Hot-Rod Stage Share Affections of Bobby Driscoll

This is the second in a series of articles written in 1953 by Zelda Cini when she interviewed various personalities living in Pacific Palisades, California. "The Yella Terra," her low slug sport car, tearing around the hills of the Palisades while she was on special assignment, was used in the articles as a device and became more a personality than the writer herself, she says.

By Zelda Cini

It isn't so much that the Terra is resistant to departure . . . and it sometimes is . . . but there's no accounting for its temperament. What explanation can anyone give for the handle of the door falling off, for example, just because across the street on Chattanooga sat a collection of automobiles all belonging to the Driscoll family.

Granted, one was obviously a hot-rod. No self-respecting Model T during a legitimate life-span could expect so glittering an array of accessories. Only the loving care of a teenager could produce such a miracle of stripped to the bare essentials plus chromium trim.

The Terra sulked, nose uphill, its dented snobbery even more pointed because the modern Oldsmobile near the Model T was neat and shiny and the dun-colored Studebaker, also nearby, bore a striking resemblance to a Pierce-Arrow motor and belonging to the same era.

The latter two automobiles are the property of Clet Driscoll, who sang out greetings from the driveway and then opened the front door to the pleasant sprawling house.

"Bobby's still dressing," he explained, shooing Candy downstairs. "She's a Samoyed . . . go on, Candy. Downstairs," he went on. "The dog I mean."

She looks a little like a toy Spitz or a white Pomeranian, with more curves. She wriggled down the short flight of stairs to the sunken living room whose wide picture windows face the canyons below, and then disappeared into another part of the house—never to reappear.

For a while it seemed Candy must have joined Bobby Driscoll in a sort of Never-Never land, but there were evidences that Bobby (like the legendary Kilroy) had been here, for the bookcase across the room was studded with tributes to him.

There was one gold medal from Parent's Magazine—"Awarded Bobby Driscoll, 1949—Most Talented Juvenile Star" and another, a large gold star in itself, labeled "Milky Way—Best Juvenile Actor—1952—The Happy Time." Later on, others came to light, through Clet, who produced one from 1953 and Film Daily.

Maybe there were more, but suddenly there was Bobby Driscoll, in charcoal flannels, and his friend Greg Schafer, in grey cords, descending the stairs to the upper level like any teenage boys . . . Clumping.

"Have you cleaned your fingernails?" Clet inquired, with fatherly solicitude.

Both boys laughed, Bobby sheepishly examining his.

"Mechanic's hands," he chuckled showing almost no nails at all. "Transmission came loose on the hot-rod," he explained.

"I'm going to race it again next week," he went on. "I've won one trophy . . . for drag racing." He looked up for some flicker of understanding.

There wasn't any.

He sighed.

"That's from a dead start."

Still no answering flicker.

His "mechanic's hands" came into play, giving color to the explanation.

"You see . . . well . . . it's a quarter-mile straight forward from a standing position. My little car broke 100. Not on the speedometer . . .It was clocked. By a watch." He looked quizzical and then gave up.

Aside from hot-rod racing, whatever did this boy do?

"You can get a haircut," his father suggested.

Greg laughed.

Bobby put up a hand to the back of his head, and grinned.

Greg laughed again. "A butch?" he suggested.

"No, not quite," Clet added. "But shorter."

And then it came out. Bobby is playing "The Boy With a Dart," the Christopher Fry show which plays churches under the sponsorship of The Bishop's company.

"I'm the boy," Bobby explained. "Everybody in the company plays several roles except me. I don't. Maybe it's because I'm only off stage for about two minutes during the whole show. Wouldn't have time.

"In almost 12 and a half years of being an actor . . ." he stopped and

looked to Clet for corroboration.

"Well," said Clet. "You're 17. You were five and a half when you got your first role. With Margaret O'Brien in 'Lost Angel.' At MGM."

"Anyway," Bobby went on, "I never played blank verse and I'd never been on the stage. Imagine that!"

Greg sat quiety, nodding.

"I love it. Now it's what I really want to do. And write. I enjoy writing. Nothing in particular. Just what I feel like writing. Gee . . ." and he turned to Greg, "I gotta call that guy about my axe."

Bobby looked strong enough, but the picture of him wielding an axe was considerably out of character.

A large question mark must have made itself visible.

"Trumpet," Bobby explained "That's what we call it."

Why?

"Well, that's what all musicians call a trumpet. Bop talk is musicians' talk," Bobby explained patiently.

"That's right," Gregg interpolated. "Except psychologist say that it's a language that makes a teenager feel secure. Sorta language of his own that adults can't understand. Gives kids a chance to talk among themselves without being understood."

Bobby listened attentively and then said, offhandedly and with a certain amount of admiration . . ."He's taking psychology."

Bobby is unashamedly interested in music and admits he used to sing.

"But," he adds, "my voice changed."

And then it came out he was a boy soprano.

"Did tap, too," he will admit. "But I think I remember only one step. Maybe two." He thought on that.

Classic music?

"Nope," he explained patiently. "Progressive jazz."

Bobby's voice is unusually pleasing to the ear . . . almost musical with the strangely precise diction which seems the unconscious province of good actors. And he is probably a very good actor.

"Now I want to do some real stage work. Someday . . ." and he leaned forward, "I want to do a play I read once. I can't even remember who wrote it. It was called 'When Late the Sweet Birds Sing.' I was supposed to do it on Broadway. But the deal wasn't right."

"It didn't make Broadway anyway," Clet interrupted. "Opened in Buffalo, I think."

"Or Philadelphia," Bobby added. "Anyway, it was the story of a boy whose mother died and whose father went away and left him with this other couple. The boy worshiped his father. And then after years . . . maybe 10 or so . . . the father comes back. The boy keeps expecting him but he doesn't arrive. And so the boy's in his room, almost crying, and then a big shadow falls over the room from the doorway. And it's the father. And the boy looks up and rushes toward it . . ." Bobby looked into the distance dreamily.

"And that's the end of the first act," he said crisply.

It was difficult to see how this normal boy, "all wrapped up in hot-rod," to use his own term, could move so mercurially from one mood to another with a comprehension usually reserved for those more adult and then, just as abruptly, emerge, the very essence of his years.

He remembers little of his early days in pictures. He liked working in them. Got his first job through the barber who used to cut his hair in Pasadena.

"The barber had a son who was a bit player," Clet explained. "He thought Bobby ought to be in pictures. When an opportunity arose, we took him to the studio. While we were walking across the lot Bobby spied a big ship (actually a set) and asked the director, with whom we were walking, how come the ship was out of water. The director was impressed with Bobby's curiosity and his apparent lack of interest in his own career. Anyway, he got the job."

Under contract to 20th Century Fox and MGM and loaned out for all manner of films, Bobby ended his childhood acting career, in a manner of speaking, in 1952, after his 8-year contract at Disney studios expired.

There he made a whole series of live-actor movies (So Dear to My Heart, Song of the South, Treasure Island, When I Grow Up, etc.) and even was the voice of Peter Pan.

Now, while waiting to hurdle the "difficult years" and serious about the stage, he's been playing "The Boy" in the Fry play since January, giving some 30 performances during a tour of northern California, and is now rehearsing for a tour of western United States, scheduled to begin in June.

"What I'd really like to do next," he said thoughtfully, "is maybe a musical version of Tom Sawyer. Somebody's just written one and we've been reading it."

He glanced at his watch. "It's almost 12. If you'll forgive me, I have to get to school. But wouldn't you like to see my hot-rod first?"

The Yella Terra did not snort. As a matter of fact, it almost didn't start at all.

And it's been behaving very badly since Bobby Driscoll publicly promised—in front of witnesses—to take the Terra's pilot on a sample "drag" in the hot-rod. Next week?—1954 Δ