



private lives

Tony Curtis

Still likes it

hot

With a naughty smile and oodles of charm, one of the original bad boys of Hollywood, Tony Curtis, is still irrepressibly himself as he reminisces about his colourful past – including his *Some Like It Hot* co-star, Marilyn Monroe.



If you pride yourself on political correctness, read on at your own risk. You may well be offended by a 76-year-old laughing – unrepentantly – about his fabled exploits in Hollywood. And using the kind of salty language that would have given his very proper, domineering mother instant heart failure. So if you're put off by a shamelessly naughty man telling it like it was, you better turn the page.

If you do, however, you'd miss all the fun, because this 76-year-old is Tony Curtis, and I have never met a man of any age with a more lascivious twinkle in his eyes. He couldn't care less what others think of him, and his frankness borders on the startling, especially in front of his past studio executives, who alternated between cringing and turning various shades of puce.

Tony was in town to promote the special edition DVD and VHS release of the 1959 classic *Some Like It Hot* (due out on October 31). And promote it he did.

Usually, interviewing anyone from Hollywood means a deadening 20 minutes with an over-hyped "star" who has nothing to say and publicists who constantly prevent them from saying even that. Tony, on the other hand, regaled us for hours with stories filled with such humour and self-deprecation that no one could take offence. Instead, I was riveted.

Tony is among the last of a dying breed, literally, as most of his contemporaries are no longer with us. Yet he remains unabashedly a movie star who calls a man a guy, and a woman a doll. And if the doll were one of his many wives or any of the countless starlets he happily admits to bedding, he no doubt called her something else.

I knew I was in for a wild ride when Tony sauntered into the posh hotel suite on a beautiful spring day. He was wearing a transparent white shirt (revealing the fact that his chest is still powerful) and white ►

Left and above: Tony Curtis, 34, and Marilyn Monroe, 33, on the set of *Some Like it Hot*, in 1959. They had dated in the late 1940s, but Tony says that by the time they worked together on this film "something had happened to Marilyn" and he didn't think that she would survive to do another film.



Above: Tony and Jack Lemmon in costume for *Some Like it Hot*. Both actors loved making the 1959 comedy. Right: Tony and his first wife, Janet Leigh, in 1955, pose in the family living room with Tony's parents, Emanuel and Helen Schwartz.



"My wife is so sweet to me, she lets me have girlfriends ... so I don't have to only hang out with the guys."

shorts (yes, his legs are still muscular), and he carried himself with dignity.

And then he opened his mouth. That thick Bronx accent hasn't changed a bit. He was rightly teased when, in one of his early films, *Son of Ali Baba*, he uttered the immortal line: "Yondah is de castle of my fadduh." He looked like a sheik, but he sure didn't sound like one. Tony didn't care. He laughed all the way to the bank.

Ask him to do his even more infamous Cary Grant imitation, which was sprung on unsuspecting audiences in *Some Like It Hot*, though, and it's letter perfect. That's because Tony, in his heyday, could skilfully combine a tough-guy swagger with a real sweetness. Unless he was playing bad to the bone, such as his role as the press agent from hell in *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) or in his Oscar-nominated turn in *The Defiant Ones* (1958).

Tony learned how to be bad growing up as plain old Bernie Schwartz in a repressive household, the son of devoutly religious Hungarian Jewish immigrants. His father, Emanuel, was a tailor; his mother, Helen, ran the shop; one brother, Julius, was killed by a truck in 1938; and his other brother, Robert, was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

"There was a lot of neuroses, guilt, hoarding, everything-is-a-shame kind of

attitude," he explains, "so for me it was a privilege and a necessity to escape from our tenement house on 62nd Street and First Avenue. When I got outside, I wasn't a Jew or Gentile, I was just a kid running around in the city, but I was free. And that meant a lot to me. But it was still really hard to get over the guilt."

Still desperate to be accepted and assimilated into American culture, Tony served in the Navy in World War II, then landed small parts in the theatre in New York, and was quickly discovered in the prophetically named play *Golden Boy*, and sent out to Hollywood in 1948. He'd spent his childhood sneaking into cinemas and was determined to be a star.

"I was so driven," he says now. "That's what saved me. I was meant for the movies. Tony of the Movies!"

Of course, as a name, "Tony Curtis" has a slightly more melodious ring to it than does "Bernie Schwartz".

"I had always planned to change my name," Tony concedes. "I didn't like the name Schwartz because with what was happening then, with the Jews in the Holocaust, I didn't want anyone to think I was German. Everyone thought I changed it because I didn't want to be a Jew. That kind of thing pissed me off."

In the late 1940s, though, most actors

changed their name or the studios insisted on changing it for them, and the Jewish ones learned how to keep their mouths shut when faced by rampant, yet often subtly submerged, anti-Semitism.

"I never was one of the establishment favourites," Tony says candidly. "I was a wise-ass Jewish kid out of New York, a handsome kid, and a lot of people hated me. I didn't care what they called me – call me names, just call me a job. I didn't revel in my looks, but I didn't push away what came as a result, either. And I didn't go out just to brandish beautiful women. I just wanted to be in the movies."

Blessed with astonishing good looks, with his copious dark hair, flashing blue eyes and even more devastating charisma, Tony Curtis was an instant hit with nearly everyone. Especially with the ladies.

"In those early days, I got a reputation as a womaniser," he says. "What was I gonna be – a maniser?" He fixes his gaze on me and laughs. "I became quite a connoisseur of ladies – and lingerie! Much of my life has been with you darling girls and I have a sense of what it's like to be with a woman, and to be a woman. My [current] wife, Jilly, is so sweet to me; she lets me have girlfriends – any girls, her girlfriends – so I don't have to only hang out with the guys. I would never deny



Left: Tony and Janet in 1962, with daughters Jamie Lee, two, and Kelly, five. Below: Jamie Lee and her father in the early '90s together for a publicity shot. "My children now seem alienated from me," Tony says sadly.



myself that. I never did. There was a moment there, when I was growing up, when I wondered if I could be a latent homosexual and would that suddenly pop out one afternoon. I mean, we didn't talk about things like that in those days. And I was good-looking, so whenever I went down the street, when I was a dumb kid of 15 or so, I'd hear 'Yoo-hoo, sweetie!' from men and from women. Oh God, it scared the hell out of me!"

Trust me, he soon got over that. "I had a girl in a car once – I used to own an old limousine that you took to funerals – and she was under contract to Universal," he says. "I remember she had a lot of wrinkles on her neck – it looked like a road map. Although she said she was 20, I knew that she was a lot older. She was Spanish and spoke proudly of her heritage.

"So we're in the car one night – in the back seat, necking – and she said, 'Stop! I can't do this without my *duenna* [chaperone]!' And I said, 'Well, let's go to a drugstore and we'll get you some.'" He laughs again. "I thought she meant a condom. She got mad and left in a huff.

"In those days," he goes on, looking a little nostalgic, "all of these girls came up to Hollywood. There was a whole slew of guys in their 40s and 50s, good-looking and debonair, with a little grey in their hair, driving nice cars, who would take them out. There were enough 'little daughters' for all those 'father figures' in that town. These guys had houses and mansions and big hotel suites, but I

couldn't afford them." He laughs again. That situation would not last.

"Producers would bring over all these European beauties and put them under contract for three or four months," he goes on. "Anita Ekberg was the best of all of them. She had the most extraordinary figure – but more than that, her personality was amazing, too. Everybody thought they'd finesse her – but everybody was wrong. She got what she wanted, when she wanted.

"Marilyn never did. Marilyn didn't know how to do that. She just went along and these guys took advantage of her. She wasn't sturdy; she was weak, and there were all those pressures on her." He sighs.

The Marilyn he's talking about is Monroe, of course. "She was fun when we were dating" – they went out when he first moved to Hollywood – "but by the time we worked together in *Some Like It Hot*, something had happened to her."

The making of *Some Like It Hot*, one of the best (if not *the* best) comedies ever made, directed by Billy Wilder, has passed into cinema legend. In it, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon play musicians in Chicago who inadvertently witness a mob murder. In order to save their hides, they disguise themselves as women and join an all-girls band, whose star singer, Sugar, is played by Marilyn Monroe. Much mayhem ensues.

"I understood the picture" – older stars always call movies "pictures" – "from day one," Tony tells me. "If you work in a

film, the material itself speaks to you, quietly. You don't need a whole script; you need a page, and if the director inspires you or implies that he wants a certain flair or touch to the character, that'll tell you what the rest of the picture is going to be like. For *Some Like It Hot*, we never even had a finished script. Billy and Izzy Diamond wrote it as we played it. He watched how Jack and I played each other. We got strapped into the clothes, stepped out and did our characters instantly.

"Jack was the \$4 gambler and I was the \$50 hooker. He came out chewing gum and slapping his ass around like a tramp, and I came out a little more demurely, pursing my lips like Eve Arden.

"We were so in sync, we just picked up from each other. It was fabulous, me and Jack. And Marilyn! We couldn't rehearse because Marilyn couldn't remember any of her lines, but we didn't need to. The scenes were very dynamic and simple; there was nothing complicated in that picture's approach to the love scenes, the energy scenes, the shootings." He smiles. "What makes this picture unique, for me, is that it's not sentimental. There are no fag jokes, no tit jokes, although there ►



Above: Tony with his wife, Jill Vanden Berg, at last year's Vanity Fair Oscars party. He now describes himself as "a connoisseur of ladies – and lingerie!"

certainly could have been. And Marilyn's dress in that song, *I'm Through With Love* ... "He rolls his eyes. "You can't see porno movies with a better pair of knockers!"

One of the most famous anecdotes to come out of the difficult shoot was that Tony had said, "Kissing Marilyn was like kissing Hitler." When I ask him about it, he sighs. "I never said that. Marilyn was so juicy, so plump and ready to go, but she was very troubled. There were a lot of problems with [her then husband] Arthur Miller; she was pregnant; she was sick. They were ready to kick her off. Something

had changed in her, making her at times awkward and clumsy. I could see the huge difference 10 years after we'd gone together. And she was only 32. It was a real tragedy. Especially how used she was," he adds. "When we were shooting, I never thought she'd survive making another picture. And what was so hard for me was that I felt very protective of her, all the way through, even though she drove us crazy."

Which is why he is still incensed that anyone could think he'd insult Marilyn. "How do you do that love scene if you're pissed off with each other?" he asks of the infamous scene where Marilyn is on top of him, trying to convince him of her kissing prowess. "Four days of me having this incredible woman flopping all over me. I had an erection for a week and a half!"

"You can't manufacture that kind of chemistry," he continues. "You wouldn't try. And Billy loved my agony. He loved the idea that this was the first time Marilyn was on the make for someone, in a picture. And he loved it about me because I was doing all the girls in town."

He laughs yet again. "Before we did *Some Like It Hot*, Billy said: 'The only two things Tony Curtis wants are tight pants and top billing.'"

Tony's tight pants would get him into constant trouble, though. "My early years in Hollywood were really nice. The trouble began for me when my parents moved out to California [in 1949], because I was going to support them," he says. "I just said well, this is what I gotta do. There I was working movies, and every 10 minutes on the phone with some psychiatric ward trying to take care of my brother Robert. And I got married too early."

He also married often. His first marriage was in 1951, to actress Janet (*Psycho*) Leigh, and they had two daughters, actress Kelly

Lee, born in 1956, and actress Jamie Lee, in 1958. Janet and Tony divorced in 1962. He married actress Christine Kaufmann in 1963 and they also had two daughters, Alexandra, in 1964, and Allegra, in 1966. Divorced again, in 1968 Tony married model Leslie Allen and they had two sons, Nicholas, in 1971, and Benjamin, in 1973, but that marriage also ended in divorce. Undeterred, Tony married lawyer Lisa Deutsch in 1993, but they were divorced in 1995. He married his current wife, equestrian Jill Vanden Berg, in 1998.

At the end of the 1960s, he went to England to shoot the cult TV series *The Persuaders*, with Roger Moore, and was promptly arrested (and then released) for marijuana possession. Ten years later, he was freebasing cocaine and heroin.

The accumulated effects of his failed marriages and the fact that he didn't always like the movies he was making led Tony to, as he puts it, "experiment" with drugs for about seven months. "It almost killed me," he says. "But I cured my addictions by analysing every gesture and attitude I had. Every little thing that irked me. Was I afraid of growing up as a homosexual? Did the girl really like me or was she just tolerating me because I was a movie star?"

"Then I realised that no one was going to help me. I had a really good friend who put me in a rehab centre. There they took away all my money and put it in a trust, so I couldn't waste it all."

Being locked up cured Tony of his drug demons, but two more short marriages and the death of his son, Nicholas, at 23, in 1994, from a heroin overdose, only brought him continuing pain. I ask Tony about his relationship with his children, and for the first time, his face falls as he confesses quietly that he rarely sees them.

"My mother taught me a very ▶

crusta

A great fresh Australian orange juice.



important lesson," he says after a long minute. "Don't shepherd your children, so I don't. I've supported every one of them; at one point I was making six child-support payments and never missed one."

"But I don't know what they think of me as a father. I'm an extremely happy and gregarious person, and I'm like that with everybody. But my children seem somewhat alienated from me. For what reason I don't know. I really don't want to go into it."

With that in mind, I ask if he has any regrets, and he shakes his head. "I never did anything I was ashamed of," he says, quickly regaining his good humour, "but I am sorry I married so many times. I only got married because I wanted f*****g privileges – and I don't mean this in a degrading way to any of my wives – but I was so busy working. I was a lusty kid and, by the time we were finished for the day at 8 or 9 or 10 o'clock, I'd make a date with some girl, and by the time I could convince her I wasn't a Communist, I had to go back to work in the morning."

It's often difficult for anyone under 60 to remember just how paranoid and all-powerful the studio system was when Tony Curtis arrived in Hollywood.

"Oh, they could crush you down, and quickly," he says, his eyes flashing. "We were all up for grabs, and they used us badly. But movies today have nothing to do with what it meant to be a movie player. Everybody's hiding out, or they go out with their bodyguards. Who cares? Jilly and I go out together and we stop traffic. With no bodyguards, no 'I want to sit in the back'. I want to sit in the front, you know? People come over, I sign autographs. It's fun for me, and for the people who enjoy movies. I'm gonna make it tough for any guy to make it after me."

He throws his hands out. "I have an obligation. Cary Grant gave me the baton and told me to carry on. I have a beautiful picture of him I took from the RKO office for him to sign, and he wrote: 'To Tony Curtis. You will be an enduring and indeed a pleasant and excellent addition to the streetcar called success.' And then he explained that Hollywood success meant to look at who's getting off that streetcar, as well as look at who's getting on."

"Cary Grant was the greatest. When I was starting out, he and Clark Gable were so good to me. I told Cary that from watching him in pictures, I learned how to escort a lady into a club, to sit down, order a drink, light a cigarette. So when I got to Hollywood, I could help all the ladies out of my car! Hell, man, where are you going to learn that now?" He laughs heartily, then stops. "There isn't anybody on the screen today who's an elegant, snappy, good-looking guy who knows how to handle dialogue with a girl."

Once movie work started to slow down, Tony became an accomplished painter – you can buy his art over the Internet – and writer. He seems genuinely gaga over his sixth wife, Jilly, who is more than 40 years his junior. They recently moved to Las Vegas. I asked if it was a shock, leaving Los Angeles after so long.

"There isn't any Hollywood any more. The traffic is lousy, people are rude and it's a tough town to live in. I have no value there any more," he says with candour.

"That's the nature of the profession. One of these days some picture will come along and I'll do it and do a good job on it, but it won't be what it was then. I worked a lot; I made three or four pictures a year. Producer Lew Wasserman told me that if I wanted to be a big movie star, I had to buckle down for 10 years and do at least

three pictures a year. Which is what I did." That meant that he missed out on plum roles, but so did all the other actors vying for the same parts.

"I wanted to do *The Hustler* [which starred Paul Newman] but couldn't get loose from Universal. Brando was going to do *The Defiant Ones*, but wasn't available. My joke was when they offered it to Kirk [Douglas] he wanted to play both parts, and Marlon wanted to play the black guy."

Sometimes, though, Tony ended up with a job that sounded like a dream and rapidly turned tricky. "I was supposed to do two weeks on *Spartacus* and it turned into six months. Jean Simmons and I are sitting in our camp chairs on the back lot. There's Kirk [Douglas] on his horse, and 800 slaves. It's hot and dusty and we want to go home. I said to Jean, 'Who do you have to f**k to get off this movie?' " His grin is disarming. "Usually, people are so desperate to get hired, the line is: 'Who do you have to f**k to get on this movie?'"

Tony Curtis isn't all anecdotes. One day, on a trip to Budapest, he saw an old synagogue, and realised it was the very one his father used to talk about.

"The Germans were saving it for after the war, so it could be a museum of what they killed off," Tony explains, "so it was never bombed. It was in total disrepair. So I formed the Emanuel Foundation, named for my father, to renovate it. I created a stainless steel tree, where for 50 bucks you could buy a leaf and put your name on it. Now it's bursting with flowers." He beams proudly. "That means a lot to me."

So go ahead and think of Tony Curtis as an unrepentant old reprobate, if you want. I prefer to think of him as one of the most entertaining actors who ever lived. Long may he shine.

W
– KAREN MOLINE

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