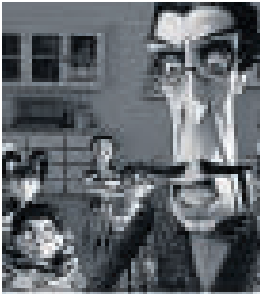


the conversation

‘Marilyn was incredibly attractive. But our affair was purgatory’

Hollywood legend Martin Landau tells **Tim Teeman** about his love affair with Marilyn, casting calls with James Dean, working with Hitchcock and his role in Tim Burton's new animation

There's a question niggling away insistently while, in his agent's office in Los Angeles, the engaging, very funny Martin Landau regales me with tales from his life in the movies: of being James Dean's best friend, or the blooming of his friendship with Alfred Hitchcock, which began after the director cast him in *North by Northwest* (1959), or the moment while filming *Cleopatra* (1963) when it became obvious that Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor were having an affair. However, that



MASTER'S VOICE Landau plays a teacher in Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie*

question — how did he feel about never truly hitting the big time as his buddies did? — throbs away. It will eventually be addressed, but not before we discuss a certain, little-known love affair Landau had with Marilyn Monroe.

While geeky fiftysomethings will remember him as that master of disguise Roll-in Hand in the original TV series of *Mission: Impossible* and fortysomethings as the tunic-wearing Captain John Koenig in the Seventies TV series *Space 1999*, Landau's finest roles came after he turned 60 (he's 84 now). He was the adulterous, desperate husband Judah Rosenthal in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role as Bela Lugosi in Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994). His gravelly voice, with alugubrious Eastern European brogue, features in Burton's latest, exquisitely rendered movie, *Frankenweenie* — the first black and white animation shot in 3-D. In this remake of a 1984 Burton short film, Landau voices a science teacher who, by electrocuting a dead frog into jerking life, inspires a ten-year-old Victor Frankenstein in Sixties American suburbia to reanimate his beloved dead dog, Corky, leading to gruesome, delirious chaos.

"People who've seen it think it's a masterpiece," Landau says proudly. They would be right. The film is a stylistic wonderland, a brilliantly rendered mash-up of human grotesques, classic horror, pulp science fiction, Godzilla, a dose of Burton's finest mordant Gothic, Winona Ryder voicing a spooky schoolgirl with a sinister cat ... there's even a steaming fondue.

"Tim and I work well together," Landau says. "I understand him, we both started as cartoonists." At the same moment, in two different places, they both had the idea that the film should be in black and white. "When we talk it's very spare: we often don't get to the verbs. He's somewhat idiosyncratic. I understand his essence."

Landau will be in London next week for *Frankenweenie*'s European premiere at the London Film Festival and to talk at the BFI about his career and work with Hitchcock.

He recalls taking classes with Marilyn Monroe, a couple of years his senior, under Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio in New York. "She was there because she was dissatisfied. People perceived her as a Hollywood blonde bimbo. She was very needy and would go from being on top of her game to absolutely bereft of any self-belief or confidence. She see-sawed between those two personalities."

When they went to the theatre she'd change her outfits many times. "We'd never see the first act of the play."

Did he desire her? "She was terrific ... I don't talk about those things," he says quietly. Did he have a relationship with her? "I had a relationship with her. It was just before Arthur [Miller, the playwright; he and Monroe married in 1956]. It was an interesting relationship, I look at it very differently than the way I did then. She was incredibly attractive but very difficult."

How did he cope with that? "You can't. That's why I didn't." It lasted? "Several months." He couldn't cope with the poles



AP: TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, STEVE SCHOFIELD

of her personality? "Yeah, you didn't know which one would show up in the middle of something." Did he end the relationship? "I did, by becoming more busy." Was she upset by that? "I don't know, probably. I didn't want to upset her." Because she was fragile? "Yes. I busied myself with other things."

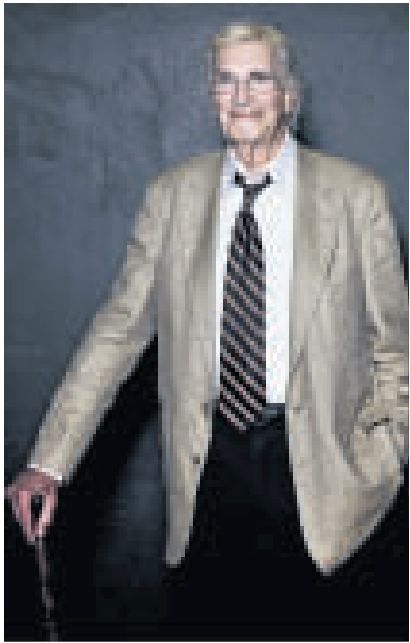
After the relationship ended, Landau and Monroe saw each other "a couple of times in passing" in New York and Los An-

gles. Was he in love with her? "I don't know if I was in love with her or fascinated by her or flattered by her. She was incredibly attractive and fun to be with much of the time. When she wasn't she wasn't. I mean, that was the problem. She could get very withdrawn." Did he want to marry her? "No, no. It was almost a form of purgatory. I never knew who [ie, which Marilyn]

I was going to be with." Landau was changing planes in Rome in 1962 when he read that Monroe had died. "I was heartbroken. As the mystery unfolded I was more and more shocked. It didn't seem possible that she killed herself intentionally. It was possible she took more barbiturates than necessary, just losing count, or possibly it was foul play. Nobody knows."

Growing up in Brooklyn, Landau loved acting and drawing; his father was a machinist, his mother took him to movies and theatre. A "sensitive kid", he was good at sport and had "an imagination". He listened to radio dramas such as *The Shadow*, with Orson Welles, "which allowed you to create a set of images and characters". He studied art and became a cartoonist for the *Daily News* in New York but soon became attracted to acting after watching a colleague on stage and deciding he could do better. Landau quit his job — against the advice of his parents — but he got work in television, and then Hitchcock saw him in a play and cast him in *North by Northwest*, saying: "Martin, you have a circus going on inside you. Obviously if you can do that part you can play this little trinket." At his office, "he greeted me as if we knew each

END OF THE AFFAIR Marilyn Monroe and Martin Landau, pictured below today, were lovers for several months



other and showed the movie in storyboards". Landau was cast as James Mason's henchman, who wanted to get rid of Eva Marie Saint's character "with such a vengeance". Landau decided "he had to be gay; she was interfering with his relationship with Mason. I made it subtle; I knew in big cities they'd get it. Hitch loved it. People told me: 'Don't play gay. It will affect your career.' I said: 'I'm an actor.'"

Did the young Landau have lots of sex with women? "I tried to. I loved them. I was shy at first. Those years when you're maturing are tough. You're like [he looks down to his groin]: 'What's going on here?'"

When both men were in their early twenties Landau met James Dean at the "organised bedlam" of an open casting call: "He was a farmboy, I was a New Yorker." Dean asked: "How does this work?" Landau said they were called up ten at a time: "I don't think we'll compete for parts — I don't look like you and you don't look like me."

They became close friends, although when Dean became famous, "I didn't want to be known as 'the friend of'. We talked about actors we admired, Marlon Brando and Monty Clift. He was concerned he wouldn't mature into manhood."

Of the premature deaths of Monroe and Dean, Landau says: "It's so hard because everyone else I've known who died got old — they're both frozen in time."

Landau drank, "but knew not to become addicted. I hung around with Jason Robards, Richard Harris, Robert Shaw, Richard Burton. I knew not to match them for drinks." On the set of *Cleopatra*, he recalls seeing Burton kissing Taylor one morning and "knowing in that moment they had spent the night together. Eddie [Fisher, Taylor's then husband] walked off in a huff. When Sybil [Burton's wife] arrived you could feel the tension."

Landau met his wife Barbara Bain [who also co-starred in *Mission: Impossible* and *Space 1999*] at an acting class. Their marriage, from 1957 to 1993, came to a "natural end". He has had girlfriends since but is single — "I guess I wouldn't be if I didn't like it" — and about to move in with one of his two daughters and her family. Will Landau marry again? "No, I'm 84. That's an old guy."

Watching the 1984 Oscars, Landau recalls "having a beer in my underwear, saying: 'I should be there.'" *Mission Impossible* and *Space 1999* were in the distant past and, while he coached actors such as Jack Nicholson and Anjelica Huston, agents had told Landau that he was "finished". "It was frustrating. I knew what I was able to do, I was at the height of my powers but no one was giving me the chance."

His renaissance began with *Tucker: The Man and his Dream* (1988) for which Landau won a Golden Globe and was nominated for an Oscar. He received a second Oscar nomination for *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. When he finally won for *Ed Wood*, "it was like an out-of-body experience. I felt I knew Lugosi. Like him I had worked for good directors and terrible directors. I went thinking I was going to have a nice dinner and probably be miserable at the end of the night. When I win you can see Samuel L. Jackson [nominated for *Pulp Fiction*] say 'Shit', probably the most honest reaction one can have."

Landau revels in being a surviving link to the Hollywood of old but he doesn't like ageing; his concession to vanity is hair-



NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

TOP DRAWER Landau in the art department at the New York Daily News in 1951. Above, with Barbara Bain in *Mission Impossible*, c 1970

pieces. He complains that people today become actors "to become celebrities. We became actors to work in theatre. Hollywood was 3,000 miles away. We did television because we needed a couple of extra dollars."

Now, back to that niggling question: he never made the A-list. "I think it would have held me back in a certain way," Landau says. "I played a wide variety of roles." Others had "great careers and became major stars, but I played more things, had more fun and," he smiles merrily, "I'm still doing it."

Frankenweenie opens the 56th BFI London Film Festival (in partnership with American Express) on Wednesday (bfi.org.uk; 020-7928 3232) and goes on general release on Oct 17. Martin Landau is in conversation at BFI Southbank on Tuesday



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