

One photographer's detailed memories of Marilyn Monroe

In "Marilyn & Me," Lawrence Schiller remembers the woman who became the icon

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.Photographer Lawrence Schiller had the rare experience of getting to know Marily...

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Marilyn had now had most of the day to look at the black-and-white proof sheets I'd left with her and to talk to whomever she might talk to for advice, to hear what her shrink had to say about them, and her publicist, her hairdresser, her secretary, and her masseuse. I had no idea whether she shared them with the people she surrounded herself with or if she kept them to herself. As an actress she was enormously insecure, but as a model she was totally self-assured. I had discovered back in 1960 that she knew better than anyone else what made Marilyn Monroe work and what didn't. So when I pulled up to her house after sunset in the cul-de-sac drive off Carmelina in Brentwood, I just took a deep breath and wished myself luck.

She answered the door herself. "Here you go, let's exchange," she said, handing me the oversize envelope with the black-and-white proofs. I gave her the one I was holding, with the strips of color. Still standing in the doorway, she pulled out one of the strips, held it up, then put it back in the envelope with the others and said, "Let's go get Dom."

Marilyn Monroe poses with two bears

Who is Dom? I wondered. All I could think was that I was going to have to deal with someone new now and that this was a wrinkle I hadn't anticipated. Instead of asking me inside to meet Dom, however, she grabbed a cardigan and headed for her car. I think it was a T-Bird, but I don't recall for sure. Marilyn motioned me in and drove us to Sunset, then headed east to the Strip. Near Schwab's drugstore, where Lana Turner was said to have been discovered sipping an ice cream soda at the counter, Marilyn parked the car under a streetlamp and told me to wait — she'd be right back. A few minutes later, she came out of Schwab's holding a brown paper bag. Back in the car, instead of starting the engine, she reached into the bag and pulled out "Dom" — a bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne. She popped the cork like a wine steward, took a drink from the bottle, and said, "Pictures?"

I was upset. This was not the time or the place — sitting in a car under a streetlamp. "Let's not look at them now," I protested. But Marilyn just took another swig, handed me the bottle, and said, "Let's see."

Reluctantly, I reached into the envelope in my lap and pulled out the filmstrips. At the same time, she reached into her purse and took out an Eastman Kodak loupe — a very good magnifying glass — and what looked like a pair of scissors. She held one strip up against the streetlight, and zip! She snipped an image in half. Then she took the bottle from me, knocked it back, handed it back again, and zip, cut another shot in half.

"Larry, you're not drinking," she said.

"No, I'm not. I'm just scared that I may wind up with no color shots," I replied. With nothing more intelligent to say, I blurted out, "What kind of scissors are those?"

"They're pinking shears," she said.

"What are pinking shears?"

"You don't know anything about women's dresses, do you? When you hem a dress, you use these to cut the fabric."

Now I decided to take a drink, but it didn't go down smoothly, not while she had those pinking shears in her hand. I was lost — it was almost dark. I couldn't see the pictures she was looking at. I wasn't being consulted. On a few pictures, she zip-zipped twice! I was trying to figure out how many strips of color I could keep inside my envelope without showing her.

She held up a strip where her rear end was highly defined. "Johnny Hyde used to say my behind was like a colored woman's," she said. "Only he didn't say 'colored.' Colored blood turns a lot of men on." Zip!

Never-before-seen Marilyn Monroe photos up for auction

I was at a loss over what to say. Again, I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "You know what Yousuf Karsh said to Anna Magnani when he showed her his proofs from one of his shoots?" I said. "He apologized for all the wrinkles in her face that his lighting had produced and said he'd retouch the photos. And you know what Magnani said? She said, 'Don't you dare take them out. I worked too hard for those wrinkles.' "

I had caught her attention. Marilyn looked at me for a couple of seconds, and then she said, "Maybe if I had those types of wrinkles, Fox would take me more seriously."

"She does have an extraordinary face," I said. I was hoping to divert her attention away from those pinking shears.

"I met her once when I won the Donatello Award for *The Prince and the Showgirl*. She hugged me for the cameras, and she called me a putana when she thought I wasn't listening."

"What's a putana?"

"Look it up. It's Italian." Zip! Zip! Zip!

By the time Marilyn was through with her editing, she had cut about 70 of the approximately 108 color images. Seventy sounds like a lot, but 38 approved sounded even better. The next day I would throw away all the cut-up images, oblivious to their historical value. I was living in the present and not the future.

It was dark when we finished the champagne, and as we drove back to her house, she reminded me of our deal: she didn't want to see Elizabeth Taylor in any of the magazines that her pictures were going to appear in.

Slideshow: Memories of Marilyn (on this page)

The Dom had loosened her tongue, and she started talking about how badly Fox had treated her, how the executives had no respect for her or her talent, and how she'd really like to stick it to them. She was rambling on, and my mind was wandering. I was beginning to calculate the projected number of magazine covers we could generate from the strips of approved color images in my lap. I kept thinking about *Life* magazine. It was my dream to land a cover, and I was sure that one of the pictures could make that happen.

"Are you here, Larry?" Marilyn asked.