

The King and eye

Sun-drenched, impossibly glamorous, a star everywhere you look. A film set? In the photographs of Yul Brynner, this was real life. By Lucy Davies

Yul Brynner's eyebrows lent themselves with panache to a career spanning 60 years. They alternately scowled and arched under an Egyptian headcloth for *The Ten Commandments*; a battered Stetson for *The Magnificent Seven*; and for *The Buccaneer*, a wig that required nightly dousings of acetone to loosen its glue. They had their most flagrant outing for *The King and I*, where they were inked nightly onto a face made yellow with walnut juice. That these eyebrows spent much of their existence furrowed over the viewfinder of a camera is less known.

But a new exhibition of his work, hot on the heels of a book published last year, will likely give them their due.

Brynner used photography as a way to stay in love with his day job, filling hours spent waiting on film sets by strolling among friends and crew with a Leica slung around his neck. His images reveal a talent for accruing images of subjects utterly at ease in his presence and rare treasures indeed when seen alongside stilted studio publicity visuals.

Via the reflection in a mirror Ingrid Bergman smiles indulgently from her bathroom doorway, a candy-stripe robe tucked neatly around her waist; Frank Sinatra emerges from a helicopter, its blades still pulsing, besuited, fedoraed and clutching a glass of scotch on the rocks. These are some of the most noted names of the era and – whether in stylish monochrome or courtesy of Kodachrome's pinks and yellows – they appear rapt and relaxed, exhilarated to be living their kind of life in a sun-drenched, eternal now.

The images for the show were selected from the book put together by his daughter Victoria last year, on the 25th anniversary of Brynner's death. A photographer herself, and the owner of a fashion production company, she found the process of editing from the 8,000-odd images her father left behind daunting. "It was a long task," she tells me from her office in Los Angeles, "but a pretty fascinating one, with a lot of surprises." Hardest to select from were his portraits of Ingrid Bergman: "Isabella [Rossellini] still talks about it, how they had this amazing friendship; that the pictures my father took of her mother were the best, because you can see the depth of feeling between them."

Brynner discovered photography in 1950, while working as a director at CBS. He had already tasted success as an actor on Broadway, cast by Michael Chekhov (nephew of Anton) in a production of *Twelfth Night* in 1941. But the phenomenal notoriety he achieved as the King of Siam in the stage production of *The King and I*, a role he performed more than 5,000 times, was still in the wings.

"Even after acting became his primary career, he was intimately involved in the production of his films," says Victoria (Brynner would later co-direct the film version of *The King and I*), "and I think photography was his way of staying in touch with that hands-on side of things. You can see from the way he framed his photographs, playing with reflection and shadow, that he was using his director's eye. My father was part of a small group of truly successful people. They were no longer celebrities; they were people who enjoyed being together. These were their private times."

'Yul Brynner: A Photographic Journey' is at the Little Black Gallery, London SW10 until February 11; 020 7349 9332, or visit thelittleblackgallery.com





STAR STRUCK 1) A self-portrait on the set of 'The King and I', 1956. 2) Grace Kelly photographed in 1966. 3) Frank Sinatra steps out of a helicopter in 1964. 4) Audrey Hepburn takes a canal trip in Venice

in 1965. 5) Elizabeth Taylor swimming with daughter Liza Todd in Hollywood in 1959. 6) Ingrid Bergman on the set of the 1961 film *Goodbye Again*. 7) Joan Collins takes it easy in Hollywood in 1956

