



ALLAN GRANT INTERVIEW
LIFE TURNS 50
LIFE STORIES

Allan Grant, Photographer, Life Magazine
August 25, 1986
Total Running Time: 13 minutes and 32 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

Allan Grant

Photographer, Life Magazine

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INTERVIEWER:

Why don't we begin with the story, the great story you told about Shirley MacLaine? About how-

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ALLAN GRANT:

Shirley MacLaine's story, yes. I don't remember what year it was, but we were shooting- we were supposed shoot Shirley MacLaine for a cover, because I did a, what we call, "speaking of pictures" on Shirley and her little girl Sachi, who was very cute and used to impersonate what the- the things her mother did, and she would follow around doing whatever Shirley did. And so we set up in the studio to get a cover shot in color of Shirley with the baby copying her. And, uh, Shirley was late. She was shooting at the studio and she showed up



several hours late, exhausted, and the baby was tired and cranky. And, uh, when we started shooting, the kid was not doing anything at all—copying Shirley. She just was looking around and, you know, doing her own thing, in other words. So I decided to try setting up a mirror where Shirley could watch what the child- what her daughter was doing. And, uh, and in so doing, Shirley was looking in the mirror and watching what she was doing, impersonating a child, and the kid was putting beads on her head and everything, and Shirley just did that. And to me, it didn't look like it was really working. So, uh, we- I call it quits and sent the film off to New York, and hoped I had something. And what I got out of it was a cover, and it was a charming cover, but I never expected that to happen that day.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you ever hear from Shirley? Any reaction from her at the time?

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ALLAN GRANT:

Well, she loved it. She loved the covers. Some people thought it was, uh... Let's scratch that. Shirley actually loved the cover, yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

Okay. Some of the other famous pictures you've taken, um—I wrote down some Bob Hope, uh, Liz Taylor. Tell me about that Liz Taylor cover, if there's any-



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ALLAN GRANT:

Liz Taylor got, uh- was- I was covering the, uh, Academy Awards, and, uh, she, uh, got an Oscar that night for, I guess it's Butterfield 8. Uh, and it was- everybody's delighted 'cause they felt she deserved it way long- long time ago for some of the other films she did. And, uh, we followed her to, uh, a party— I believe it was at the Beverly Hilton hotel—and, uh, she was, uh, embracing and stroking the thing. And I was stood by with a camera and just photographed her. And that was one picture I never expected to be on the cover because it was just a straight flash shot. And usually you have to really create something visually interesting. And it was marvelous, turned out to be a nice picture.

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INTERVIEWER:

That was a situation that was sort of a grab shot, but-

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ALLAN GRANT:

That was a grab shot, indeed, yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

But there was other situations where live photographers were treated as almost stars themselves on the set.

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ALLAN GRANT:

Yeah. Well, on some movie sets, if you did not get what you went to get, uh, because of problems in composition, lighting or whatever, uh, we had the authority to go to the producer or something, and they would either hold a production or give us an hour in between shots or something, and build a stage, a set for us, light it, uh, supply whatever we needed, and we would restage a shot and shoot it so that Life could use it. And the case in point was a picture called I Remember Mama that George Stevens was directing. And there was a scene in there where Oskar Homolka was dying in bed, and Irene Dunne was drinking a last toast to him after he died. And, uh, she pulls a, uh, the blind which is behind her down to cut the light off on his body in the bed. The camera would move to show Oskar Homolka, and then you see her start to pull a window shade down, and then you'd see the light cut off on him. Well, I couldn't use that as a shot for an opener in the movie, and that was an important scene.

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So I asked if I could get the shot myself in my own way, and they said yes. So I had them bring a- it was a little, uh, cupboard like thing with a mirror on it. And, uh, I took the mirror and tilted it, so I got the body to appear in the mirror right next to the window where Irene Dunne would grab the window shade and pull it down. And so I had her pull the shade down, and you could see a line across where the with a shade was coming down, and I shot it that way. And George Stevens was watching me shoot that, and he came up to me, put his arm around me and said, "Allan," he said, "Would you mind terribly if I copied that shot the way you did it?" He said, "Because that's terrific. And I said, "Not at all. Just give me screen credit." And, uh, I don't remember- I



didn't see the movie. It was a long time after, so I don't know if he did that or not.

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INTERVIEWER:

That was typical? Life's-

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ALLAN GRANT:

Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

Relationship with Hollywood.

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ALLAN GRANT:

Yeah. We had, we had- they spent a lot of money trying to get- You gotta understand that one full page picture—Life goes to the movies or Life, uh, picture of the week or whatever it was—uh, that they had- if they had to buy that spot, as an ad, it would cost \$50,000, but the ad would not bring as much attention to the film as a Life story would. Because Life generally gave it an opening page, and maybe two more pages if it's a good film. So they spent a lot of time and money allowing us to do this kind of thing on the sets.

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INTERVIEWER:



And they would set up everything for you, whatever you want?

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ALLAN GRANT:

They- yeah, mostly, yeah. In the early days, whatever you wanted, you got. I mean, you- if you wanted to build a whole soundstage and move it for you, they would. I mean, we had an audience of- I think it was, at the time, 6.5 million circulation. And they figured out that one issue of Life was seen by 63 million readers, including, you know, the dentist office, a doctor's office, we found a magazine on the subway, and things like that. So we had a big audience for that. Money was no object with the studios.

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INTERVIEWER:

Are there any other specific examples you remember where the studios went out for Life?

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ALLAN GRANT:

Went out to get Life? To attract Life's attention? Uh, yeah. There was a film called Pepe. Debbie Reynolds was in it with, uh, Cantinflas, a Mexican film star, and they had- they- she had a cover six months previous to the shooting of the movie. They took that cover that was on Life actually, blew it up to about 12 by 15ft or something, and did a dance number around the cover, and, uh, to attract, to get, to get into Life magazine, I presume, you know, once more. And, uh, having not seen the picture, I don't know if the dance numbers in there, but I assume it was. And, uh, Life ran a full page of- they eliminated



the cover, but they did run a full page of the desk showing a pencil- ceramic, uh, pencil cup in the background with some pencils in it. And, uh- but that set was huge. A pencil- there was a pencil lying across the magazine, and it must have been 20ft long. So, uh, the dancers look, you know, like little tiny figures.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about the reaction from the stars when you came on the set? I mean, whether it was Audrey Hepburn or anybody else like that.

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ALLAN GRANT:

Of course, they all swooned and fainted, but [laughs], no. No, I can tell you one thing. Debbie Reynolds, some years ago, uh, was doing a dance number for a film, and, uh- I was then, uh, freelancing. I had left the magazine. This was in the late 60s. And, uh, she refused to do the dance number unless they hired me to cover it for her, because I'd done a lot of work with Debbie. And, uh, I asked for a lot of money—they paid me. And I went out there and shot the film, gave it to the publicity guy, and said, "You've wasted your money. This isn't going to run." And you know what? It ran in Life with two color pages. I couldn't believe it. But that's generally what happens. And then on the other hand, it cost, it cost a lot of money, and sometimes the stories wouldn't run. I mean, I've spent hours and hours photographing people, uh, Hollywood people, ordinary people, whatever. And you think you would have a story in it—you may have had a story—and it would- sometimes it would be killed because they needed that space for something else. And, uh, so they would kill that story. And a lot of people were disappointed because they told



their friends, "Okay, I'm going to be in Life magazine." And, you know, you can't use everything.

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INTERVIEWER:

Angry phone calls?

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ALLAN GRANT:

Well, not really. But Life was very good about it, because it always gave, uh, little, uh, little, beautiful, uh, albums with the original print photographs that I would make of whoever shot the story. Uh, they'd give them 12, 15 photographs from the story, and that's a nice thing to have.

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INTERVIEWER:

No, I was worried whether or not if you went back to the same studio, where you just killed their story and it didn't run, if there was a backlash against the Life photographers.

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ALLAN GRANT:

No, I don't remember any of that now. No, but I have- I had other experiences outside of Hollywood when the story didn't run, and they- I got nasty letters from people saying, "How dare you make us spend all this time and money, you know, and not have the story," as if it was my fault. But not, not related to



Hollywood. I mean, that was a gamble. It's like when you make a film, you don't know if it's going to sell or not.

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INTERVIEWER:

Uh, three other stars that I know you took photos of—Bob Hope. Any stories about him?

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ALLAN GRANT:

Bob Hope. That's- I can't tell him. Bob Hope carried a masseur—not a masseur—but a guy who would give massages every day. That's- Bob Hope's secret was getting massaged every day by this guy who looked like a wrestler. And I've got pictures of him being massaged in bed, being massaged on airplanes, being massaged in, you know, studios. And, uh, uh, he, he was unbelievable. I mean, he's, he still is unbelievable. He could stand against the wall and fall asleep for ten, 15 minutes. I mean, really go to sleep standing up that way, and out. And I guess that was the, uh, the secret of his, um, stamina.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you remember any of the pictures that ran in Life? Any stories, any anecdotes on them?

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ALLAN GRANT:



There were, there were very difficult- Uh, there was a, there's a great photograph of him in, uh, I think it was Oklahoma University, which took hours and hours and hours to set up. And it's just a sea of faces surrounding this man on the stage. We had a strobe light, so we had a light that whole- it was like lighting the Coliseum with strobe lights. It was just unbelievable. And, uh, I don't know if the fly view is a shot, but it's available in the, in the file. I'll tell you, Bob Hope was the only star in my memory to send me a thank you note when his- he got a cover. I got him on a cover of Life and about 6 or 8 pages. And I've got- I treasure a little thank you note from Bob. You know, uh. You talk about the importance of the photographers—when I first came out here, we were- literally, every Christmas time, trucks would back up to our houses, and they would take- they would dump stuff—not dump stuff—I mean, beautiful gifts, uh, wines and liquor and, and desk sets and stuff like that. I mean, it was payola. It was the beginning of payola, and it was marvelous. I mean, you get hundreds of dollars worth of things. And finally, Life forbid it, forbade it. Uh, we didn't want it to happen, wouldn't let us do it, yeah, whatever the word is. But, yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:

Any stars who especially, uh, tried to bribe you more than others?

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ALLAN GRANT:

Yes, in different ways. I mean, I had bribes from stars. Uh, I had, uh- [unintelligible] actually gave me a beautiful set of gold cufflinks after the story ran. There were, uh, there were no bribes to, to get you in the magazine.

It was just to kind of keep you there and make you appreciate- show that they appreciated what you did.

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INTERVIEWER:

The, um, Audrey Hepburn picture. You took that beautiful picture of her, I think at the Oscars, when she was-

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ALLAN GRANT:

Oh, Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly, that-

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INTERVIEWER:

But particularly the Audrey Hepburn picture. I mean, afterwards, you have an arch, there's lights in the back, and it just-

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ALLAN GRANT:

Oh, that was a different. Yeah, that was a different story. That was an Audrey Hepburn story. The other was doing Grace Kelly. Grace Kelly was going to get married, and I think that was the year she, she left town. And it was really- I was covering Grace Kelly, and Audrey Hepburn happened to be in the background. That's a beautiful, that's a beautiful photograph. Uh, it's just a matter of following them around, and watching the light, and, you know, and, uh, using natural light and shooting. The Grace- the Audrey Hepburn picture that you're talking about was shot in this set up in the studio for a story on



Hollywood that I was doing. She came through. She was- I love that gal. I wish- I had wanted to photograph her so badly for years and years, and, uh, they kept sending guys out from the west- from the East Coast, which they do- ordinarily do when something special happens, you know. Send a freelancer. Not even a staff photographer would come out and photograph-

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Sam, Sam Shaw took a picture of her and she got on the cover. And, uh, it's interesting because in the, in the period I've spent in Hollywood, Marilyn Monroe had been here for years and years, I never got a chance to photograph her. No specific reason, because Hollywood was- I was here, but I also did a lot of other stories. I mean, you know, it's, uh- cover the atom bomb test and the Kennedy assassination, things like that. But when I finally got an assignment to do Marilyn, which was the last interview she gave, uh, I photographed her, um, maybe two hours. And three and a half weeks later, she was dead. And you want to hear a funny story about that? My niece called up and said, "I know why she killed herself. Because you wouldn't marry her, right, Uncle Allan?" Because I was dating- I was free then and dating a lot of people. So anyway, that's top on the shoulder.

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