

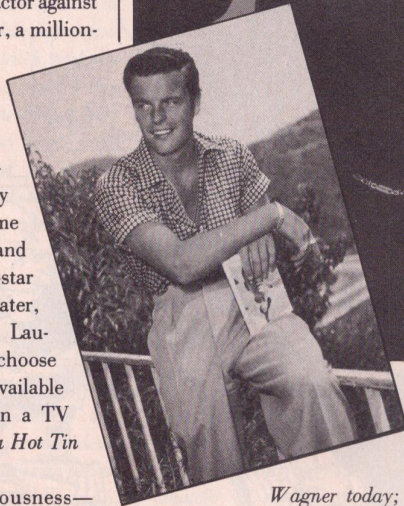
## A HEART TO HEART WITH THE CARY GRANT OF TELEVISION

IN THE EARLY FIFTIES, LONG before he made it as a big TV star, Robert Wagner was a bobby-sox idol, with bodyguards protecting him from grasping fans and more mail than anyone in Hollywood except Marilyn Monroe. In those days, he could project a gorgeous, challenging, Mick Jagger-like rebelliousness so unlike his image today: the tuxedo-clad hipness, the faintly amused, unflinching nonchalance.

In fact, Wagner *was* something of a rebel in his youth. He bounced in and out of nine schools before his high-school graduation, was arrested for a spree of delinquent pranks, and became an actor against the wishes of his father, a millionaire steel magnate who wanted him to take over the family business. As an actor, Wagner showed promise. Spencer Tracy thought he might become the next Cary Grant and handpicked him to co-star in two fifties films. Later, no less an actor than Laurence Olivier would choose him from a wealth of available talent to play Brick in a TV production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

That early rebelliousness—gone. That early promise—never quite realized. In its stead is the consummate smoothy, perfectly balanced and as sleekly tuned as a Rolls-Royce. The king of the Nielsen ratings. Yet beneath the surface, coming through despite the indefatigable charm and style—some disappointment, some edginess, some private depths of pain.

WHEN I MEET WAGNER ON the set of ABC's *Hart to Hart*, his latest hit TV show, he is nothing but charm. Onstage, about to do a scene, he happens to glance my way, and his face brightens so



Wagner today; as bobby-sox idol in the fifties (inset).

nice I wonder what old pal of his is nearby until it becomes obvious he is smiling at me. In a second, he is at my side, welcoming me. "*Playgirl*, right? Henry, right? Are you OK? Here, make yourself at home." Wagner pulls up a director's chair. It happens to be his own, larger than the others, a sort of canvas throne with R.J. embossed on the back. R.J.—that's what everyone calls him.

"You're kidding," I say. "The star's chair?" But Wagner has already turned and is heading back

for the stage. His walk is slow and gingerly, the walk of a veteran ballplayer after a long game. It's the only thing about him that hints of age.

Except for a short, gashlike line between his eyebrows, his fifty-one-year-old face is wrinkle free. It brings to mind Dorian Gray, the Oscar Wilde character who remained forever young on the surface while aging frightfully within.

But Wagner hardly seems to mask any such hidden decay. Indeed, on the *Hart to Hart* set, he is every bit his image. You look at him standing next to co-star Stefanie Powers, her hand on his shoulder, and you can't help but wonder why it looks so right for a beautiful woman's beautiful hand to be there.

You note how distinctive his smallest gestures are: the almost abstracted, utterly relaxed motion of his hand as he fixes his tie; the way he dabs the corner of his eye with the back of his thumb.

He steps onto the stage and becomes Jonathan Hart—my, that was easy! He is rehearsing a scene in a railway dining car, sitting, wineglass in hand, looking suave, mellow, a transcendent success.

"I KNOW, YOU WANT THE interview to be 'in-depth' right? Fine. Go."

Off the set, in his private trailer, Wagner seemed a bit more real, a trifle moody, full of sudden, off-color banter. He eased himself into a seat, lifted his legs, leaned back with a sigh, almost immediately threw his legs down, and called to a guy who happened to be passing by, "Hey, y'old cockbird, how's yer cock?" Nearly everyone passing the open trailer door received a similar salutation.

I wanted to talk to Wagner about Natalie Wood, whom he divorced in 1965 after her highly publicized fling with Warren Beatty. They remarried in 1972. I wanted to ask him about that trauma.

I wanted to ask him about the conflict with his father, the frustrations of his career, and his years spent in analysis. The image of Robert Wagner was not what interested me; it was the complications beneath the surface. But Wagner seemed wary of that word *in-depth*.

Diplomatically, I began by ask-

As *Playgirl* was going to press, tragedy struck the life of Robert Wagner. His wife, actress Natalie Wood, drowned in the early morning hours of November 29, 1981. This article was written before news of her sudden death at age 43.

ing why he'd become an actor.

"I was very rebellious in my teens. I didn't want to do what was planned for me, to follow along in my father's business—country clubs, you know—a planned, safe, WASPish kind of life. I just wanted to be in the picture business.

"I loved movies. I wanted to be Clark Gable. And that caused a lot of friction because my father didn't want me to be an actor. I said, 'Fuck it, that's what I'm gonna do.' I tried to run away to join the merchant marine, to get out of that life. Keeping up a front, a position for the family—I didn't want to be involved in all that."

Has the rift with his family troubled him through the years?

"The one thing I've really tried to do is to live my life and not worry about that shit," Wagner responded, almost harshly. "Try and live it on the best possible terms, without being tortured about it, because everybody walks around with a bit of torture, you know."

"Is the torture what you dealt with in analysis?" I asked.

"One thing I'm not going to do," Wagner quickly replied, "is talk in depth about my analysis."

"No problem. No problem," I said. "You don't have to take me into therapy with you. But I hope you will talk about hard times, your divorce—"

"I don't want to get into that. I don't want to talk about my marriage and my divorce, all of that. It's too wrenching."

"But that's your life. If you won't talk about your life, what's the point?"

"You're right."

"Will you talk about politics?"

"No."

"Hmmm. This is a problem."

"No, I don't think it's a problem," Wagner lightly countered, "because—we don't have to do the interview. In fact, I don't think we ought to because I don't want to reveal all that stuff. I don't want to go into all that. So I think maybe what we ought to do is pass on this."

Wagner was hardly upset. He smiled pleasantly, stood up, cried out to a passing group—"Hey, bring those women in here and have them take their clothes off"—and then telephoned his press agent and canceled our talk.

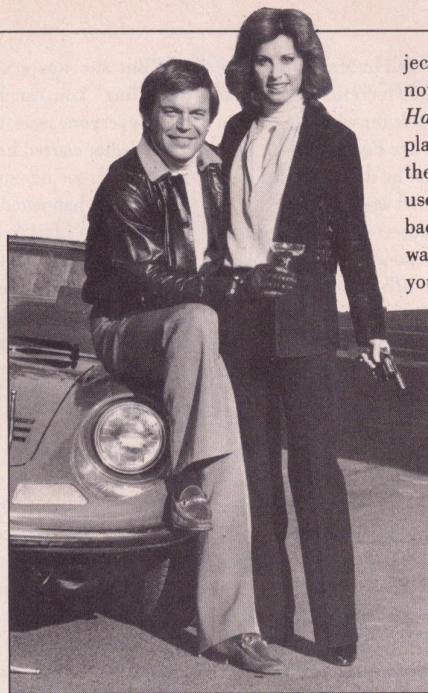
TO ALL APPEARANCES, WAGNER'S life has been a charmed one, but you have to wonder whether he ever finds his success as a TV superstar at all bittersweet. The kid who wanted no part of his parents' "planned, safe, WASPish sort of life" once had higher ambitions. He wanted to be an actor, an artist. He wanted to move and stir people. Born in 1930 in Detroit, he grew up in Beverly Hills across the street from the Bel Air Country Club, where he caddied for and idolized Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Fred Astaire, and Gary Cooper, all the great, subtle smoothies of the



time. Later, he went to New York and saw his first play, the original Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman* with Lee J. Cobb in the lead.

Wagner and I talked about that experience during

With Natalie Wood in '57; with daughter, Natasha.



With *Hart to Hart* co-star Stefanie Powers.

a second interview after I'd agreed to steer clear of sensitive areas. "I was sitting in the theater, and I was crying," he told me. "I didn't know what was happening with me. It was kind of—uncontrollable, you know what I'm saying? I said to myself, my God, that's what actors do, they do that to people all the time, right? They create that moment night after night for people who come to the theater. Jesus Christ, that's something else! If I could do that, be a part of that, what a privilege it would be! What a great, wonderful world that would be!"

Wagner figured he could do it. He didn't know anything about acting, but he had been popular in school.

"I thought you could learn it, you know, like you learn to play golf. Jesus Christ, I was just off the boat, but I didn't give a goddamn because I had this tremendous enthusiasm. I was dying to be a part of movies. As a kid I used to jump over a wall at Fox [the same studio where *Hart to Hart* is produced] and watch the people work on Westerns. It was all so exciting, putting music and writing and acting together on the screen. I didn't care that maybe people were going to laugh at me. I was bad in a lot of stuff. Jesus, I was scared. The pro-

jection room where we now run the dailies for *Hart to Hart* is the first place I ever saw myself on the screen [in 1950]. I used to sneak up in the back room to see what I was like. I was so nervous, you can't believe it. Scared to death. Scared to fuckin' death.

"At first I was trying to play out an image of an actor. I was trying to do Gregory Peck, Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, everybody all rolled up into one. I wasn't doing myself, that's for sure. I didn't really know what I was doing. Then in 1952 I did a picture called *With a Song in My Heart*. [Darryl]

Zanuck told me, 'You'll be on the screen for a minute, and it'll be the biggest scene of your life.' He was right. *Voom*, all of a sudden I was a bobby-sox idol getting 30,000 fan letters a month. I was an instant, on thing; and Zanuck kept placing me in pictures where all that could develop.

"Did I enjoy it? Are you kidding? Sure. Why not? Absolutely. It was terrific. I don't think anyone could be too blase about that. I mean, fuck it, how many bobby-sox idols were there? I thought, Jesus, this is great, this is good. This is all I have to do, just keep doing these movies and everything'll be great. Later, I had to really work to get out of that, you know, to get over into something with a little more depth.

"When Tracy got ahold of me he said, 'You know, you've got a chance to go in a very interesting direction.' As a matter of fact, he thought I had a real feel for light comedy. He thought I had a lot of humor and stuff like that. He kept telling me to go to myself all the time, use me, get it down to where it would be me coming through, not someone else, to be very honest and approach the work in a truthful way. Because you don't want to go to somebody else's truth. You want to go to your own."

With Tracy's encouragement

and support, Wagner tried to break out of the pretty-boy mold. In 1959 he refused to appear in an Elvis Presley picture for which he'd been slated. Twentieth-Century Fox President Spyros Skouras told Wagner he'd see to it that he'd never work in Hollywood again.

For years Wagner's career sputtered, even as his work improved. He co-starred with Robert Mitchum in a film called *The Hunters* and later, in 1966, with Paul Newman in *Harper*. He appeared in *The Longest Day* and *The Pink Panther*. After the break-up with Natalie Wood, he went to Europe and landed numerous off-beat roles, some of which turned his Hollywood image inside out. In a 1967 comedy called *How I Spent My Summer Vacation*, he is hilarious as an inept sleuth whose suave togetherness crumbles at every challenge. The role is a perfect spoof of just about everything Wagner would wind up doing on TV.

Television, of course, is what rejuvenated his career. *It Takes a Thief*, Wagner's first series, was one of the hit shows of 1968. Ten years later it was still playing during prime time in the Far East. His next series, *Switch*, also drew high ratings throughout its three-season, mid-seventies run. And *Hart to Hart*, Wagner's current show, has been near or at the top of the Nielsens all season long. It's the number-one show in England and Bangkok, Thailand, too.

Wagner's television work is nothing to be ashamed of. He may not have become, as Tracy predicted, the next Cary Grant of the big screen, but in a way he has become the Cary Grant of TV. Somewhere along the line he developed into an excellent, polished, ironic light comedian. But his very success on the tube narrowed his opportunities for other, more challenging work, which he very much wanted to do.

"I was set to do *Rosemary's Baby*, but I had a tight contract with *Thief*. I wanted to do *The Sting* with Paul Newman very badly. I wanted to do *Butch Cassidy*. I lost it. Lost it. Really wanted that part. But you can't go with hat in hand, that whole number, you know? You just can't, after a while."

OUR SECOND INTERVIEW LASTED THE better part of an afternoon only because Wagner seemed to revel in a state of continual interruption. The Yankees-Oakland play-off game was on, the telephone was on his lap, and, once again, all passing traffic was on call. Since I was forbidden to ask Wagner about Natalie Wood, I decided to ask him about Marilyn Monroe, with whom he did numerous screen tests when they were both contract players at Twentieth-Century Fox.

"Ah, she was great. She was enthusiastic, eager to learn, to read, to find out more, all those marvelous things that one has *at one time in life*. [Wagner fairly spit the words out.] All that precious stuff. And she had humor—which is the only thing that saves your life.

"But she was crushed. This work is very beguiling. You can become consumed by it. And everyone was taking from her, *taking*; that's what caused her to fall into that kind of despair. To see her start and then to see all the things that happened to her—it was like what happened to Elvis in a way.

"One of the things I've really tried to do in my life is to keep some kind of reality going, some kind of outside thing. That's what Gable and all those guys did. They always had an outside life, which enabled them to keep an inner perception about what they were. *Holy shit*, did you see that catch?"

Wagner jumped up and watched a replay of Dave Winfield robbing Oakland of a home run.

"Jesus, look at that. The guy's a monster!"

I asked Wagner about his inner perception of himself as an actor.

"I do the best I can. I feel like I've grown a lot because I didn't come in with much, you know. I've been up at the plate for a long time, though, and swinging at it, and I don't give much of a shit what the critics say.

"Some actors try to push it so hard it becomes unreal. Cary Grant told me to just let it go, let *me* go. I've learned how to lay back a bit. You see it in ballplayers, in all pros, don't you?"

"I'll tell you one thing: Nobody's doing what I'm doing now. I'm the only guy with this style, the whole tongue-in-cheek, comedy-melodrama thing, with the black tie and dinner jacket and G2 airplanes and a beautiful wife.

"And in *love*, that whole trip, which people said would *never* work, because where is the conflict?"

"I said, 'But we're not doing *The Honey-mooners*.' Jonathan Hart loves his wife, and he does his thing with a lot of style. It's a dream, isn't it? People would love to be able to do that."

I asked Wagner if he identifies with his roles.

"Yeah, sure, how the fuck do you think I do it? You can't do all that bullshit all those years and not identify with it. C'mon! Christ. I identified with Alex Mundy [his character] in *Thief* because he was locked into a society that he was totally in control of and also could rebel against, because he had everything in his pocket, in his corner. And he had humor and style.

"Identify with Jonathan Hart because whatever he wants to do he can do, and it's how he does it that makes it exciting. It's not the money and power. It's the circus in his head. Anything not to have boredom, not to succumb to the everyday bullshit of life.

"I identify with that very much because I'm trying to do everything I can to stop boredom. And I'm getting bored sitting here talking about this shit because do you know how many times I've talked about it over twenty-five years? No kidding, now, what do you think? Has Oakland

(Continued on page 97)

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**PEOPLE** (Continued from page 14)  
got a chance?"

As Wagner spoke, Lionel Stander, the croaking butler on *Hart to Hart*, joined us.

"Hey, Lionel, this is Henry. He's doing a piece on me—have I told you about this?—for *Playgirl* magazine."

"*Playgirl*," Stander echoed, his heavy eyes picking up an amused glint.

"Yeah, *Playgirl*, and in the center of *Playgirl*, I am there nude. But they're going to use your cock, because it's been around so long."

"Old established firm," Stander agreed.

Just then a stage assistant appeared to summon Wagner back to work.

"Would you like to have me, uh, enter the stage?" Wagner intoned with mock hauteur.

WHILE HE WAS GONE, LIONEL AND I had a drink of Wagner's ultrasmooth (what else?), 100-proof Russian vodka. Stander, an actor for fifty years, has appeared in forty-eight Broadway plays and countless movies.

"If it wasn't for Wagner," he said, "this show would really be in the toilet. He owns half of *Hart to Hart*, and he fights the producers for whatever quality we have. At least this show attempts to have some charm.

"That's what he sells. Robert Wagner sells charm, which is the most difficult thing to do. Who else is charming? Who else even tries?"

"Of course, it's still empty shit. But in this business, you judge people by the level at which they compromise. He compromises very little. He tries to do the best job he can with the material. That is the highest level of integrity for television—to be a professional."

Wagner was back, easing himself onto a couch and kicking off his shoes.

"I'll say it a hundred times," Stander continued. "It is *easy* to be great when you have Shakespeare, or Brecht, or Shaw, or O'Neill. If you're a fuckin' actor you just relax and it's there. But to go and do each week the sort of shit that he gets and to *still* be charming—it's a triumph of technique and personality."

"God damn, Lionel, this is great," Wagner said with a grin. "You're pumping me up like crazy."

Stander nodded approvingly.

"When you get the shit that he has, and you make it believable and true, *that* is technique, *that* is acting. Did I ever tell you what Herbert Marshall used to say?" Stander asked, looking at Wagner. "Herbert Marshall was the greatest high comedian I ever worked with. He did great things in the theater, but when he was working in some dreck film, he would say: 'You know what I feel like doing this? I feel like I am on a high diving board. I execute a beautiful swan dive—right into a swimming pool full of horse shit.'"

Wagner burst out laughing. He seemed to know what the guy was talking about. ■

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