company in order to avoid the appearance of conflicts when he took a leadership position in the Screen Actors Guild.¹³

11 Maynard Good Stoddard and Cory SerVaas, “Charlton Heston: He’d Rather Pretend Than Be President,” *SEP* (Sept. 1984), 44; Earl Wilson, “Moses Hides Out in the Woods Instead,” Scrapbooks, Heston Papers, HL; Steele, “Unmasking Charlton Heston,” 74; *CHA*, 322; See also Charlton Heston, *The Actor’s Life: Journals, 1956–1976* (New York, 1976), 187, 421, 481, hereafter cited as *ALJ*; Mary Blume, “Donald Pleasance—Proud of His Wicked Film Ways,” *LAT*, July 21, 1968.

12 Edwin Schallert, “Charlton Heston Plans Varied Activities,” *LAT*, Oct. 11, 1956.

13 “Heston to Form His Own Company,” *LAT*, Feb. 18, 1959.

In addition to his Midwestern roots, Heston took enormous pride in his Scottish background and heritage. Noting in his autobiography his connection to “Clan Fraser of Inverness,” he labeled the link “a blood strain I’m very proud of,” and thought the clan motto (“*Je suis prest*—I am Ready”) particularly appropriate. He took considerable pleasure in a trip to Scotland in the summer of 1972 that allowed him to connect to that past. He experienced “the very different delights of the Fraser country,” on July 19; on the following day, he hiked “across the moors” and reveled that it was “[m]arvelous to do it in a kilt . . . it made all the difference, somehow.” This “very full Fraser day” led the actor to conclude, “I’m prouder than ever of my Fraser blood.”¹⁴

From the youth growing up in the isolated woodlands of the Midwest to the man who made good in his career through the sweat and toil of his own brow, Charlton Heston took many of these elements of his heritage to himself almost literally. Long before his involvement with the National Rifle Association, he saw guns and hunting as a way of life rather than simply a fascinating diversion or sport. Likewise, he looked at family in an idyllic sense. Heston boasted that he was anachronistic in a world of Hollywood royalty and Washington connections, yet he appreciated the benefits of his profession and recognized the flexibility that the elevated status he had attained allowed him to enjoy. “I didn’t go after fame,” Heston once insisted; “I wanted to be an actor.” He explained, “I don’t think stardom is what any serious actor has in mind. What they have in mind is acting, getting good parts.” As such, he maintained that “[s]tardom is not something you seek; it’s something you accept.” “The material rewards are considerable—certainly out of all proportion to merit,” but this status allowed “what the artist wants above all else: *control*.”¹⁵

Whatever role he might take in public affairs, Heston’s appearances in epic films provided important context for his most recognizable roles. One scholar observed that “Charlton Heston is arguably the über-epic actor, famous for his lead roles in some of the biggest mid-century epics.” Director Carol Reed’s biographer assessed the actor’s suitability for these larger-than-life portrayals, writing that Heston’s “sculpted looks and dominant presence were ideal for the scale of monumental acting needed on a wide-screen, and his muscularity meant he wore armour and togas of epics with conviction.” In 1972, a writer for the *Los Angeles Times* called

14 *CHA*, 15–16; *ALJ*, 391–392.

15 Dotson Rader, “If I Ran & Won, I’d Never Be Able to Act Again,” *Parade Magazine* (Mar. 9, 1986), 4–5, 7.

him simply “Chuck Heston: A Toga Man in the Jeans Era.” Another noted that Heston’s “presence in many epics of the 1950s and 1960s has made him a virtually integral feature of the genre.”¹⁶

Cinematically, Heston will always be associated with the dramatic chariot race that marked the culmination of the complex relationship between the Roman Messala (Stephen Boyd) and the Jewish Judah Ben-Hur. In film history, the contest presented in the 1959 version has become iconic. As one scholar has observed, “indeed, *Ben-Hur*’s chariot race is arguably among the most famous episodes not only in the Hollywood epic corpus, but in the entire history of film-making.” The effect for one young viewer was unforgettable. “I remembered as a 12-year-old sitting in the Cinerama Theater, watching Heston defeat Stephen Boyd in the famous chariot race,” news correspondent Michael Blowen explained. “His hands gripped the reins, his powerful shoulders controlled six white horses, his eyes glared with the grim determination of a man possessed—he played a hero to a 12-year-old.”¹⁷

Purportedly, Heston disdained labeling the massive project as an “epic” motion picture. “Don’t call it an epic,” he told one interviewer. “That’s a dirty word in my vocabulary. Films labelled epics are invariably bad ones.” The sheer spectacle of much of what comprised *Ben-Hur* for audiences who flocked to see it and for the awards that came its way, however, suggested that few considered the term to apply negatively in this instance. A British reviewer noted that “although everyone connected with this . . . enterprise—including Charlton Heston . . . and William Wyler—disclaims with horror the idea that *Ben-Hur* is anything so vulgar as an epic, this useful four-letter word will do to convey to most people the nature and scope of this enormous 3½-hour film.” Heston insisted that Wyler’s ability to remain focused on “keeping the people in them the important thing” meant that a “colossal” picture like *Ben-Hur* could have a personal quality, too, allowing it to become what he termed “Hollywood’s first intimate spectacle.”¹⁸

16 Joanna Paul, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (Oxford, 2013), 155; Nicholas Wapshott, *The Man Between: A Biography of Carol Reed* (London, 1990), 319; Joyce Haber, “Chuck Heston: A Toga Man in the Jeans Era,” *LAT*, Dec. 3, 1972; James Russell, *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood: From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator* (New York, 2007), 7.

17 Paul, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition*, 213; Michael Blowen, “For Heston the Key is Resilience,” *BG*, July 21, 1980.

18 Paul, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition*, 230; Pete Martin, “I Call on Ben-Hur,” *SEP*, Aug. 20, 1960, 40.

Through the years and in various manners, Heston delighted in retelling the story of his intense preparations and his concern that he not only look like a creditable charioteer, but succeed in crossing the finish line ahead of his competitors. “Chuck, you just make sure y’stay in the chariot,” his trainer Yakima Canutt explained. “I guarantee yuh gonna win the damn race.”¹⁹ Some versions of this exchange, which remained part of Heston’s storytelling repertoire, became a defining element of his public persona, even employed as a tale told to fellow partygoers in an Anheuser Busch commercial for a much later generation of viewers, and ostensibly, beer drinkers.

Heston’s long career obviously encompassed much more than the biblical epic that emanated from the pen of former Union general Lew Wallace, subtitled “A Tale of the Christ.” The sturdy Midwesterner was also Moses, compelled by a divine hand and the direction of Cecil B. DeMille to spring to screen superstardom while leading his people from bondage in ancient Egypt. Indeed, the characters of Judah Ben-Hur and Moses defined and influenced much of the essence of Charlton Heston’s public persona for the rest of his life.

Heston was fortunate to be among the rare actors who embodied at least two distinctive and memorable screen figures, but this also required him to balance his subsequent choices in order to avoid becoming typecast. One writer suggested that for Heston, films such as *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* created the dynamics for the actor’s increased stature. “It’s been said that a performer never achieves true stardom until he’s typed.” Michael Druzman did not indicate the source for the comment but recognized the degree to which it applied to Heston and, although he contested the point, offered a reason as to why the matter bore significance. “Actually, he appeared in a wide variety of film roles following *Ben-Hur*, but it is the memory of the sweeping epics—biblical, medieval, and otherwise—which has remained most vivid with the public.” Actor Rex Harrison, with whom Heston worked in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, explained the nature of their shared profession. “The kind of style you develop as an actor has, of course, a lot to do with the kind of material you choose to act, and this is something on which an actor must bring all his intelligence to bear because it’s very difficult to get it right.”²⁰ Any performer risked limitation by audiences that demanded to see that individual only in the roles they had come to expect.

19 *CHA*, 186; see also *ALJ*, 48.

20 Michael B. Druzman, *Charlton Heston: A Pyramid Illustrated History of the Movies* (New York, 1976), 80; Rex Harrison, *A Damned Serious Business* (New York, 1991), 43.

Whatever parts he accepted, Heston was prepared to bring with him a serious and thorough approach to portraying them. A meticulous student of history and literature, he valued learning as much as he could of each character or the world and time period in which that person had lived. “If you’re playing a biographical character, there’s the additional element of research involved, and exploring, as deeply as you can, into what the character actually was; what kind of man he really was.” To achieve this level of investigation, the actor was willing to go to extraordinary lengths. “His preparation is intense,” one interviewer noted. “For example, to portray Michelangelo, he read six hundred letters written by the artist.” Heston found such primary sources “the most valuable research of all. Letters are usually the best material for finding out the true character of a person. Better than biographies.”²¹

These practices took root in his days in college and manifested themselves in his work. One writer noted, “There were those who were inclined to ridicule him for his intense dedication to the role he was to play because he was never seen on the Paramount lot, during his year of preparation, without a stack of books under his arm.” For Heston, these were not theatrical elements. “Books, to him, are not mere props.”²² Heston’s endeavor to learn about each of the historically based figures became almost legendary among his industry peers.

The actor also felt that for any role to be as believable as possible for moviegoers, he had to buy into it himself. “Whenever I play someone it doesn’t matter who it is or whether he actually lived or not,” he noted; “I like to find the outside of the man first, what he looks like, what he wears, what he sounds like, the way he walks.” Heston felt that by considering these aspects, he could explore deeper, but the external assessment had to occur first. “I can’t find the middle of the man before I find the outside.”²³

Even where biographies were the best sources available, the actor recognized the importance of drawing upon multiple interpretations in order to arrive at the point of view that made the most sense to him. “If you do your homework right, you read biographies that reflect the different views. But still, you have to arrive at one view that you decide is the one you’re going to use.” Noting that no performance allowed for “a compendium” of all of the possible interpretations, an actor had to decide which one felt right “intellectually, but also with the equipment you can

21 Rovin, *Films*, 18; Van Slyke, “From ‘Moses’ to ‘Midway,’” 47.

22 Hyatt Downing, “Hollywood’s Moses,” 3, Heston Papers, HL.

23 Michael Munn, *Charlton Heston: A Biography* (New York, 1986), 191.

bring to bear on him.” In that final analysis, Heston asserted, “[y]ou obviously choose a view of the man that will lend itself most readily to your own equipment. Not simply physical equipment, but emotional equipment as well.”²⁴

As he suggested, the actor supplemented his voracious appetite for written sources with other tangible connections to the figures he portrayed. For this process to occur, setting and imagination could be useful, but wardrobe was essential. As Heston explained in an interview, “I feel at home in ‘wardrobe’—but it’s important to get used to it.” These elements were not superficial, but rather meant to uncover parts of the character he wanted to absorb. “I think many actors wearing complicated or unfamiliar period ‘wardrobe’ make a great mistake in taking as much of it off as quickly as they can.” Such distinctions were not trivial. “If ‘wardrobe’ cannot become clothing—if it remains ‘costume’—then you fail with it in your work,” he said. Heston believed that inhabiting some portion of the clothing was critical to finding the person inside, but his insistence on doing whatever was required to identify with a given character could prove daunting. “I think it’s very important to wake up in the morning and see the clothes lying in the corner where you kicked them off the night before,” he explained. He understood that this method was key for him to employ as much because of its psychological significance as anything else. “The trap most actors fall into is to regard the ‘wardrobe’ as a costume—dress-up clothes. And if they think that way, it’s liable to look that way.” Through the repetition of this pattern on his part, wife Lydia grew used to the incongruity of seeing her husband in their modern home while clad in period wardrobe and surrounded by relics and reading material. “I remember having the Dead Sea Scrolls discussed at breakfast the way other men might discuss baseball. And it’s still a bit unnerving to see him tramp into the kitchen in chain mail or a suit of armor or dressed like Michelangelo.” In an interview conducted in connection with the release of *El Cid* in 1961, Lydia Heston noted that her husband could be more “serious” with some roles. She added, however, that over time she “learned to live” with “these various characters at home.”²⁵

The search for Charlton Heston’s characters took many forms and evolutions. He believed that he could “find” them in wardrobe or their surroundings, but

24 Rovin, *Films*, 18.

25 Jay Leyda, ed., *Voices of Film Experience: 1894 to the Present* (New York, 1977), 202; Hamill, “Heston: Larger Than Life,” 90; “1961 Vintage Radio Interviews with Charlton Heston and Lydia Heston,” *El Cid*, The Weinstein Corporation, 2008.

he identified most when he saw a characteristic in them that he recognized in himself: “a remote, obsessed drive that motivates most of the great men I’ve played,” both historical and fictional. He felt this as he struggled mightily “to find each one, and somehow stay true to him.” Whatever Lydia might think about Charlton’s obsessions, he saw them as critical to his performances. “I find the character from the specifics about him in the way he looks, the clothes he wears, the watch he carries.” He also took pains to present the appropriate accents, studying language patterns when necessary to obtain authenticity for each role. “I resonate enormously on these external things,” he observed of these techniques. One writer agreed, calling Heston “[m]ethodically thorough in preparing for a role.” Lydia concluded, “He is, after all, an actor, and there are times when he gets too tied up in his work for his own good.”²⁶

Heston knew that if a performance lacked authenticity, it would have a negative effect on the audience’s receptivity of the part, the actor in it, and the credibility of the film itself. As a consummate professional, aware of the importance of box office as well as the technical aspects of his craft, he wanted the people sitting before him in theaters to invest themselves in what they were seeing as much as he did himself.

Though Heston might cringe at many of the formal trappings and note privately his impatience with the elements that marked his public existence, he recognized the fact that the external world he had chosen to inhabit made his internalized one possible. The balance that defined the public and the private, or “the inner and the outer me,” as he called them, represented the irrepressible battle he fought throughout his life. “Over the years I’ve learned well how to be a public person, a celebrity,” he observed, although he admitted, “Christ, how I hate that word!” Biographer Michael Munn noted that “in an interview, the curtain may go up but so too do the invisible barriers,” adding that Heston did “his best to give the single interviewer or the viewing audience what they have, as it were, paid to see: the *public* person.” His public “face,” as he termed it, became a crucial part of who he was. Heston also understood the bargain into which he had entered; “If you make your living as a star (I hate that word, too), you have a responsibility to your public identity.”²⁷ Nevertheless, he felt a similar obligation to remain as true as possible to his “inner self” and the family and close friends he cherished.

26 *CHA*, 334; Donald Chase, “Between Scenes with Charlton Heston,” *SEP* (Nov. 1983), 42; Hamill, “Heston: Larger Than Life,” 90.

27 Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 10; *CHA*, 116.

Heston remained aware of the energy offered him by the authoritative figures he had embodied in his most recognizable cinematic endeavors. Indeed, he worked hard to maintain the aura that surrounded them, and him. After over a decade as an established star, a writer noted, “on-screen and off, Heston has a powerful presence.” Another observer explained that the desire for a significant off-screen impact stretched across a wide range of public service causes, leaving Heston free to employ “as much time as I want to put into them.”²⁸

Certainly, his highly recognizable public “face” was crucial for his career and informed the choices he made and the causes he supported. Whatever the response to his efforts, Heston’s franchise became a carefully crafted one. The relationship between the celebrity figure that others witnessed and accepted and his audience itself remained of paramount importance: “You offer not only your talent . . . you have to risk *yourself*.”²⁹

As a performer, Heston understood the signal imperative: he required an audience. Michael Munn explained that in a group setting, the actor engaged readily. “But what has struck me more than anything else is that when he has an audience—even if it’s a gaggle of journalists at a press call—he performs in a totally different manner in comparison to the private interview.” The writer felt that under those circumstances Heston “literally plays to the crowd and on these occasions, as when he has a television audience, he enjoys himself immensely. What he puts over is to all intents a *performance*, and he responds to the number of listeners, to the environment, and to his enthusiasm for the subject under discussion accordingly.”³⁰

Despite the strong and persistent desire for privacy that remained with him, Heston recognized that he led a very public life. He remarked, “I don’t think I’ve ever been a really satisfactory movie star, the persona that, unavoidably, has defined my life and most of my work.” Aspects of the profession simply did not fit his approach to it or to life. Even so, he accepted that many public activities were “part of the work,” and he practiced and prepared those aspects as much as he would lines from a script or marks on a stage. “Fortunately, people go to my films and plays in sufficient numbers to keep the franchise valid,” he observed, and maintained he was grateful for that, as he truly appeared to be.³¹

28 George McKinnon, “Movies/Heston as ‘Failure,’” *BG*, June 21, 1970; Plutzik, “Last of the Epic Heroes,” 33.

29 *CHA*, 234–236.

30 Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 9–10.

31 *Ibid.*, 235–236.

At the same time, Heston was genuinely appreciative for his career and the living it gave him. "I've been extremely fortunate doing it because I've been able to support my family and send my children to school," he explained; acting also presented him with a platform for "people to take down all my opinions and print them." Indeed, the range of the subjects and vehemence of those views could be impressive, with one scholar noting Heston's "penchant for dramatic rhetoric."³² Given his education, profession, and passions, it would have been surprising for him to express himself, when he chose to do so, in any other way.

Much of what Charlton Heston admired and aspired to be in the public realm of performance fit into what he viewed as the broad definition of tradition in his profession. He knew that motion pictures gave him star power and television provided access to larger-scale audiences, but first and foremost he thought of himself as an actor. "I do a play every other year," he observed. "It is a very important part of my life, and my life is my work." The stage was the place where he felt he could hone his craft. Because of his screen success, theater was a privilege he could afford whenever he desired it. As one author observed of the big-budget screen projects Heston accepted, "Apart from needing the money to live on, it was also a variation upon the long-running theme of his career in which he used movie money to subsidize his work in the theatre."³³

Under any circumstances, only one playwright held the greatest sway for him. "In my trade, the real test is can you play a Shakespearean role?" Heston was just entering his place in film when he made clear the degree to which he intended Shakespearean roles to dictate his career choices. He mapped out a scheme to tackle key roles at different stages of his life. "I don't think I am ready for Brutus yet," he explained in 1954, "but I feel that Antony still is within my range, as is Petruchio, and that I will be ready for Brutus about five or 10 years from now, and Macbeth 10 to 16 years hence." King Lear could come later. For Heston, "Shakespeare spells completeness to me in the opportunities that he affords an actor through his lifetime, and I will never be happy, I am sure, without essaying one play or another from time to time. What is more, I like to work on the stage."³⁴

32 Druzman, *Charlton Heston*, 140; Emilie Raymond, *From My Cold, Dead Hands: Charlton Heston and American Politics* (Lexington, KY, 2006), 63.

33 Stoddard and SerVaas, "Charlton Heston," 103; Bruce Crowther, *Charlton Heston: The Epic Presence* (London, 1986), 126.

34 Martin, "I Call on Ben-Hur," 40; "Heston Maps Career as Shakespearean Actor," *LAT*, Jan. 17, 1954.

Scholar Mike Jancovich thought Heston's affinity for theater generally and British connections in particular was an effort to obtain status as a "legitimate theatrical actor," which could buffer him against criticism for his work in commercial films. Heston always insisted that his appearance on any stage meant a return to "actor's country" and that there was no better representation of that artistic endeavor and the craft he had embraced for himself than Shakespeare's native land.³⁵

Indeed, Heston took great pride in any connection with the United Kingdom and its most celebrated practitioners of the stage and screen. When visiting London in 1965, he wrote passionately of its theatrical venues. "Well, they ARE marvelous, except that the places other people go to play, I go to work." He elaborated on London particularly: "I've been here I don't know how many times; my roots on both sides are British. As an American I was raised on Anglo-Saxon history and suckled on Shakespeare and the rest." When asked in a popular television newspaper supplement what he would take to the moon, the actor responded, "The Collected Works of William Shakespeare and my wife."³⁶

Heston gravitated to American figures as well. He held Gary Cooper in high esteem and enjoyed the opportunity to act with him. He did not have the same chance with John Wayne, although the "Duke" had wanted him in *The Alamo*, either as Jim Bowie or Col. William Travis. Heston turned down both roles, but respected Wayne's star power. "He created a permanent niche for himself as *the* American actor," Heston explained in an interview. "Beyond any question, beyond any doubt, John Wayne is the *absolute* all-time movie star."³⁷

Heston's competitive sense did not give way easily, especially if Wayne nudged him out of a role, but he thought his friend's marketing capability was inspiring. "Wayne's greatest achievement may have been creating John Wayne. The character he played, the character he invented, was the American persona of the man who is hard and believes in doing right and will do it against all odds." Heston knew,

35 Mark Jancovich, "'Charlton Heston is an Axiom': Spectacle and Performance in the Development of the Blockbuster," in Andy Willis, ed., *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York, 2004), 67; Charlton Heston Newsletter, Mar. 30, 1966, Heston Papers, HL. This designation remained vital to him throughout his life and career. See also Haber, "Chuck Heston: A Toga Man in the Jeans Era," and "Dialogue on Film, 1980," UCLA.

36 Newsletter, "London, England," Aug. 28, 1965, HL; "Front Row Center."

37 Michael Munn, *John Wayne: The Man Behind the Myth* (London, 2003), 348. Munn noted Wayne's preference for either Bowie or Travis in *The Alamo*, roles which went to Richard Widmark and Laurence Harvey, respectively; *ibid.*, 204–205. On another occasion, Heston noted that Charles Lindbergh was a figure he admired, in addition to Cooper.

however, that every persona had its limitations. “There are actors who can do period parts,” he noted without referencing himself, “and there are actors who can’t.” Then, specifically addressing Wayne’s performance as a Roman centurion in the crucifixion scene in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, he observed candidly, but without malice, “God knows Duke Wayne couldn’t play a first-century Roman.”³⁸

Like a professional athlete, Heston quickly learned that at the highest levels, everyone else was talented and capable, too, and that he must work to set himself apart from his colleagues. Similarly, he recognized that while a successful product was a wonderful accomplishment, what usually followed was pressure to repeat or exceed the earlier work for an audience that constantly demanded more. In a retrospective moment he experienced while directing an all-Chinese cast in a Beijing production of *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, Heston expressed what he saw as the essence of motivation in his craft. “Acting is not supposed to be a competitive undertaking,” he observed; but “[i]t is though . . . unavoidably.” Then, in a manner of assessment born of long experience, he explained that a sense of competitiveness had existed for him from his earliest years, and it grew over time: “Later on, you can’t help but keep track of the other guys.” Internally, the assessment became, “Christ, I should’ve done that part after all . . . look at the grosses. I would’ve been better in it, too.” Of course, there was no way to know the degree to which one person could embody a role in a similar manner or with the same degree of box-office response as another. In the end, Heston decided there was something more fundamental at work. “In truth,” he concluded, “actors compete only with themselves, and the part.”³⁹

He seemed to admire most those individuals who had demonstrated the capacity to make a difference in something greater than themselves. “If one examines carefully every one of my forty films,” he observed, “a central theme runs through the majority of them. Almost all the characters I’ve played are men with an individual sense of total dedication and responsibility which motivates their triumphs.” When pressed in an interview about his argument that some individuals had the capacity to make an enormous impact, Heston responded, “An *extraordinary* man can effect change. Jackson, Jefferson, and a number of other

38 Ibid., 134, 249.

39 “October 18th [1988] Tuesday, Opening Night, Beijing,” *BD*, 133.

men I've played could do it." Then in a moment of introspection, he added with humility, "I don't put myself in the same category."⁴⁰

In the modern era, Heston found Winston Churchill enormously compelling. Another contemporary figure, Ronald Reagan, symbolized leadership in different settings, ranging from their shared proximity via Screen Actors Guild activities to Reagan's terms as governor of California and president of the United States. Even so, Heston had no enduring aspirations of public political office for himself, preferring instead to portray such figures through his artistic endeavors; he pronounced himself sufficiently satisfied by undertaking those portrayals. One modern student of the connection between actors and politicians observed, "Heston's political career was both typical of film star activism in the post 1960s era—in that he spoke out in favor of causes but avoided running for public office—and an atypical instance of an actor striving for a quasi-presidential role."⁴¹ As these public manifestations suggested, Heston also appreciated the various platforms available to him.

In all facets, from a theater stage to a sound stage, on and off location, Heston enjoyed his trade, but recognized the demands it made on those he loved. "Of course my work intrudes enormously on my personal life," he admitted, "and takes time from my wife and from my children that I wish it didn't have to take. But they react with understanding." Then, without appearing to realize the point he was making, he insisted, "My work is the center of my life, and they understand that. We're quite cohesive about it."⁴²

Chuck Heston enjoyed other indulgences, too. Although his schedule demanded that he take care of himself, often through a strict regimen of exercise, he appreciated good food and drink. One assessment of the rising star offered glimpses of these more private aspects to an eager public. In addition to being "overly fond of oysters and clams," Heston consumed "four pounds of steak daily, plus two pounds of tomatoes." When moments of unwinding allowed, he enjoyed a libation in addition to his ubiquitous cups of coffee. "His favorite drink is a straight shot of Bell's twelve-year-old Scotch," the writer noted.⁴³

40 Rovin, *Films*, 213; Lawrence Linderman, "Charlton Heston Interview," *Penthouse Magazine* (August 1980), 110–112.

41 Burton W. Peretti, *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2012), 311, n. 40.

42 Rovin, *Films*, 21.

43 Steele, "Unmasking Charlton Heston," 51, 74.

Although he lived in an environment of performance, Charlton Heston operated under few illusions. He knew what critics thought of him and his work and labored diligently to protect himself by embodying standards of perfection and professionalism in all facets of his life. His sense of humor served as a ready safety valve for dealing with the public. Beneath the surface simmered a potentially volcanic temper that he kept largely controlled, but which occasionally found articulation in some of his more piercing personal expressions. The actor's journals became the means by which his most critical evaluations found release.

To those outside his immediate circle of friends and family, Heston often appeared to be studied and separated. Michael Munn considered the performer careful in his responses during interviews, seemingly drawing upon an internalized script for anecdotes as illustrations. Characterizing his subject as "deviously clever at it," the writer concluded, "you begin to realize that you're hearing the same answers you've heard before, almost word for word." He noted, "But what I have since discovered through personal experience is that Heston doesn't just give an interview—he *performs*. Sometimes flawlessly, sometimes poorly." Yet the actor seemed more guarded in one-on-one situations, careful not to expose too much of himself. In these settings he appeared to accept the role "dutifully," as "part of the job of acting." The shift in demeanor left Munn puzzled. "It's as though *he* is in control of the interview and you can be sure that he'll tell you exactly what he wants you to know." At another point in 1980, Heston asserted, "I spend a great deal of time in public and can do it very well—but it's a professional skill."⁴⁴

Heston understood the necessity for promotion. He recognized that there was a process to be followed and accepted the role he was required to play as essential in any product's successful marketing. Heston's name, face, and voice often proved indispensable to such campaigns. Yet, as writer Michael Druzman suggested, "His impressive list of credits notwithstanding, Heston has never been considered by his industry to be truly viable when it comes to attracting patrons to the box office." He argued that other factors associated with the historical/biblical spectacles and colorful science fiction films brought individuals into the seats, whereas his "best performance to date—*Will Penny* (1968)—died in the theaters, despite, in several instances, above average and even superior critical reviews." Writer Ed Leibowitz took a different tack, calling ventures such as *Will Penny* "the best" of "some smaller films that cast him in an unfamiliar light, where he's liberated from being Charlton Heston." Even so, the writer explained, "this was not the Heston his fans were

44 Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 9–10; Plutzik, "Last of the Epic Heroes," 33.

prepared to accept,” preferring instead his “enduring film persona—mighty and outsize.”⁴⁵

In any event, Charlton Heston’s motion picture presence carried over into the realm of celebrity influence in the political arena. Indeed, scholar Steven Ross proclaimed him “the first prominent practitioner of image politics.” Ross noted that such identifiable roles “allowed him to forge a cinematic person of such gravitas that he repeatedly used it to lend authority to his off-screen role as [a] political spokesperson.” In the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election, another writer labeled the veteran actor “Hollywood’s most effective activist” and its “preeminent public citizen.”⁴⁶

Heston explained, “Well, I think I play my part in the public process. Heaven knows, I shout my mouth off all the time and have, as all performers and actors, an unusual, if you like unfair access to the public forum. If I want to talk about some public issue I get on television.” Until later in his life, the actor argued that most of his positions were largely not political ones, even when he spoke in favor of candidates who supported them. He added, “I have taken a very public part in the political process on behalf of candidates from both parties all the way back to Adlai Stevenson back in 1952 which was about the first time I had enough public identity to make it worth my while, and I have served in appointive offices for Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan.”⁴⁷

Regardless of the setting, Charlton Heston remained focused on the persona he was creating and developing. If he could not separate himself from his screen presence, however, he did not really wish to do so. “I wanted the arena,” he explained, maintaining that it was “sweat, sand, and blood, where it really counts.” He always expected to “take the test, and give your best . . . and then somehow be better.”⁴⁸ Heston saw aspects that some might find overwhelming, discouraging, or intimidating, as challenges to overcome rather than endure or avoid. His achievements established his worthiness of entering in the acting arena and his satisfaction at emerging victorious from it. Such accomplishments also solidified his name and reputation among his peers and his public.

45 Druzman, *Charlton Heston*, 12; Leibowitz, “Last Stand,” 64.

46 Mark Harvey, *Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-Based Advocacy* (Lawrence, KS, 2017), 29; Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right*, 9; Leibowitz, “Last Stand,” 61, 65.

47 Stoddard and SerVaas, “Charlton Heston,” 42.

48 *Ibid.*, 73.

At the same time, Heston sought to live and reflect the values he held closest as a responsible professional, husband, and father. When asked what advice he would give his children, the answer was unequivocal: “Do your best, keep your promises, and be on time.” He believed firmly that these were essential ingredients for success. Tellingly, when asked “You knew you were grown-up when you _____,” he offered another insight into his character by answering when he “[l]earned to accept the blame for what happens to me.” As Heston explained in one interview, he took pride in being able to “keep” his public and private lives “separate on the one hand and live them both at the same time on the other.”⁴⁹ Yet both spheres defined him. Beneath the exterior of the “public” figure lay an individual who wanted others to perceive him as fair and honest, and prepared to act in the interests of others.

At the same time, the “public” and “private” dichotomies could not easily be untangled. While filming *55 Days at Peking* on location, he learned that his personal driver, Ricardo Perez, had not been paid for five weeks. Heston intervened to correct the matter, only to find out that nothing had changed. At this point, more than a lack of payment for a worker was at play, for the star had inserted himself into the situation and could not avoid feeling personally affected. He returned to the office, dressed in the dingy uniform of the Marine officer he played in the film, and announced that he had covered the sum out of his own pocket. The production company now owed him instead. Professional clout had allowed Charlton Heston to fulfill an obligation that Chuck Heston insisted must be met.

Each of these qualities translated into a successful public career and the subsequent exposure that Heston sustained through thorough preparation and dedication. From his earliest time on stage, buttressed by a consistent professionalism, a solid work ethic, and a commitment to what he saw as the values expressed through his career and beyond it, Charlton Heston exhibited “the look of eagles.”⁵⁰

49 “Front Row Center”; “1961 Vintage Radio Interviews with Charlton Heston and Lydia Heston.”

50 Commonly known in the racing world as reflective of a confident thoroughbred, this term appears, for example, in Linda Carroll and David Rosner, *Duel for the Crown: Affirmed, Alydar, and Racing’s Greatest Rivalry* (New York, 2014), 9.

Chapter One

TO THE POST

1920s-1940s

“It was a fine place to be a boy in.”
—Charlton Heston on growing up in Michigan

“In those days I wasn’t satisfied being me.”
—Heston, on his childhood

Performances:

Peer Gynt, August 25, 1941



Charlton Heston was always a product of the Midwest. Born October 4, 1923, in Evanston, Illinois, to a dynamic mother from Chicago, Lilla Charlton, and a charming father, Russell Whitford Carter, the child grew up in a middle-class family. Lilla was the force that engulfed it, long after they had left their home outside of Chicago and moved to the woods of Michigan in his earliest years. She was determined that rather than be known by his birth name, John Charles, the firstborn son would be Charlton. This name was emblematic of the firmness of their bond and the connection to the Scottish roots that Charlton Heston maintained throughout both of their lives.¹

¹ Marc Eliot, *Charlton Heston: Hollywood’s Last Icon* (New York, 2017), 4-5. Eliot interviewed Holly Heston Rochell for comments about her father’s early life.

Although Charlton Heston remained largely reserved about his private or family life, he was often frank and open about what he did share. His expressions of affection for his parents were forged in the crucible of circumstances that surrounded his youth. He later noted that Lilla's recollection of his early years differed from his own, particularly regarding the pastime of hunting. For Heston, the guns he remembered taking into the woods offered him a sense of freedom and independence that he cherished. His Scots heritage gave him a sense of frugality and stubborn pride as well. Throughout his career, a staunch professionalism and desire for perfection were the part of the inner core that both drove him to focus so intently on his craft and provided him with the means for success and financial independence.

The degree to which Chuck Heston really was the little boy wandering the Michigan woods with his imagination ablaze was less relevant than his need to believe that image in order to fit this conception of himself. In any case, the depictions he offered of his youth remained consistent over the years. The adventurous figures of his mind provided both a comforting memory and motivation as he wound his way through his professional life. Heston always seemed to prefer looking back even as he strove to move his life and career forward.

Heston's *An Actor's Life*, published in 1976, opened with a section biblically titled "At the Beginning," in which he described his youth. Employing an allusion to the mythical Paul Bunyan, he recalled an idyllic world before declaring, "it was a fine place to be a boy in." He also observed that he "had a very happy boyhood."²

In the quieter world away from the environs of Chicago, the young man learned to entertain himself, developing the creative imagination he would bring to his life and career years hence. Heston found that he enjoyed taking on other personas. Although often professing to a happy youth, he admitted that he occasionally preferred to be someone else. "What acting offered me was the chance to be many other people." He also acted because no other outlet appeared to hold as much satisfaction for him. Eventually, the desire to perform prevailed. "I couldn't conceive of doing anything except acting," he observed. "Acting is pretending. But I *like* it."³

2 *ALJ*, xii; HARDtalk, BBC Interview with Tim Sebastian, 1997, part 3, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkhLjPnjyYQ, accessed June 11, 2018.

3 Radar, "If I Ran & Won," 5; Belmont Interview, Aug. 1967, Heston Papers, 11, HL; Druyman, *Charlton Heston*, 140.

The youth's traditional education came in a one-room schoolhouse populated mostly by extended kin. The presence of cousins and close neighbors supplemented the sense of comfort in a relatively quiet, communal, and isolated existence. The Michigan woods he walked through to reach the school also provided a buffer from outside intrusion and an opportunity to enrich a youthful imagination.

Early in life, Chuck Heston developed many traits that remained with him. He learned to be creative and resourceful. Years later, when a reader inquired for the segment, "Ask them Yourself," "What's the cutest Mother's Day story you know?" the answer featured "one about Charlton Heston." "When he was 14, he bought his mother a big box of chocolates several days before Mother's Day." Wanting to keep the special present a surprise, he neglected to refrigerate it. Opening the box to check on the contents, he was broken-hearted to see they had melted. He reacted creatively, however, by adding the note: "Mom, you melt my heart, too."⁴

Several passions emerged during these early years. Heston realized that he loved the outdoors and enjoyed books, combining these pursuits with a desire to perform. "I used to read books," he observed, "and then go outside and act them out by myself. I'd act all the parts in turn." Expanding on an important source for this inspiration, he noted, "At seven I read Ernest Thompson Seton's 'Lives of the Hunted' about animals, and acted out all the parts myself," describing Seton's work as "the greatest single influence on his life." Later, when asked why Americans like Ernest Hemingway seemed to be so attracted to Europe, Heston observed, "Hemingway, like all complete artists, was attracted by the world." Naming the works of Hemingway and Shakespeare as some of his favorites, he answered a query about his plans to come: "To go on acting."⁵

Heston pursued these interests in that tiny schoolhouse, whose numbers were too small and age ranges too great to allow for team sports or larger group activities. "I learned a lot in that school," he recalled, "most importantly, how to read." He was fascinated by the transition from having a parent read to him as a child to discovering the joys of reading for himself. "I've never gotten over the infinite wonder of that," he observed in his autobiography. Classics such as Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* opened new worlds to a fertile mind and eventually re-emerged as film projects. Indeed, his love of reading formed the central part of Heston's preparation for many future roles as

4 "Ask Them Yourself," clipping, circa 1977.

5 Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 23-24; Steele, "Unmasking Charlton Heston," 51, 74; "Interview with Charlton Heston, 11-9-64," "The Agony and the Ecstasy publicity," f.2, Heston Papers, HL.

well as the foundation for fostering his active imagination and providing a source of personal entertainment and education, which he passed along to his children and grandchildren. Although he insisted that he never developed “excellent research discipline,” Heston passed along a dedication to understanding the past that he embraced sincerely. “I was finished with school before I figured out that history is not only the most important subject, it’s the *only* subject,” he recalled telling his son Fraser. “You’ll find that out, sooner or later.”⁶

Though Charlton Heston found pleasure and release in volumes of literature and history, the works of others could not contain his love of words. He might deny a desire to set his thoughts to paper, but numerous instances related the opposite. In 1958, he maintained that had he not succeeded in acting as a profession, “he would like to have become a writer.” The young student also enjoyed developing other artistic talents. “I liked to draw cowboys in my geography book,” he noted, illuminating a tendency to occupy himself in a manner that remained with him. He found other outlets in mechanical drawing and art courses. One observer noted, “When Charlton Heston sits at a table and has nothing particular to do the artistic comes out in him. He’s forever ‘doodling,’ his bent being largely toward drawing persons.”⁷ Together, these habits stood him in good stead as he researched roles and recorded his life on movie sets and in theaters across the globe.

As a student, young Heston was also learning about the world of acting. He later told columnist Hedda Hopper, “No, I’m the only one,” when asked if any other members of his family were actors, but he may have been thinking of immediate relations. The degree to which family connections imparted any influence over an impressionable youth existed primarily through a more distant one. “A portrait of the actor as a young boy (age 5) would show him sitting at the knee of an uncle, Percy Charlton, himself an actor of some distinction,” a writer of a piece on Heston’s emerging talent explained, “eagerly drinking in the secrets of the trade which made Chuck a stand-out in the school Christmas pageant.”⁸

Although he had an important role, “stand-out” was a bit of an exaggeration with respect to this first theatrical production; he spent the better part of the

6 *CHA*, 21; Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 22, 24; Plutzik, “Last of the Epic Heroes,” 32.

7 Steele, “Unmasking Charlton Heston,” 74; Eliot, *Charlton Heston*, 6; A. S. Kay, “Let’s Go Places,” Scrapbooks, HL.

8 Charlton Heston, Feb. 1952, 6, Hedda Hopper Papers, f.1665, HL. According to Heston, “I started acting in grammar school. I played Santa Claus in a Christmas pageant.” *Ibid.*; Freedgood, “Big Man, What Now?,” HL. See also Crowther, *Charlton Heston*, 10, and Plutzik, “Last of the Epic Heroes,” 34.

performance waiting to make his appearance. Still, Heston maintained that his involvement in the play was instrumental in stoking the fires that burned within him. Responding to an observation that he had participated “in every class play at the Stolp public school in Wilmette,” Heston added, “Sometimes I think my ambition to become an actor dates back farther than that. When I was 5 I starred in a Christmas pageant in Evanston—that was the real beginning.” Elsewhere, Heston recalled that despite his normally quiet demeanor, “I guess I was always hamming things up. . . . I appeared in every school entertainment at the grammar school I attended.” Some of this critical foundation included presenting “his own puppet show” to classmates.⁹

Heston remembered this as the time when a stage and an audience first inspired him. “I played Santa Claus. . . . It wasn’t a big part and I had to stay cooped up in a chimney until my entrance at the end of Act II.” The role required a lesson in patience and discipline, as he remained in close confinement while the play proceeded until he could finally spring forth and utter the critical line, “Merry Christmas!” Even so, great-uncle Percy Charlton, who was among the family members in attendance, seemed to be impressed. Of the performance, he concluded, “Another actor in the family.” And so it was.¹⁰

The young fellow’s world expanded in other ways as well. The birth of a sister, Lilla Ann, redefined Heston’s family circle, but he continued to derive comfort through his jaunts into the woodlands. The rich diversity of seasons that brought shifts from the lush of spring and the heat of summer to the colors of autumn and the snows of winter defined his wider universe.

If rabbit hunts were part of the fertile imagination of frontier life with Davy Crockett more than a routine activity, such forays represented a meaningful sense of independence for the youth. Heston did not mind being alone, since he often was not; he took along a German shepherd dog named “Lobo” as a welcome and trusted companion.¹¹ Together, these mental images of the wandering boy,

9 Freida Zylstra, “Young Wilmette Actor’s Star Rises in Hollywood, Goes Directly to Films After Success in TV,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 22, 1951, Heston Clipping Files, HL; Hyatt Downing, “Hollywood’s Moses,” 9, HL; Marjory Adams, “Film Producers Want Actors Not Charmers, ‘Hot’ Star Says,” *BDG*, Aug. 8, 1950.

10 Hedda Hopper, “Hollywood Life Too Easy, Says Heston,” 1952. See also Hopper, “No Restin’ For Heston,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Apr. 6, 1952, and *ALJ*, xii; Druxman, *Charlton Heston*, 15. See also “Biography of Charlton Heston,” Paramount—Hal Wallis Productions, March 1950, Heston Clippings File, HL, and Steele, “Unmasking Charlton Heston,” 74.

11 *CHA*, 20, 22-23. Heston continued to stress the importance of this historic figure in later interviews as well. See Vernon Scott, “Charlton Heston’s Life Story,” *GH* (May 1986), 128, 130.

the faithful dog, the ever-present guns, the traditional Christmas tree, and the freedom and sense of security became fixtures of his existence and foundations for his well-being.

Not all the elements of his childhood were reflections of a happy existence, however. One of the most memorable of these occurred when a neighbor killed his dog in a fit of rage. Heston recalled that Lobo's death "was the first loss of my life. I still think of him." His affection for dogs remained another tangible connection to his past as he grew older. "I've owned dogs all my life, mostly shepherds," he said of his family's beloved "Arthur Pendragon," known commonly as "Drago."¹²

Unfortunately, this was not the only trauma he confronted over a short time frame. The next year, at age 10, Heston suffered a greater, equally lasting shock. He noted repeatedly in subsequent years the deep degree to which his parents' separation and divorce affected him. Lilla determined that the marriage was not salvageable and abruptly uprooted her children from their secure existence. The family headed for Columbus, Georgia, where mother, eldest son, daughter, and newborn baby brother, Alan, lived with an aunt. Thrust into an unfamiliar world, Heston remembered this brief period as a mixture of relative opulence and Southern charm, with the uncomfortable challenges of fitting into a new school and community. He found that he could make only one friend, a fellow named Josh, who was the son of the family's African American maid. In a similar fashion to the way in which Georgian Jimmy Carter described such associations, the future actor observed, "I only knew him as my friend."¹³

Still, brief glimpses of happiness punctuated his time in Georgia. When Heston returned later to explore a dark side of the Civil War in a production on the trial of Henry Wirz, commandant of the infamous Andersonville Prison, Heston reflected on his childhood memories of the area. "He did remember 'vividly' one thing about Dr. [William F.] Jenkins' home where he lived—the big pecan tree in the front yard," a newspaper writer who interviewed him explained. "He said he was always overwhelmed with the fact that I could just go out in the yard and stuff my pockets full of them." Jenkins also recognized a fondness for "big eating" in his young visitor, telling writer Herschel Cribb, "I used to have a lot of fun trying to fill Charlton up." Heston's mother summed up the twin elements of her growing

12 *CHA* 22, 286. Heston employed such terms as "sainted," "faithful," and "devoted" to describe the cherished pet, which also accompanied the family on several overseas location shoots. Heston introduced "Arthur Pendragon" in his June 6, 1961, entry; *ALJ*, 120-121.

13 Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood* (New York, 2001), 73. Carter's friend was Alonzo "A. D." Davis.

son by noting, “Oh, I never remember a time when Charlton didn’t love books and didn’t love food.”¹⁴

Even with such pleasant diversions, the forced break from his father and the outdoor environment the boy had known were particularly difficult. “It was an extremely traumatic experience,” he attested as he looked back at a youth interrupted; “It colored my whole adolescence.” Heston was certain that he somehow bore responsibility for his parents’ breakup, and “felt a deep sense of personal guilt.” In his adult years, Heston retained this perspective. “This was then and still remains the most traumatic experience of my life, including [my participation] in World War II.”¹⁵

Young Heston had to learn to channel such feelings into the best possible course, and the demand for such flexibility offered him additional incentive to improvise when it came to maintaining a sense of personal equilibrium. “In those days I wasn’t satisfied being me,” he noted candidly. “You see, I always thought of myself as inadequate.”¹⁶ As anyone caught up in challenging circumstances, he could choose to go in different directions. Turning inward, he might retreat into isolation or depression, which exacerbated his tendencies toward shyness and withdrawal, or he might become antisocial in an extreme, even violent manner, as an expression of his feelings of anger and self-loathing. Fortunately, other factors and a strong resolve cast Heston on a path that allowed him to compensate for absence and disappointment in a constructive way. His memories of this period also became an essential part of his personal and professional narrative.

In the meantime, a new male figure emerged in Heston’s life. The Southern sojourn proved short-lived, and Lilla took her family back to St. Helen. John Charles returned to a changed world that included a new stepfather, Chester Lucien “Chet” Heston, who had worked with Russell Carter for a time. With his marriage to Lilla, Chet stepped into the gap that resulted from Russ’s departure. Perhaps the most important development from the standpoint of future identity was the fact that John Charles Carter became Charlton Heston, a hybrid of his mother’s family name and his new surname. Lilla’s determination to remove any overt connection to the past brought an indelible element into her son’s life. Heston insisted that

14 Herschel Cribb, “Charlton Heston Cast in Andersonville Role,” in Scrapbooks, HL; “This is Your Life transcript,” 10, HL; Bill King, “Chiefs: An Unusual Portrayal of the South and an Unusual Role for Heston,” *AJC*, Nov. 11, 1983, 4.

15 *CHA*, 30.

16 Rader, “If I Ran & Won,” 5.

although he respected Chet for his stepfather's determination during those difficult days, he accepted the change not so much due to affection than from a desire to avoid drawing attention to the family's circumstances.¹⁷

Disruption continued to be the norm in a challenging economy as Chet tried to find work. For a brief time, Alliance, Ohio, was home, then Wisconsin, and finally Wilmette, where the new patriarch secured a position as a welder. This move into the Chicago suburbs gave the family a real home and Heston an important refuge. A converted third floor became his bedroom. "I had the whole floor to myself," he remembered. "That meant a lot to me."¹⁸ As he had once done in the Michigan woods, in this valuable new space, he escaped from unwelcome intrusions.

When not ensconced in his third-floor abode, Heston eventually discovered a fascinating world outside his home. The Chicago suburbs offered interesting diversions, and he found outlets for his imagination in the images that blazoned forth from movie screens in local cinema houses. "I could be Gary Cooper and Errol Flynn," he explained, "which was fine with me."¹⁹

Heston adapted to his universe, but new circumstances could not sunder old relationships entirely. In the first year in Wilmette, Russell Carter came back to see his son. Heston was playing softball with friends when his father drove up and caught his attention. Russ remained in the vehicle while they talked, and the awkward moments passed before his father drove away again for another indefinite separation from the boy. The reunion had only reaffirmed the void that Heston felt and the awkwardness and sense of guilt that he had imposed upon himself.²⁰

Newly resettled and renamed, young Charlton Heston entered New Trier High School. His experiences there later assumed vital meaning—"I can't emphasize enough how important New Trier turned out to be for me."²¹ Initially at least, the new environment exacerbated his feelings of being an outsider. Heston tried to adapt in ways that his background and awkwardness at fifteen permitted. His name brought additional unsettlement when a teacher misidentified him as "Charlotte" and compounded the error by insisting that the "Heston girl" identify herself.

17 *CHA*, 33, 38.

18 *Ibid.*, 34.

19 *ALJ*, xiii.

20 *CHA*, 34.

21 Eliot, *Charlton Heston*, 13.

Joining the rifle team and the chess club offered him some opportunities for involvement and acceptance. Like so many others, however, the worst moments of his teenaged years came with the awkwardness wrought by sudden physical changes. Heston found that his frame shot upward before the rest of his body could catch up with it. The actor liked to tell how friends at the time remarked, "Every family has a skeleton in its closet, but the Hestons have let theirs out and are educating him."²²

His awkwardness exacerbated his tendency toward shyness. When he and actor Bruce Dern worked together, Dern told him that they had attended the same high school. "Oddly enough," he recalled, "Heston never knew I went to New Trier until I told him one day on *Will Penny*." The star replied by listing some of the Hollywood figures with whom he had attended the school, at the same time illustrating the isolated circumstances that prevailed at the time. "Hugh O'Brian, Rock Hudson, and Heston were all in the same class," Dern noted, "and none of them knew each other until they came to Hollywood."²³

High school could be traumatic, but it also proved transitional and helped Heston to identify his own creative path. "At New Trier we not only began to find our way into Shakespeare," he recalled, "but I discovered [Thomas] Wolfe and [Ernest] Hemingway and [Robert] Frost as well." New vistas opened that built upon his earlier interests. Drama classes, plays, and radio productions proved crucial to his progress from childhood affectation to the pursuit of practiced art. In this new setting, he found additional affirmation of his inclination toward acting when he saw a production of *Twelfth Night* in Chicago and realized that adults pretending to be others was a legitimate and accepted practice. As a whole, he explained, "They gave me the center of my life: my work." He added tellingly, "It began my life."²⁴

In addition to whatever inspiration and direction his teachers might provide the prospective thespian, New Trier High School also gave him a dose of reality when it came to the pitfalls of a career in performance. As an essay theme in his junior year, Heston selected "Acting as a Profession." In looking back on the information he gathered for the paper, the now-successful performer observed,

22 Martin, "I Call on Ben-Hur," 42.

23 Bruce Dern, with Christopher Fryer and Robert Crane, *Things I've Said, but Probably Shouldn't Have* (Hoboken, NJ, 2007), 47.

24 Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 28-29; *CHA*, 37.

“The statistics indicate what any actor knows that you really can’t [expect to] make a living acting, which did not daunt me at all.”²⁵

The earnest pupil was certainly not lacking in determination. He recalled, “From a one-eyed pirate in that first play through every part I could get in every production till I graduated, I soaked up different people to be, and some idea of what acting was.” Heston also found his way into other areas of performance, as when he lent his voice to a production of *Macbeth* adapted to radio for the school’s English classes.

As Heston moved into his final two years of study, he shelved experiments with the rifle, chess, and football as he found expanded opportunities with the local Winnetka Community Theatre. This training both nurtured his desire to perform and opened a way for him to continue his pursuit of acting as a career when he was awarded a \$300.00 scholarship to the School of Speech at Northwestern University.²⁶

Still, the road to Hollywood did not open in some traditional fashion for him, with discovery by an established mogul or a professional talent scout. Instead, young Heston was acting in a high school play when he caught the eye of a visitor who was in something of desperate straits himself. David Bradley was a student at Northwestern University, anxious to produce and direct a version of Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. Unfortunately, his *Peer* had wrangled a summer stock gig and was no longer available.

Bradley watched as one of the actors on that small stage, a “gangling, six-foot, startling creature named Heston,” radiated a presence he thought could be adapted for his purposes. Bradley determined to convince the young man to join in his enterprise, and Heston assumed that an agent from “Tinsel Town” had come to offer him his big break. “Never mind Hollywood,” the visitor asserted, “Would you like to play *Peer Gynt*?”²⁷ Heston was unsure where this opportunity would lead or of the exact nature of the role, but was shrewd enough to know that any work in his chosen craft would be beneficial. A certain amount of naiveté did not hurt in this instance either.

The budding actor had other options as well, but they were hardly as attractive. He had an opportunity for summer employment in a steel mill working for his stepfather. Even with a potential paycheck from that job, the choice was not

25 “Screen Actors Guild Interview—Legacy, June 1994,” UCLA.

26 *CHA*, 39.

27 Munn, *Charlton Heston*, 30.

difficult for him to make. "Playing Peer Gynt in a movie, free, still looked better than handling hot steel for eighty-five cents an hour," he remembered.²⁸ Indeed, Heston approached the role of a self-centered youth with gusto. His screen debut had elements of the actor to come, with a figure that dominated the screen and the occasional "Heston stance," with arms akimbo and head thrown back.

As his high school career wound down, Heston knew he felt most comfortable in the guise of others in a theatrical performance, but he remained a part of a very real world from which he could not always escape. His attendance at the senior prom provided new challenges to overcome. Heston recalled that he "solved the problem of neither having a date nor knowing how to dance by walking the beach until three o'clock in the morning. That way I would seem to be out for an appropriate length of time." Despite the isolation of these circumstances, he claimed, "you survive those things."²⁹ Such moments allowed Heston to develop the kind of imperturbability that would be useful in the years ahead.

After graduating from New Trier, his admission to Northwestern became pivotal to his journey, although initially he struggled to find his place there as well. Charlton Heston was a long way from Hollywood at this point. He was not even particularly clear on his own identity. Lilla's insistence upon naming her child Charlton in preference to John Charles had cost the young man a middle name. For a brief time, he tried "Lance," although the new moniker slipped away, except as stenciled on his luggage chest.³⁰ Validation would have to come in other forms.

In his quest for acceptance, Heston tried football. "I was an end on the freshman squad at Northwestern the year Otto Graham was the varsity quarterback. They used to run over us in scrimmages during the week." Unlike his celebrated teammate, Heston's efforts did not result in gridiron success. He insisted, "After I'd had my nose banged a few times I decided I'd better quit football if I ever hoped to have an acting career."³¹

A decade later, as he prepared for a role that brought him to the cinematic gridiron, he recalled lightheartedly of his brief Northwestern football career, "I had everything an end needed except speed and good hands." Certainly, lacking these salient features proved problematic at the time. "My career was spectacularly

28 *CHA*, 41.

29 Scott, "Charlton Heston's Life Story," *GH*, 130.

30 Eliot, *Charlton Heston*, 12, 16.

31 Jerry Nason, "Graham Makes Actor of Heston," *BG*, Nov. 4, 1959.

unremarkable,” he noted. “I was strictly cannon fodder for the varsity.” When he held a special screening of the film *Number One* at his home, Heston remembered battling the senior star, Otto Graham. “It didn’t take too much intelligence to realize I didn’t have it.” Even so, the situation provided him with another crucial element of his future screen prominence. A broken nose from a hard tackle became an unmistakable asset as his life progressed. “It’s gotten me a lot of parts,” he quipped frequently.³²

As his focus turned to acting, Charlton Heston found little time for football, anyway. Near the end of his life, a retrospective noted that as a “student of the School of Speech, Heston dove into the theater world right away, participating in six university productions.” Many of these initial roles were small, but they built his confidence and seasoning. He remained determined to learn all he could, but never failed to help when others in these productions requested it. One fellow student recalled that he helped her overcome a severe bout of stage fright by reading A. A. Milne poems to divert her attention and by offering his assuring presence at subsequent performances. Heston insisted that he never endured the malady himself. “I always thought I could do it,” he maintained. “You have to believe you can do it.”³³

Heston’s college acting career also benefitted from working under an able instructor: Alvina Krause. Scholar Emilie Raymond concluded that this mentorship provided the young man perhaps his best lesson, observing, “it was through her that Heston acquired the thick skin needed for the acting business.” As he progressed, he demonstrated that an innate sensitivity remained, but Krause hardened him to the realities of all types of criticism. After achieving success, he reminded his professor that he did not recall receiving any plaudits from her at the time. “People who have to be encouraged to act,” Krause retorted, “have no business doing it.”³⁴

If Professor Krause proved demanding of her students and unrelenting in her expectations, this only drove the fledgling actor to improve himself and work hard to develop the skills necessary for later success. She recalled, “At the tryouts, Chuck Heston, a freshman, tries out for the lead of the show, the 2nd lead, the third lead,

32 “Charlton Heston: Old Pro to Play ‘The Pro,’” *LAT*, May 24, 1968; John Hall, “Welcome to the NFL,” *LAT*, July 17, 1969; *CHA*, 126; Rader, “If I Ran & Won,” 5; Scott, “Charlton Heston’s Life Story,” *GH* (May 1986), 130.

33 Karen Werling, “Appreciation: Charlton Heston’s Life as a Wildcat,” *North by Northwestern* (Apr. 16, 2008), www.northbynorthwestern.com/story/heston-at-northwestern, accessed Mar. 25, 2019; John H. Richardson, “Heston,” *Esquire* (July 2001), 66.

34 Raymond, *Cold, Dead Hands*, 12; *CHA*, 48-49.

the servant, anything!” This persistence marked his desire to perform and allowed Krause to shape his early course. “Unmistakably, [she was] one of the greatest teachers in the world,” he maintained afterward. “Every, every person should have in his life the experience of a great teacher. Alvina Krause was a great teacher.”³⁵

As a student, Heston already had a notion of advancing through practical methods rather than charisma or physical attributes. “Most of the film actors of the period I was in college—1941 and 1942—were chosen for personalities and photogenic charm,” he observed after his first Hollywood production. “Some of us who studied drama seriously,” he added pointedly, did so with the objective of “acting for a living [and] were not interested in motion pictures for that reason.”³⁶ Heston was determined to make his way forward in his profession through hard work, dedicated study, and stage experience rather than by means of the superficial aspects that could prove temporal.

Proximity to a great urban center provided the student with additional theatrical opportunities. Later, a writer for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted these connections. “Wilmette’s Charlton Heston, named by Hollywood columnist Hedda Hopper as one of the year’s most promising screen finds, made unprecedented use of Chicago stepping stones on his way to Hollywood: Speech classes at Northwestern university, a unique Chicago-made movie, and Chicago radio broadcasting.” The latter allowed him to employ his distinctive voice. “While in college he also acted on a number of Chicago radio shows, including ‘Terry and the Pirates.’”³⁷

When not exercising his acting talents, he remained busy in other endeavors. At night, he worked as an elevator operator so that he could keep food on his plate, but he also found time for reading and studying when that work slowed down. His mother recalled that her son “really liked the job . . . because it gave him time to study.” She explained that occasionally, the exasperated manager of the facility would call her. “Mrs. Heston, Charlton has hung a sign in the elevator, ‘I have laryngitis and cannot talk.’” Heston attributed a great deal to his college employment. “All that I am—or almost all—I owe to the co-op apartment building at 5510 Sheridan Rd. When I was in college I was the midnight to 8 a.m. elevator operator there. This gave me a good share of the night to read Shakespeare and the Old Testament. I read for voice and diction.” Writer Ruth Waterbury observed of

35 “This is Your Life transcript,” 14, HL.

36 Adams, “Film Producers Want Actors Not Charmers, ‘Hot’ Star Says,” *BDG*, Aug. 8, 1950.

37 Zylstra, “Young Wilmette Actor’s Star Rises in Hollywood, Goes Directly to Films After Success in TV,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 22, 1951, Heston Clipping Files, HL.

the restless student, “He got little sleep, of course, but that was all right; he was determined to become great in the theatre.”³⁸ The aspiring actor was absorbed by the desire to learn and determined to achieve the highest standard of performance possible.

In 1941, however, Charlton Heston also made the decision that would have the most significant impact upon his personal life and, ultimately, his public persona: he sat behind an attractive classmate in “Fundamental Theatre.” He insisted that he had experienced “love at first sight” with the lovely Lydia Clarke. “It can happen and it did for me.” The love affair that ultimately resulted was personally and professionally transformative. “I would not be here without her,” he told one interviewer.³⁹

Even so, making the transition from head and heart to actual contact was no easy accomplishment. Unfortunately, Heston had little practical preparation to assist him. A writer observed of the student’s love interests, “He’d been too busy concentrating on becoming an actor to think of them.”⁴⁰ Yet the dark-haired beauty seated so tantalizingly close transfixed him. Heston apparently could not resist the chance to interact with her. Lydia remembered the sensation of someone pulling on her hair; he insisted he had only touched, perhaps even caressed it gently. In either case, for him, the connection was already irresistible.

The bond began to develop when Lydia unexpectedly turned to ask his opinion as to how she might deliver an innocuous opening line in a class performance. “I wonder if I could ask your advice, Mr. Heston?” she queried. “In this production of ‘The Madras House’ which our class is doing, I have an entrance line that is bothering me. I have to come in and say, ‘My frog is dead.’ Now, how do you think I should say that line?”⁴¹

Heston was in the half of the class preparing for another play at the same time, but he did not let this stymie him. “For reasons I cannot explain, she felt I might be able to advise her on this,” he recalled. “And I offered—there are four possible

38 “This is Your Life transcript,” 11, HL; Larry Wolters, “TV Leads to Heston’s Moses Role,” Scrapbooks, Heston Papers, HL; Ruth Waterbury, “Charlton Loves Lydia,” *Photoplay* (June 1953), 60, Heston Clipping Files, HL.

39 Ibid.; HARDtalk, BBC Interview with Tim Sebastian, 1997, part 3, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkhLjPnjyYQ, accessed June 11, 2018.

40 Helen Limke, “Bringing Up Baby,” *Photoplay* (Oct. 1955), 113.

41 Waterbury, “Charlton Loves Lydia,” 100.

readings, of course.”⁴² He added, “I wanted to come up with a shattering reading for Miss Clarke,” hoping to impress her with his sincerity and creativity while also taking advantage of the chance to further their acquaintance. “But I did recognize a golden opportunity when I saw it, and I suggested to Miss Clarke that we go to the malt shop and discuss the matter over a cup of coffee.”

Elated when she agreed, he realized that her consent created another challenge: He had no money. “Then, as she accepted,” he noted, “I was in another panic, and I had to make an excuse to leave her for a moment, while I negotiated the delicate matter of a loan of a dime from another student.” Thus, Charlton’s pursuit of Lydia began in earnest, although she largely rebuffed him for a time. Her own desires for a career did not involve sacrificing those plans for even the most appealing union, and this one did not seem to hold much promise. “The truth is,” Lydia observed of her determined suitor, “I thought Chuck was impossible.” Most importantly, it also proved “impossible” for her to avoid him indefinitely. Lydia had not been too impressed at the outset. “Oh I thought he was quite an arrogant young man at first,” she recalled, “but he did grow on me.”⁴³

Describing the couple’s relationship in 1953, writer Ruth Waterbury noted the significance of the initial encounter and the budding romance. “Shy, awkward, insecure, there couldn’t have been any better corrective for him in college than to fall in love with a spirited, brainy girl like Lydia Clarke.” Yet, her “spirited” character could not dim his ardor. “When I first dated Lydia,” Heston explained, “she had a spitfire temper.” Indeed, these emotions complemented their more cerebral interactions. “She forced him to think,” Waterbury posited, “because she argued every point with him.”⁴⁴

Heston’s prospective companion had to overcome many obstacles before their relationship could flourish. “Lydia frankly admits now she thought the big, lanky fellow from Michigan looked as wild as the woods he’d come from.” Undeterred by her hesitations, he kept his focus on establishing a long-term relationship with someone who wanted to be an actor as much as he did. “Chuck persisted,” writer Helen Limke observed. “Lydia resisted. Chuck persisted. They married.”⁴⁵ This progression ensured that Charlton Heston would never be the same.

42 Lydia said the line was “Minnie, my frog is dead.” “This is Your Life transcript,” 15, HL.

43 Waterbury, “Charlton Loves Lydia,” 100; “This is Your Life transcript,” 15, HL.

44 Waterbury, “Charlton Loves Lydia,” 100.

45 Limke, “Bringing Up Baby,” 113.

Other challenges arose, however. In the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States entered the Second World War. As it did for so many others like them, the war intruded on the young couple's future. Two years later, in the middle of his sophomore year, Heston abruptly enlisted in the Army Air Corps. When he was issued jungle fatigues, Heston thought he likely would be deployed to the China-Burma-India Theater. All the while, the soldier hoped romance would blossom before he was sent overseas.

Since he had begun courting Lydia in earnest, Heston's entreaties had proven unsuccessful. This continued to be the case when he headed off to basic training and his initial stateside postings, but an unexpected telegram offered him the prize he had sought: Lydia's hand. The couple married at Grace Methodist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, on March 17, 1944, when they managed to locate a pastor and witnesses who could perform and validate the ceremony.⁴⁶

Wrangling a pass to get married was one thing, but the young soldier realized that imperatives other than his own shaped their immediate future. Fortunately, his theatrical interests proved useful even in the service. For Lydia to have some sense of his current whereabouts, and without revealing vital secrets or running afoul of military censors, he devised an ingenious method of encryption. She would retain one of two identical maps covered with grids; Heston planned to use William Shakespeare's plays as the keys on his copy. He could identify a passage and, using that reference for coordinates, she would know where he was at any given time, if the communications themselves arrived.

Heston also managed to find ways of blending his artistic interests with his service obligations. When asked later if the sketches for which he was becoming known had brought him any income, he noted, "Well, when I was in the army I got involved in a project to do 25 or 30 illustrations for a slide lecture on Macbeth. But, to the best of my memory that's the only money I've ever received for my art and I think that's probably the best way to do it because I am not required to do it well. I just do it to please myself and have to meet no professional standards."⁴⁷

The couple found that some military priorities was useful as well. Stationed for a time at Selfridge Field near Detroit, Charlton and Lydia enjoyed the opportunity to see each other and created the chance for an unexpected reunion of another type. They were preparing to spend a special weekend together that would include a performance of Paul Robeson in *Othello*. In the course of arranging tickets,

⁴⁶ *CHA*, 53.

⁴⁷ "Heston Taped Interview – August 16, 1955," 26, Heston Papers, HL.

Heston thumbed through a phone book and stumbled on a familiar name. “Carter, Russell W.” caught his eye and he stammered to Lydia, “I think I found my father.” She encouraged him to reach out and a quick telephone call turned into a visit between son and daughter-in-law with the estranged father, his new wife, Velda, and their daughter, Katy. Charlton would not lose contact again and Lydia now had additional family to support her during her husband’s military deployment.⁴⁸

By mid-1944, Charlton Heston was still in the United States, although a summons to Seattle portended a transfer to an active front. By way of a commandeered civilian vessel, Heston’s bomber squadron was soon on course for Alaska’s Aleutian Islands. American forces had subdued the Japanese occupiers of outlying Attu and a combined effort compelled the evacuation of Kiska, the two islands invading troops had reached. Sergeant Heston was among the personnel hastening to the region as part of the 77th Bombardment Squadron. Although further Japanese incursion was unlikely, air support might prove useful for other military operations.

The circumstances at the new posting were far from ideal, with often uncertain and dangerous weather, as well as isolation. The men in his squadron adapted themselves as best they could to the climate and conditions, but Heston found that enemy fire would not be his greatest danger. Icy conditions frequently made movement treacherous and when Sergeant Heston raced to reach a plane, he fell beneath an ambulance and awakened in a hospital in a cast. His active service over, the airman returned to support duty at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage as operations in the Pacific wound to a close. In March 1946, he received orders to proceed home to await his discharge from the service. Although the usual military bureaucracy posed a final, exasperating delay, and engine trouble over Canada provided additional drama, Charlton Heston arrived at Great Falls, Montana intact and reentered civilian life.⁴⁹

Heston later said he thought he was going to take part in “Operation Olympic,” the invasion of the Japanese home islands that was expected to produce heavy casualties on both sides. Planned for late 1945, it was rendered unnecessary by the atomic bursts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “If we had to go through that

48 Eliot, *Charlton Heston*, 36-38. Russell had remarried in 1935. Their daughter Katy was six years old when Charlton and Lydia met her in 1941.

49 *CHA*, 56-60; James E. Wise, Jr., and Paul W. Wilderson, III, *Stars in Khaki: Movie Actors in the Army and the Air Services* (Annapolis, MD, 2000), 130-133.

invasion,” he noted to one writer, “I’m not sure I’d be standing here.”⁵⁰ Despite the relatively brief time he spent in uniform, his military service became one of the fundamental pillars upon which he built his future public service and identity.

The other essential pillar was Lydia. The couple had waited a long time and endured many challenges before entering a union that would achieve legendary status among his peers and fans for its longevity. Heston well understood what had drawn him to her but was less sure of why she had finally chosen him. Although there was undoubtedly more to lure her affections, she insisted that one quality attracted her. “Words, Charlie . . . words. I loved the way you talked about things.”⁵¹

His words had forged his most important personal relationship, one that would stamp his professional career with the most significant support system he could ever have imagined. “Charlie’s” and Lydia’s bond extended to the end of his life and bolstered his public persona through a marriage that defied the odds in the glitz and glamor of Hollywood. He often made light of the ingredients for marital success, saying how important it was to be “a superb husband,” or to remember the most important words for sustaining a stable marriage: “I was wrong.” Significantly, he recognized and forthrightly acknowledged that Lydia was the cement of their union.

Later in life, he had an unusual dream in which he seemed to be returning to the days of the Second World War, albeit with service in Europe rather than his actual assignment in the Aleutians. Heston explained his enthusiasm for doing it all again, only improving matters this time. This sentiment reflected the sense of perfectionism that marked all his connections and served as the basic tenet for his life and career. “I’m never content with any of my films,” he explained to one interviewer, but would repeat for others. “I always feel I could do it better if I could do it again.”⁵² The love affair between these two creative and dynamic individuals demonstrated that for all the glitches and obstacles in any relationship, Charlton and Lydia Heston surely could not have done much better for each other. Ever anxious to achieve as close to perfection as he could come in every endeavor, “Charlie” understood that he had reached a pinnacle in this most important arena.

Heston always admitted his shyness, attributing it to the isolation and disruption of his early years. The former came from the same environment that

50 Susan Bickelhaupt, “Before he was Moses,” *Names & Faces*, *BG*, Feb. 13, 1995.

51 Charlton Heston and Jean-Pierre Isbouts, *Charlton Heston's Hollywood: 50 Years in American Film* (New York, 1998), 16.

52 Susan Karlin, “Guest Shot,” *Playboy* (May 1993), 28.

allowed childhood fantasy to flourish and from which he never detached himself. The latter came from the sudden dissolution of his parent's marriage. The Michigan woods were at once a refuge that remained forever real and vital to him, the symbol of a deep, penetrating world through which he traversed with the benefit of his wits and Scots determination. During this formative period, education and performance had become essential lodestones, as was his marriage to Lydia Clarke. Charlton Heston was on his way along a track that could take him, and her, toward a finish line whose heights were as yet unimaginable to either of them.

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