

Cruising with the Stars

The 2011 Turner Classic Movies Film Cruise

Story by Nick Thomas

Photos by Debby Thomas & Turner Classic Movies

For the past two years, Turner Classic Movies has brought together thousands of classic film fans with their favorite Hollywood legends for TCM's April film festival in Los Angeles. Last December, the TCM execs decided to try something new, and added a Classic Movie Cruise to their schedule of activities. But would a more intimate, self-contained event on water be as successful as the LA Film Festival on land? I was fortunate to be on board TCM's first aquatic movie mission, along with my photographer wife, to interview passengers and the celebrity guests.

Together with the other passengers, we scrambled aboard Sixthman's Celebrity Millennium cruise ship on December 8 as it prepared to set sail from Miami for a four-day round-trip voyage to Cozumel, Mexico, on the 2011 Turner Classic Movies Classic Cruise. Unlike most cruises in the Gulf, it wasn't the warm climate, golden beaches, sparkling blue

waters, exotic restaurants, or shopping that united this dedicated band of some 2,000 travelers; it was the film events and celebrity guests on board.

Like many others on the ship, I had little interest whale or dolphin sightings on this particular voyage—it was definitely a people-watching cruise, and our first celebrity sighting occurred mere moments after setting foot on deck. While waiting in line to proceed through security around 1 p.m., on Thursday, I noticed a motorized scooter pulling up alongside me and inching its way ahead. "Look," my wife said to me, "it's Ernest Borgnine!" He was wearing a baseball cap and glasses, which I used as a somewhat feeble excuse for failing to recognize the Hollywood legend who turned 95 years old in January.

"Everywhere you go now you have to wait," said a very cheerful Borgnine. Then, in his characteristic

booming, gravelly, voice, he added with a broad grin, "except when they want to take your money! See you all aboard!"

With that, Borgnine and his small entourage disappeared into the ship. But, I wondered, would we see him and the other stars—Eva Marie Saint, Tippi Hedren, director Norman Jewison, as well as TCM hosts Robert Osborne and Ben Mankiewicz—during the cruise? Or would they all retire to their cabins, emerging only to fulfill their event obligations to TCM? I would soon have my answer.

Once through security, we headed aft towards our cabin located in the stern—that's the back end of the ship for you landlubbers—where our balcony offered a glorious view of the retreating Miami skyline. Officially incorporated as a city in 1896 with a population of just over 300, Miami has the distinction of being the only major city in the

United States founded by a woman, Julia Tuttle, who was a local citrus grower.

After unpacking, we headed to the dining room for the buffet lunch. We collected some food and moved over to a table beside a partition that separated us from the food line traffic. Not long after, a rather anxious woman sprinted past us and began peering over the partition. She looked back towards her table, calling out in a rather hushed tone: "He's standing in the food line!" Then she disappeared for a few moments, but soon returned walking slowly back to her table while holding her arm in the air. "I'll never wash this hand again!" she proclaimed, obviously quite pleased. The murmurs from the surrounding tables made it clear that the woman had experienced a close encounter of the Robert Osborne kind! After finishing our meal, we got up to leave, weaving our way through the maze of tables and walked right past Eva Marie Saint, quietly eating lunch



Passenger Cicely Hansen who runs Decades of Fashion, a vintage clothing and costume store in San Francisco, poses with Ernie Borgnine. (Photo Debby Thomas)



Tippi Hedren chats with fans at the sail away party. (Photo credit Debby Thomas)

with her husband, television director Jeff Hayden. It was clear from day one that the stars would be out and shining on this inaugural TCM Cruise.

The idea for the cruise originated with Dennis Adamovich, Senior Vice President of Brand Activation at TCM, who was on board and who I caught up with after we set sail. "I was thinking about the idea for our other Turner station, TBS, as a Comedy Cruise," Adamovich told me. "But coming off last year's successful TCM film festival, our fans were asking us if we were planning other events for later in the year. So we redirected our efforts to the Classic Cruise, although I wouldn't rule out a Comedy Cruise in the future. It was a big leap of faith, but we sold out in an incredible 70 days. Even Celebrity [the cruise line] told us they were amazed and that they'd never had a cruise sell out so fast. Bear in mind that at this point, we hadn't even announced what films we would be showing or who the celebrity guests would be, so clearly we have a powerful brand in TCM."

When TCM eventually announced their program of events and guests, only those unable to secure a booking could have been disappointed. TCM had planned a rather demanding schedule of programs for the cruise, so there was something for every classic film fan: numerous movie screenings—many preceded by introductions with the stars of the films—Q&A sessions with all the stars, as well as Robert Osborne and Ben Mankiewicz, a panel discussion with TCM executives, bingo, dancing, and trivia contests.

After boarding, there was a compulsory safety drill at 4 p.m. However, the folks demonstrating safety procedures had to compete for the crowd's attention when Ernest Borgnine came in and was mobbed by well-wishers trying to shake his hand. Had the signal to abandon ship come through then, I suspect many passengers would have preferred to wrap their arms fondly around Ernie, rather than a lifejacket! (And, by

the way, should you ever bump into him; he does indeed prefer to be called Ernie.)

Following the drill was the first communal event—the Sail Away Party by the pool amidships. By 5 o'clock, crowds had gathered around the small stage area and applauded enthusiastically when Robert Osborne was announced. "We're delighted that you are all here and hope you have a great time," said a very relaxed looking Osborne, wearing a light blue jacket and tieless shirt, his white hair blowing in the brisk Gulf breeze. In fact, he had only recently resumed his TCM hosting duties a few weeks earlier after a break of several months. "On behalf of myself and co-host for this event, Ben Mankiewicz, welcome!"

Robert then proceeded to introduce the main guests, Ernest Borgnine, Eva Marie Saint, Tippi Hedren, and Norman Jewison, each being warmly welcomed. With the average age of the four special guests being around 87, it was clear

the crowd appreciated their efforts to join the cruise. Each looked relaxed, healthy, and genuinely pleased to be a part of this special event. Hedren,

the youngster of the group at 81, appeared still stunningly beautiful, wearing a black and white striped "zebra-like" blouse, perhaps a sub-



Shot of stars and TCM reps during the sail away party. Robert and Ben are at back center. Ernie is behind Eva Marie, and Tippi is in black and white stripe top. Jewison is wearing gray cap and dark suit, and Wink is in white shirt. (Photo Credit TCM)



Happy film fans gather around the ship's pool for the Sail Away Party. (Photo credit TCM)

tle nod to her strong support for animal rights; Saint moved jauntily around on stage in a blue blazer and red scarf, clearly enjoying the supportive crowds; Jewison, sporting a gray beard, suit, and baseball cap, also seemed pleased with his reception; and then there was Ernie! Always a fan favorite, Borgnine had abandoned his scooter—needed only to navigate the lengthy distances

between events—and made his way to the crowds at the edges where he shook hands, received hugs, and posed for photos.

After a group cruise photo was taken, we headed back to the restaurant for dinner. As usually happens on cruises, strangers are often thrown together around tables at mealtimes, and on this cruise these banquets



Ernest Borgnine is a sadistic railroad conductor in *Emperor of the North*, seen here with one of his victims, played convincingly by Lee Marvin.



Ernie poses with TCM's Dennis Adamovich (left) and Jeff Gregor. (Photo credit Debby Thomas)

became special events. Since all passengers shared a common interest in classic films, conversations immediately turned to Hollywood, and strangers quickly became friends as they discussed their favorite films and actors, sometimes late into the night. It was quite amazing to watch and be part of it. During our first meal, we sat with a couple from Las Vegas and two ladies from Long Island. After the meal, the conversation carried into the Rendezvous Lounge where veteran game show host Wink Martindale, a surprise guest, presented a movie trivia contest, with questions taken from the popular TCM Classic Movie Trivia book. Calling our team of six “The Dirty Half-Dozen,” we found ourselves no match for the serious movie trivia buffs on board who seem to have memorized the entire book!

Later in the evening, as we wandered the ship, we were drawn to one of the lounges by the sound of piano music. To our surprise and delight, it turned out to be master pianist and story teller Richard Glazier who was in full swing seamlessly blending a recital with fascinating stories of his life, including how his friendships with three legendary figures in American Popular Song—Ira Gershwin, Johnny Green and Hugh Martin—had influenced his career. Although he didn't finish until 1 a.m., Richard hung around talking to passengers and posing for photographs, yet another sign that those who reached out to the celebrities would not be turned away.

When we awoke on Friday morning, the ship had docked in Key West. Naturally, keeping to the theme of the cruise, TCM had a screening of *Key Largo* which we had passed during the night! Like most, we disembarked for a stroll around Key West, then returned for lunch. For this meal, we sat with a man who was traveling with his mother. As we chattered, I noticed a familiar figure walking behind our table and I said to the young man, “Look behind you!” He swung around, reached out, and suddenly grabbed Ernest Borgnine by the arm. He proceeded to compliment

Borgnine on his body of work and career, then said, “There's a question I've always wanted to ask you?” “Sure, go ahead,” Borgnine replied. “Do you think George Reeves was murdered, or did he commit suicide?”

Even the man's mother thought that was an odd question to ask a lunching Ernie Borgnine, and she said so, too! Presumably, the question was prompted by Borgnine's role in *From Here to Eternity* which featured George Reeves in a very small role. Classy as always, Borgnine just said, “You got me there, pal! Enjoy your meal,” and walked on. I mention this only to point out that this was the only fan-gaffe that I witnessed during the entire cruise.

Overall, passengers seemed very respectful of the celebrities' space. A good example was a man from Toronto named Paul, and a huge fan of Tippi Hedren. “*The Birds* is my favorite film,” Paul said at dinner one evening. He told us he had Hedren's name on his license plate and drove a silver convertible, inspired by the car used by “Melanie Daniels” to drive her gift of two love birds up the coast highway to the home of “Mitch Brenner” in *The Birds*. When Paul first learned that Tippi would be on the cruise, he immediately went online to book, “only to be crushed to find out that the cruise was already sold out.” Determined to get aboard, Paul posted a note on Facebook asking if anyone had a cabin to share. “My prayers were answered,” Paul said, when fellow film fans from Indianapolis and New York allowed him a spot in their cabin. After checking in, Paul wrote a request on a clipboard attached to his cabin door: “Please, God, let me get a pic with Tippi!”

“What happened next was beyond my wildest dreams and expectations,” he told me. On the first night of the cruise, Paul and his cabin mates booked dinner for Saturday at the onboard restaurant, The Olympic. The Tippi Angels must have been smiling on Paul because when Saturday evening rolled around, Hedren was seated at a nearby table. “I could actually see

her and hear her lovely, distinctive voice the entire time.” Paul waited until she had finished eating before approaching her table. “Excuse me, Ms. Hedren, sorry for the interruption. I’m Paul from Toronto, Canada, and I am on this ship because of you,” he told her. She responded appreciatively: “Oh, thank you.” Paul continued. “I was ten years old when I first saw you walk into that pet store [in the opening scene from *The Birds*] and I have loved you ever since.” “Oh, how lovely,” Hedren replied.

Then Paul asked if he could introduce her to his dinner companions. “She spent about 20 to 30 minutes chatting with us all and taking pictures and signing autographs. She was a real class act and still a stunningly beautiful woman. The Turner Classic Movies inaugural cruise was a magical experience beyond my wildest dreams and expectations, and I cherish the memories especially on my 50th birthday. It allowed me to cross two items off my [before-I-kick-the-] bucket list—swimming with dolphins and manatees, and meeting Tippi Hedren!”

I have to agree with Paul. When I had the opportunity to sit down and interview Tippi later during the cruise, I found her utterly charming and elegant. She was wearing another stunning outfit, red with black stripes, with a black necklace and scarf, and gold earrings, bracelet and rings. “I’ve been on a number of cruises, but this is the first celebrity cruise,” she said. “I love it, and it’s so nice to meet so many fans.”

Since her first credited role in *The Birds*, in 1963, Hedren has worked consistently in film and television, with several films in development for 2012. She has also taken a lead role in animal activism, and developed a special interest in large cats after a role in *Satan’s Harvest* in 1969, and later founded The Roar Foundation and Shambala Reserve (www.shambala.org). In fact, her passion for animals led her to part ways with one past beau. “He thought that circuses were wonderful with animals in them, and I didn’t!”

Although Hollywood often failed to show compassion for animals—think of the use of trip wires to make horses fall down—Hedren says that the animals in *The Birds* were treated well, thanks to bird handler Ray Berwick. “He was a wonderful bird trainer and cared so much about the animals. He would go to Hitchcock during filming and say, ‘We have to shut down, the birds are tired.’ So of course, I used to ask, ‘Where’s my bird trainer?!’”

She particularly recalls the party scene with the children, and the lengths Berwick would go to keep both the kids and seagulls safe. “He loosely wired the gulls’ bills because they are not nice birds and don’t care what they bite. He trained three gulls to take off from his arm, circle, then dive bomb into the kids, then fly back to his arm. Well, for the party scene, the first and second gulls did what they were supposed to, but the third took off and didn’t come back. So he went to Mr. Hitchcock and said, ‘I’m sorry Hitch, we have to shut down for the afternoon, I have to find that gull or he will die a very painful death from starvation.’ So off he went quietly in a rowboat, amongst the rushes in Bodega Bay where we were filming. And he found the bird! I’ll never forget that. He had such an incredible way with those birds.”

Someone else who has an incredible way about him is Robert Osborne. I had interviewed him several times by phone over the years, the most recent being for a Washington Post story announcing his return to TCM after last summer’s hiatus. But meeting him in person on day two of the cruise confirmed what most of us have long suspected: he really is that kind, soft-spoken, and modest person we all see on screen each week. So it was no surprise that many passengers fondly “stalked” him for a handshake, photograph, or brief conversation during the cruise.

“I’ve only been on one other cruise in my life, and that was years ago to Acapulco, so I’m really enjoying this trip and being around so many film fans,” said Osborne, who seemed comfortable knowing that

passengers would be approaching him. “I love that because it really means they love the channel and love the work that I do. So it just shows their enthusiasm. I’m the one the viewers see and they think I do it all, but TCM is obviously a team effort by many people.”

If there’s one thing that film enthusiasts all enjoy, it’s movie trivia. I don’t know a lot, but I was in possession of one piece of Robert Osborne trivia which seemed to amuse some of my fellow cruisers: “What is the name of the New York apartment building in which Robert Osborne lives?” The answer, which he explained to me, is best told by Osborne himself: “When I was in college, I read a book about Rosalind Russell and in it she t a l k e d

that Leonard Bernstein’s apartments were for sale—he had owned three, one was his composing room, one was his secretary’s, and one was a guest apartment—during the settling of his estate. So I looked at the composing room, which was one floor down from my apartment, and it was just perfect for an office. I bought it, and it turned out to be the room Rosalind Russell would have done her singing audition in!”

Honestly, it’s hard to know where to begin a Robert Osborne interview. The man has met and interviewed just about everyone in the movie business over the past 60 years. But was there someone he desperately wanted to interview but never did? “I got to most of them; but I’d love to have interviewed the



about going to an audition for Leonard Bernstein for a singing role in the Broadway musical *Wonderful Town*. At the time, he lived at a complex called The Osborne. I thought, ‘Wow, a building spelled the same as my name!’ That was kind of cool. So later, the first time I visited New York, I had my photo taken in front of the building under the awning that says ‘The Osborne’. Well, years went by, and I ended up moving to New York and started to look for an apartment to buy. Someone told me of a friend who had an apartment for sale at The Osborne, and when I saw it I realized that was exactly what I wanted, so I bought it. Years later, I decided that I needed more space for an office. One day, after Bernstein died, a notice came in the mail to say

Tippi and her fine feathered friend in Alfred Hitchcock’s classic *The Birds*.

Robert Taylors and Tyrone Powers of the world,” he admitted. “I never met Greta Garbo, and am actually glad because I was afraid if I did, the illusion about her would have been lost. I guess one person I’d love to interview who is still around would be Deanna Durbin. She’s been a recluse since 1947, lives in France and doesn’t even go by Deanna anymore. We’ve corresponded by letters over the years, but I’d love to meet and talk to her.”

What about the most difficult interview? “That was Robert Mitchum,” said Osborne without much hesitation. “We had him do a Private Screenings interview, and at lunchtime he was quite chatty—a great raconteur and talker. But as soon as we went on camera, he’d clam up! I asked him, ‘When you first met Jane Russell, what was your impression of her?’ He said, ‘Don’t remember.’ I asked ‘Which of your movies would be the best representative of your work?’ He answered, ‘You decide.’ He was deliberately being a scoundrel! But the one interview that was the most unpleasant would be Jerry Lewis.” He didn’t elaborate, and didn’t really need to.

Anyone who watches Osborne introduce films has probably heard him say a hundred times: “This is

one of my favorite films....” But if he was stranded on a desert island with only one film to watch over and over again, which would he choose? “Probably *Singin’ in the Rain*,” he said after a brief pause. “Because the music would cheer me up, with one great number after another, it’s funny, and wonderfully entertaining.”

Not surprisingly, with his connection to film, Osborne is also a bit of a collector. “I collect movie posters, but now really have pretty much everything I want.” He also has some interesting memorabilia. “I also have an Oscar! I can’t say which one, but it was pre-1949 and was awarded to an art director. In *All about Eve*, statuettes for the then fictional award, the Sarah Siddons Award, were given to Bette Davis, Celeste Holm, and Anne Baxter in the film. When the filming was over, writer and director Joseph L. Mankiewicz gave each actress one of the statuettes. When she died, Bette Davis left hers to me.”

The name Mankiewicz, of course, is often heard through the corridors of TCM, as well as on screen. But these days it’s more likely to be in reference to Ben, rather than his famous Uncle Joe, or screenwriter Grandfather Herman. Ben was also

on the cruise and was not shy about discussing the comparisons people make between him and Osborne. “I know some people call me the weekend Robert Osborne, but talk about big shoes to be compared to! I’m not preparing to be a Robert Osborne because I’d fail! He’s just signed a three-year contract, so he’s not going anywhere, which is awesome.”

While Robert is well-known for his amazing memory, Ben says he has pretty good recall too, but has stopped trying to feel like he has to be an encyclopedia. “The Internet has not been kind to my memory—I no longer have to know the 1965 best picture Oscar nominations off the top of my head when I can find them on the computer in 25 seconds! I just try to understand things better. For instance, Norman Jewison is one of my favorite directors and it was great to have a conversation with him on the cruise. I just read his book, but didn’t write down pages of notes as I would have done in the past. I just read the book, enjoyed it, and what I needed to know came back during the interview.” Of his many interviews, Mankiewicz says his conversation with Angie Dickinson before a screening of *Rio Bravo* is a favorite. “Angie is unbelievable. She’s 80, still furiously sexy, funny, and just knows how to work a crowd.”

Delighting a crowd is another gift Robert Osborne can add to his list of talents. On Friday afternoon, he took questions from the audience in a packed Comos Lounge, pleasing many with his knowledgeable and amusing answers. Unfortunately, the room was unable to accommodate all who wanted to attend, and some became rather miffed. “This is the second program we tried to get into that was full,” one lady told a staff member as she was turned away. The young man from Sixthman was very understanding and pointed out that everyone had been told when they purchased their cruise tickets that events would fill quickly. “Besides,” he patiently explained, “there’s not a boat anywhere that has a room to accommodate 2,000 people.” Afterwards, when Osborne learned that so many people had been turned

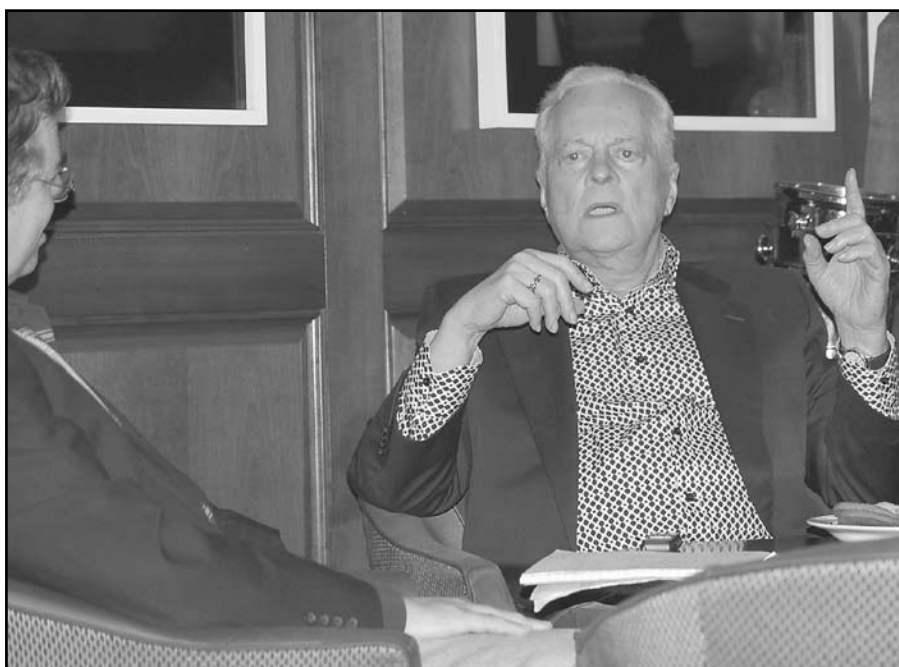


Ocean breezes buffet TCM’s Robert Osborne as he welcomes the guests on stage. (Photo credit Debby Thomas)

away from the event, he offered to do another Q&A session in the much larger Celebrity Theater on Sunday evening. The same problem was experienced with “A Conversation with Ernest Borgnine.” He, too, gave a second presentation in the larger venue on Saturday.

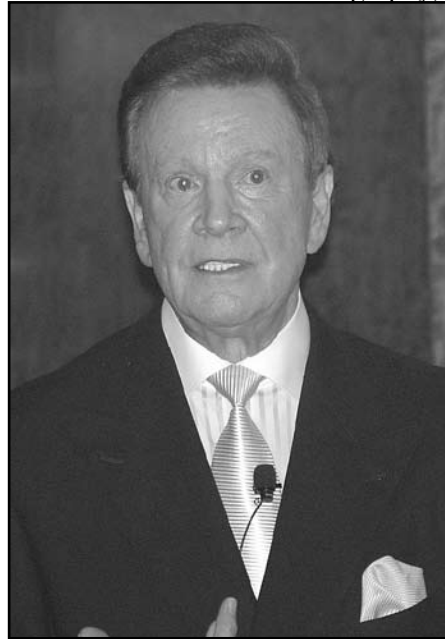
If there isn’t an expression “Cruises make for strange dinner fellows” there should be, because a remarkable coincidence occurred during our Friday evening meal. A few months before the cruise, I was reading about a new book that dealt with one of my favorite actors, Clifton Webb. An acerbic actor who counted Harpo Marx, Cole Porter, and Robert Wagner among his close friends, Webb had started writing his autobiography in 1959, but abandoned the project and died (1966) before it could be completed. A university professor, I read, had used Webb’s notes to complete the biography. And so it was during our meal, that the gentleman seated at our table turned out to be author David L. Smith, who had completed that very same book I had been reading about: “Sitting Pretty: The Life and Times of Clifton Webb.”

“Webb had no heirs and left his estate to his secretary Helen Matthews,” said Smith. “When she died, it all went to her sister who stored the materials in her basement



The author sits down with Robert for a lively onboard interview with the popular TCM host. (Photo credit Debby Thomas)

for ten years. It was all later purchased by a collector, John Nelyon, who I found when he began selling some items on eBay. When I contacted him, he told me he owned Webb's entire estate. So I asked if he had the unfinished autobiography,



Wink Martindale hosts trivia contest.
(Photo credit Debby Thomas)

and he did. I told him I was writing a biography on Webb and asked if I could see what Webb had written. He told me, 'You can use anything you want!'"

Before Smith had a chance to meet with Nelyon, all communication from the collector suddenly stopped—Nelyon had died suddenly of a heart attack. Months later, the man's widow, Betsy, eventually gave Smith access to the material. "I used the six chapters that Webb wrote, and added seven additional chapters using his notes and my research. I dedicated the book to John and Betsy Nelyon because without them there would have been no book."

After listening to David recounting the genesis of his book over dinner, we concluded Friday evening with one more TCM event—a screening of *Casablanca*. Just before the showing, a dapper gentleman walked on stage in a white jacket, black tie and hat, and began introducing the film. Of course, it wasn't Rick Blaine—it was Robert

Osborne!

On Saturday, day three, we arrived in Cozumel and most passengers went off for the day on various excursions. Once again, my wife and I just strolled around the nearby streets for a few hours. I had little interest in the trinkets the local vendors were peddling. My wife, however, didn't share my disdain for touristy knick-knacks, especially when they came in the form of jewelry. After several purchases were lovingly made, my wallet and I returned to the safety of the ship.

Saturday was also dance day, and ballroom dancing lessons were offered, while in the evening the Big Band Swing Party was held. Two young dancers were announced as "special surprise guests," and by the crowd's response, seemed to be recognized. Proving that I truly am stuck in the world of classic film and television, I had no earthly idea who these people were. Seems there's a popular show around these days called *Dancing with the Stars*. Perhaps you've heard of it? As for the dancers, they were Chelsie Hightower and Louis Van Amstel, but again those names meant nothing to me. Had they been called Fred and Ginger, or Marge and Gower, I might have paid more attention. However, not to detract from their talents, the two certainly displayed impressive moves. Passengers were especially thrilled when Ernie and Eva Marie suddenly appeared briefly on stage to display their own cool, albeit slower, moves with the youngsters! Tippi Hedren also made

it to the dance floor in one of the lounges, much to the enjoyment of the crowd.

Day four was Sunday, and we'd been rather spoiled by the smooth seas sailing down to Mexico. That all changed Saturday evening. While it wasn't excessively rough, it was enough to send quite a few passengers from the dining room to the bathroom throughout Sunday and first-time cruisers who had, been scoffing at our dramamine patches, quickly changed their tune. But despite the rougher weather as we headed back to Miami, I was still anticipating our interview and photo session with Ernest Borgnine. Celebrities sometimes get criticized for being self-absorbed, but that's not a label you could pin on Borgnine. Although he was clearly a showman and enjoyed interacting with fans, their admiration for him seemed a little overwhelming. "Oh my goodness, I couldn't have been treated better by the TCM folks or fans. I don't know why, because I certainly don't deserve it," he said humbly. I naturally suggested he was being too modest. "I don't see it that way," he said. "To me, acting is just a job I do for a living. I'm just a working stiff and want to get along with everyone. I don't go in for all that adulation stuff. It's one thing to like an actor, but the kind of love people have shown me is amazing. I just want to be one of the gang on the ship."

At the same time, Borgnine admitted that recognition is also a measure of an actor's success. He recounted an earlier time in his life as a struggling young actor when he emerged from a LA restaurant one day, only to wonder if people would ever recognize him. He got his answer, he says, years later on a trip to Easter Island. "I put my head up out of the boat to look for the statues on the island and a woman on the dock nearby saw me. 'Oh my God, Ernest Borgnine!' she yelled. And I said to myself, 'You've made it!'"

Of course, Borgnine "made it" many decades ago now, and recounted stories from his career



Photographer Debby Thomas poses with
TCM Host Ben Mankiewicz.

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when Osborne interviewed him on the cruise, as well as when the pair introduced two Borgnine films, *Emperor of the North* and *The Poseidon Adventure* (the irony of the latter being shown on a cruise ship caused no end of chuckling!). While some of Borgnine's tales had been told previously in his bestselling 2008 autobiography, "Ernie," it hardly mattered to audience members who hung on every word as they were thrilled just to be seated a few feet away from one of their favorite film personalities.

Less well known than his famous sea disaster film, 1973's *Emperor of the North* features Borgnine as a vicious railroad man. "Sam Peckinpah was supposed to be the director, but they took it away from him and gave it to Bob Aldrich. I finished *The Poseidon Adventure* on a Friday night, and Saturday went up to Portland, Oregon, and Sunday met up with Bob. He said, 'Ernie, have you ever worked on trains before?' I said 'No Sir.' 'Don't forget,' he told me, 'you never look down when running on the top of a train.'" Borgnine says he wasn't too thrilled at this advice and decided to mimic a close actor friend with a wonky eye. "I said this man [Aldrich] is mad! Not look down? So I pulled a Jack Elam—I kept one eye down on the ground and one eye ahead!"

During my interview with Borgnine, I also wanted to look ahead to his latest feature, *The Man Who Shook the Hand of Vicente Fernandez*, to be released in 2012. "The young man who wrote and directed the film, Elia Petridis—I think this was only his first or second picture—wrote me a lovely letter and said he had a role that only I could do. Well, that got me interested and I read the script. I play a man who is bitter about never becoming famous and who ends up in an assisted living home, and Barry Corbin is my protagonist who runs the place with an iron fist. When it's learned that I once shook the hand of Vicente Fernandez, who is a real Mexican singer, the employees treat me like a celebrity. It's a little complicated, but I think we've got a nice little picture coming out."

In the past decade alone, Borgnine has appeared in almost 30 films and many TV shows, a number that could be considered a career for some actors. Since he has worked with so many young actors in recent years, I wondered how they reacted to a veteran of his status on the set. "Some act a little amazed initially, kind of like I did when I first worked with people like Spencer Tracy, but then they settle down once the work begins," he explained. "But I tell you, I do have one problem with

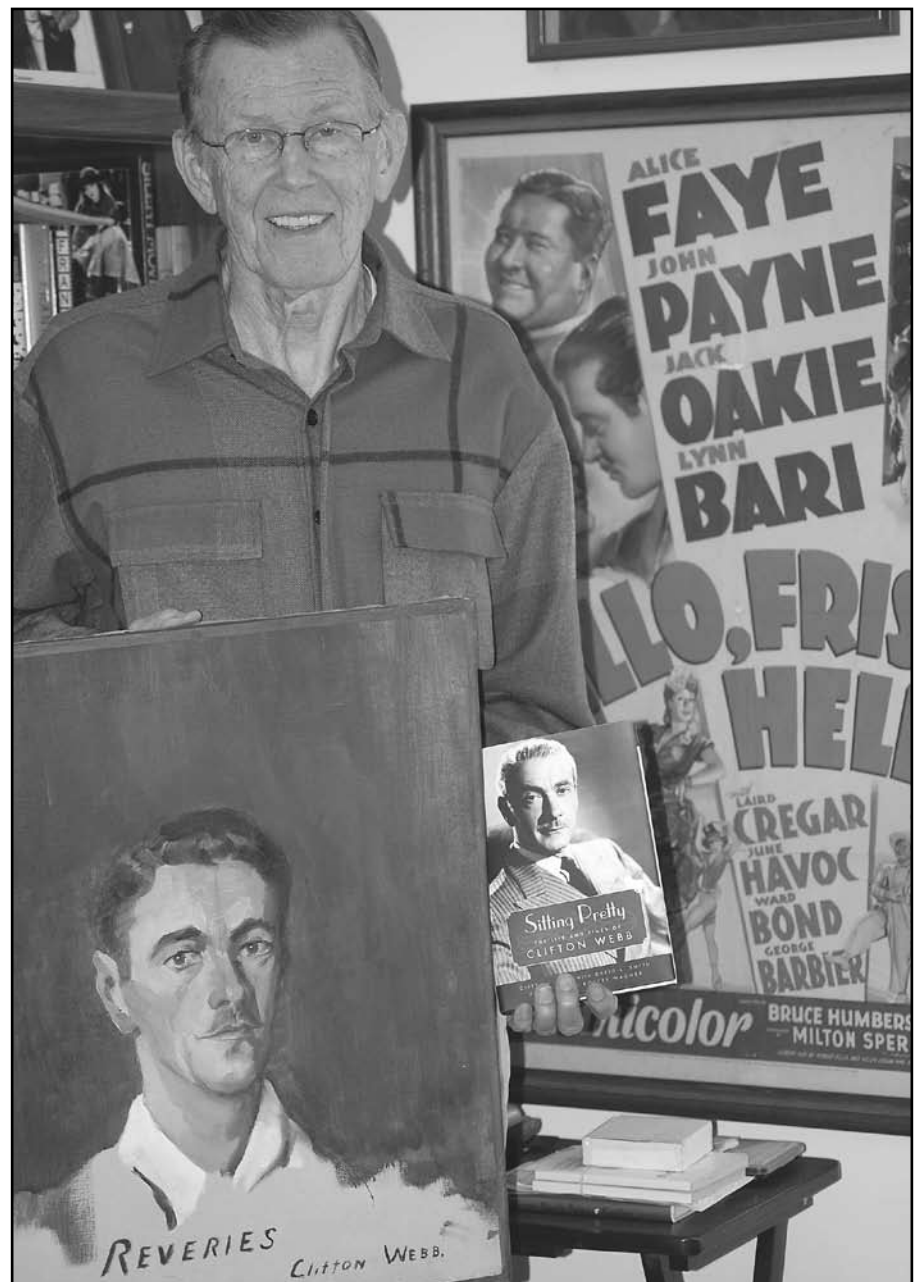
today's actors—they don't speak clearly, and break out in this Marlon Brando style of mumbling. That's because they expect everything will be redone in the dubbing room later. But that's not for me. I say do it right now, because that's what comes from the heart."

Also coming from Borgnine's heart is his love and support for the military (Borgnine served in the U.S. Navy for ten years). Fellow navy veteran and personal friend Kathi Dugan has known Borgnine for 30 years and she accompanied him on the cruise. "This type of venue really

energizes him," she told me as we were preparing to take photos. "If you think these film fans adore him, you should see how the military respond. I've traveled the world with him as he visited military bases and hospitals, and he can't leave without seeing everyone. And it's multigenerational, too. We were in Norfolk for a change of commands on a huge destroyer and were walking down the pier during prom night. The young guys in their tuxes walked by and whispered to each other, 'It's Ernie Borgnine!' He just loves those guys and they love him!"



Passengers greet Ernest Borgnine on the first evening of the TCM Classic Cruise. (Photo Credit Debby Thomas)



Author David Smith holds a copy of his Clifton Webb book and the Webb self-portrait Smith owns. Photo in Smith's home office in Indianapolis.

Like the other stars, Borgnine agreed to pose for some photographs. So we took them, and as we left, a woman decked out in a 1950's outfit caught my eye. So I asked her, "Would you like to pose for a photo with Ernest Borgnine?" She agreed, and we raced back to catch Ernie for one last photo before he headed off to the next event. "Oh, I love it," Borgnine exclaimed when he saw her outfit. "I met you last night and you were dressed in the '30s!" he said to her. It turned out the woman was Cicely Hansen who runs Decades of Fashion, a vintage clothing and costume store in San Francisco. In fact, she's well-known on the classic film festival circuit and many of the passengers commented about her during the cruise and her frequently changing attire which she often chose to match with the era of the film she was attending. I was told that for a previous TCM Los Angeles film festival, she had taken a dozen trunks filled with clothes in order to make her many wardrobe changes!

There were plenty of activities scheduled for Sunday. A much anticipated event was the appearance of both Eva Marie Saint and Tippi Hedren being introduced by Osborne as "The Hitchcock Blondes." Eva

Marie was in good form, as evident by her playful sense of humor. "If you look at the Hitchcock catalog," Osborne began, "Ingrid Bergman [*Notorious*] was not a blonde, Teresa Wright [*Shadow of a Doubt*] was not a blonde, Tallulah Bankhead [*Lifeboat*] was not a blonde" "So why are we here?" quipped Saint, to the laughter of the audience.

Appreciating the humor, Osborne wondered if the general belief that Hitchcock favored blondes was just a myth. Eva Marie wasn't sure, but Tippi suggested that blondes have both an innocence and a sense of mystery about them, which she thought might have appealed to Hitchcock. Eva Marie's sense of humor was also apparent when I interviewed her and she talked about Osborne. "I call him the Rock Star of the classic movie world! I love my husband of 60 years, then Robert Osborne!" Saint has admired Osborne for years, although she said they only met for the first time at a recent TCM Film Festival in Los Angeles. "Fans always ask me, 'What was Marlon Brando really like?' or 'What was it like to kiss Gary Grant?' But now, they also ask, 'What's it like to be hugged by Robert Osborne?'"

The Hitchcock theme continued on Sunday night with a Hitchcock trivia contest. While some questions were easy—What is the only Hitchcock film Tallulah Bankhead starred in?—others were more challenging—What is the tune Cary Grant whistles in the shower scene in *North by Northwest*? Our team did much better this time around, but was still outclassed by the others.

The final day of the cruise, Monday, was a short, uneventful one, and we were off the boat and on our way home by 10 a.m. Passengers had come from all fifty states, as well as Canada and Europe, so getting to Miami for the cruise was no small effort for some. To illustrate how determined some passengers were, let me conclude with the story of a Florida woman, in her eighties, and named Betty. A life-long film fan, Betty lives in Sarasota and did not want to make the 220-mile drive to Miami. According to Betty, her travel agent hired a limousine to drive her. She had arranged to be picked up outside a convenience store near her home, where she waited ... and waited ... and waited. Four hours later, after standing the whole time and her legs swelling, Betty felt she had no other option other than to hire a taxi to drive her from Sarasota to Miami at an additional cost of \$500! Now that's one determined classic

film fan!

Although her legs hurt throughout the cruise, Betty enjoyed the programs and guests. Like her, and so many others, I would certainly classify the first TCM Classic Cruise a success and hope that future cruises become a reality, too. I asked several TCM representatives about this possibility and they acknowledged that the positive feedback from the passengers was already causing them to give serious consideration to future cruises. Certainly there were some small glitches, but these could be addressed easily in the future. I also found passengers were eager to speculate on who would make ideal celebrity guests on a future cruise. Jane Powell, star of *Luxury Liner* (1948), was a popular choice. So too was June Lockhart, especially with her acting heritage and parents, Gene and Kathleen. Topping the wish list was Debbie Reynolds. With her outgoing personality, and extensive Hollywood knowledge and experience, Debbie would be ideal. Besides, who wouldn't want the "Unsinkable Molly Brown" on their cruise?

Nick Thomas is author of the recently released book, "Raised by the Stars: Interviews with 29 Children of Hollywood Actors" and can be reached through his web site www.raisedbythestars.com



Robert with Eva Marie (right) and her husband, director Jeffrey Hayden, during the sail away party. (Photo credit Debby Thomas)



Fans gather around celebrities and TCM staff at the Sail Away Party. (Debby Thomas)