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LAST WORD

By Terry Runté

● *Flipper became a joke in the Hollywood community, reduced to pathetic appearances on The Merv Griffin Show, where he performed tricks from his earlier days as a big television star.* ●

They called him Flipper. Flipper—faster than lightning. No one, you see, was smarter than he. He was a young, gifted bottle-nosed dolphin with a star on his door and his face on every magazine cover in the country. He had it all—a luxury sea pen in Corona del Mar, a stable of nubile girl dolphins who squealed at his every move. He even had a recording contract. He lived in a world full of wonder. Now, at age 25, he's just another has-been animal actor.

"Sure, I'm bitter. I'll admit it," he told me recently at The Glass Bottom Boat Hotel, where he's wrapping up a tour of his one-dolphin show "Orca." Critics have lambasted Flipper for his performance as the legendary killer whale. Although he put on half a ton by using Robert De Niro's *Raging Bull* diet and had his skin dyed black in places, he doesn't have the presence to convincingly portray the famous "Wolf of the Sea." One critic said he looked more like a toothless bull walrus than a killer whale.

"Hollywood directors did this to me," he says, lounging at poolside with his trademark cigar and a bottle of Old Smuggler. "They typecast me from the start. I wasn't content to play a happy-go-lucky dolphin for the rest of my life. But people want to see the same dreck week after week—Flipper stands on his tail, Flipper makes that creepy laughing sound, Flipper bashes an alligator with his nose until he can't see straight. Give me a break already. How about Flipper gets the girl for a change? How about the King of the Sea gets to do a little acting? I had to take control."

"The Flipman bucked the system," says longtime friend Lancelot Link, himself a famous chimp actor who is now a major executive at New Line Cinema. "God, how we admired him. He started out as an extra on *Hello, Down There* and never looked back."

Flipper shocked the entertainment world when he walked out on his hit TV series for a new life in stage and film. He also walked out on his long-standing live-in trainer, Susan P. Mackleberry. Mackleberry never got over the shock.

"When I found him, he was half dead in some fisherman's net," she says. "I nursed him back to health and got him involved with an improvisational hoop-jumping group. Those were good times. Everyone loved him. When he left, he didn't even leave a note. He just grabbed his ball and swam away with it. The next day I read about it in *The Hollywood Reporter* like everyone else."

Flipper signed a multipicture deal to produce and direct three movies, but he made one poor choice after another. His all-dolphin production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has become a camp classic on college circuits, screening alongside such bombs as *Plan Nine from Outer Space*. Rumors

persist that he turned down the Burt Lancaster role in *The Swimmer*, a part that many still believe was written with Flipper in mind.

Meanwhile, his personal life deteriorated. Gentle Ben, the lovable TV grizzly, remembers Flipper's legendary temper. "He obviously had a drinking problem—and there's nothing more pathetic than a bottle-nose hitting the bottle. One night at a yacht party we noticed this paparazzo swimming around the boat. Well, Flipper flipped. He bashed the poor guy with his nose until he went belly-up. But that was Flipper—just a little too quick with that nose."

Flipper was found guilty of second-degree manslaughter and sentenced to 60 days in jail, which was scheduled around his film appearances. When he was released from prison, he found he had lost his job and his friends, too.

"He was poison," says horse-actor-turned-producer Fury. "I offered him a part in *Hot Tub Dolphins*, but he was too proud to even audition."

Too scandalous for television and too weird for film, Flipper turned to the stage. Bomb after bomb sent his career spinning wildly out of control. He soon became a joke in the Hollywood community, reduced to pathetic appearances on *The Merv Griffin Show*, halfheartedly performing tricks from his television days.

Now with a disastrous "Orca" as his swan song, Flipper faces premature retirement. "They'll put me out to sea," moans Flipper, sprawled at poolside as the last stub of his cigar burns out. "This stupid killer whale makeup is permanent, you know, so once the real orcas get a load of me I'm as good as dead." A tear wells in his eye, and he lamely tries to wipe it with a wet flipper. A janitor enters and announces it's time for Flipper to leave. For this once-proud superstar, it's time to return to the sea and almost certain death.

As Flipper struggles to open the sea gate with his nose, the phone rings. It's his agent. "Flip, baby, we just signed you to thirteen weeks on prime time. Are you ready for this concept? You and Flip Wilson. Flipper and Flip. He's a wacky cop, you're his sentient sidekick! We're sitting on a gold mine here. Pack your bags, we start shooting Monday!"

Flipper puts his little fin over the mouthpiece. "Do you mind? I'm talking business here. Out, get out! Wait a minute . . . give me a chunk of herring from that bucket. Right, now get out or I'll call security." As I pack my tape recorder, Flipper starts opening and closing his mouth, spraying me with water until I'm drenched. For the moment, at least, Flipper is a celebrity again. **DD**

Terry Runté, a Chicago humor writer, can communicate with others using a complicated language of clicks and squeaks.