

Marlon Brando

How He Wasted \$6 Million
By Sulking On The Set

POST

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Brando as
Fletcher Christian

Six Million Dollars Down the Drain:

The Mutiny of Marlon Brando

A petulant superstar turns paradise into a moviemaker's nightmare. How Brando broke the budget in a marathon remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

By BILL DAVIDSON



As the rebellious first mate, Fletcher Christian, Brando waits for his ship to come in. To date he has earned \$1,250,000 with more to come.

A few months ago President John F. Kennedy invited the noted movie writer-director, Billy Wilder, to have dinner with him. Wilder, who prides himself on his knowledge of world affairs, was all primed to discuss such matters as Laos, Berlin and the wage-price spiral. Instead the President devoted himself to the burning question: "When in the world are they going to finish *Mutiny on the Bounty*?"

At the time the President posed this innocent query the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer remake of the old Charles Laughton-Clark Gable classic was in its eleventh month of production after thirteen months of preparation—a total creative endeavor that surpassed, in time, the gestation period of an elephant. Three members of the company had died; a Tahitian girl had been fired from the cast for becoming pregnant, but was rehired long after she had had her baby; another Tahitian actress, the second female lead, married a French soldier and moved to Algeria during the interminable filming, necessitating the total excision of her part from the picture. The star, Marlon Brando, had ballooned in weight from 170 to 210 pounds over the eleven-month period, so that special refinements had to be made with lighting and makeup lest he appear to have the dimensions of Stan Laurel in the early reels of the picture and those of Oliver Hardy at its conclusion.

Only Cleopatra Cost More

By April, 1962, the film still was not finished and M-G-M was considering a new ending, proposed by Billy Wilder, the sixth writer to be involved in the script. The cost of the movie had soared to nearly \$20,000,000, more than M-G-M's combined expenditure for *Ben Hur* and *Gone With the Wind*. By the time it is completed and distributed (hopefully next December) the studio will be nearly \$27,000,000 in the hole. In the entire history of the motion picture, only Twentieth Century-Fox's *Cleopatra*, plagued by Elizabeth Taylor's illnesses and romantic peccadillo, will cost more.

"Why?" President Kennedy asked Billy Wilder—another question which film-makers and millions of moviegoers are asking. A discreet man, Wilder professed not to know the answer.

However, *Mutiny on the Bounty*'s director, Lewis Milestone, is less reticent. "This picture," he told me, "should have been called *The Mutiny of Marlon Brando*."

According to Milestone, Brando's recalcitrance, pettishness, argumentativeness and sulking "cost the production at least \$6,000,000 and months of extra work." Says the director, who is sixty-six years old, "I've been in this business

for forty years, and I've never seen anything like it. Did you ever hear of an actor who put plugs in his ears so he couldn't listen to the director or the other actors? That's what Brando did. Whenever I'd try to direct him in a scene, he'd say, 'Are you telling me, or are you asking my advice?'

"Instead of boarding the *Bounty* at the dock in Tahiti with the rest of us every morning, Brando insisted on a speedboat to take him out to the ship while we were at sea. Three weeks before we were to leave Tahiti he decided to move from the house we had rented for him to an abandoned villa nearly fifty kilometers away. It cost us more than \$6000 to make it habitable for him for the week or two he lived in it. That's the way it was for the many months we were shooting.

Getting What They Deserve

"I can only say that the movie industry has come to a sorry state when a thing like this can happen, but maybe this experience will bring our executives to their senses. They deserve what they get when they give a ham actor, a petulant child, complete control of an expensive picture."

Brando, however, has his defenders. For example, Aaron Rosenberg, the producer of the film, says, "Marlon gave us a rough time, but he felt we were not living up to the agreements we had made with him about the basic concept of the picture. Besides, with a modern actor like him, he's got to *feel* the part and you must allow him to make his contributions to the script and the directing. Otherwise he can't work."

But there are few Brando defenders to be found among his costars in the picture. Trevor Howard, who plays Captain Bligh, the villainous captain of the *Bounty*, bespake himself to a British reporter about Brando as follows: "The man is unprofessional and absolutely ridiculous." Irish actor Richard Harris, who plays a mutineer, told me wearily on the transatlantic phone, "The whole picture was just a large dreadful nightmare for me, and Brando was just a large dreadful nightmare for me, and I'd prefer to forget both as soon as my nerves recover from the ordeal."

The *Mutiny of Marlon Brando* has its roots deep in the past. For years Brando has been coddled by the movie industry as one of the few male stars with genuine box-office appeal. A strange, moody youth from Libertyville, Illinois, he is the son of a staid businessman, and a fragile, beautiful patroness of the arts who died a few years ago. His parents were in constant bourgeois-bohemian conflict when he was a boy, and the family discord wrought its toll on the youth. He did badly at Libertyville Township High School. H. E. Underbrink, who was then principal, told me,

The \$750,000 replica of the original Bounty rides at anchor in Tahiti's Matavai Bay. A two-month shipbuilding delay added to movie's woes.



“The movie industry has come to a sorry state when

“Brando was rather irresponsible. He wasn't interested in anything in particular. His record was poor. He rarely took part in any extracurricular activities because practically every afternoon he was in our 3:15 P.M. disciplinary period.”

Later Brando was kicked out of Shattuck Military Academy in Minnesota for smoking. After laying tiles in a sewage project in Libertyville, he went to live with his sister in New York, attended drama classes and became the joint discovery of actress Stella Adler and director Elia Kazan. Kazan sent the youth to his own psychoanalyst, Dr. Bela Mittelman. After certain aspects of Brando's regressive personality were ameliorated, Kazan elevated him to stardom in the Broadway and Hollywood productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

From the moment he arrived in Hollywood, Brando established himself as an extraordinarily fine actor, a natural box-office attraction and a screwball. He dabbled in Oriental religions, popularized the T shirt as a manner of dress and the motorcycle as a mode of transportation, set new records for compulsive eating whenever he was emotionally disturbed.

Brando's Hollywood Antics

He has been known to ride down Sunset Boulevard in his open convertible with a trick arrow stuck to his head to give the illusion that it had penetrated his skull and emerged on the other side. When he married Anna Kashfi (from whom he has since been divorced), he planned the wedding with great secrecy, so that his jealously guarded privacy would not be invaded by the press and public. The day before the nuptials, however, he went to downtown Pasadena to purchase the wedding ring himself (though a friend, actor Sam Gilman, had come to Pasadena specifically to buy the ring). Brando's garb, on that occasion, was hardly designed to keep the crowds away. He was clad from head to toe in flowing Hindu raiment—and he was mobbed.

Despite these idiosyncrasies, and a growing reputation as a troublemaker, Brando is usually the first choice of producers whenever they cast a picture. They—and the banks which finance them—classify him as box-office insurance, no matter how bad the script. As they do with other stars, such as Cary Grant and William Holden, they offer him every enticement—fees up to a million dollars, a percentage of the profits, the right to approve or reject the script, the director and other members of the cast.

Brando uses unique methods of choosing the films in which he will condescend to work. He would not sign to do *Sayonara* until the ending of the picture was changed to allow the American hero to marry the Japanese heroine. “I want to get a message across about tolerance,” he said. Even so, he still refused to sign with Joshua Logan and producer William Goetz until one day, just as Logan was ready to give up, Brando said, “I'll do it.” Logan asked him why he had changed his mind. Brando replied, “I like you. I like the tender way you took the dead leaves off that plant while we were talking yesterday.”

It was against this background that the *Mutiny on the Bounty* and the smoldering *Mutiny* of

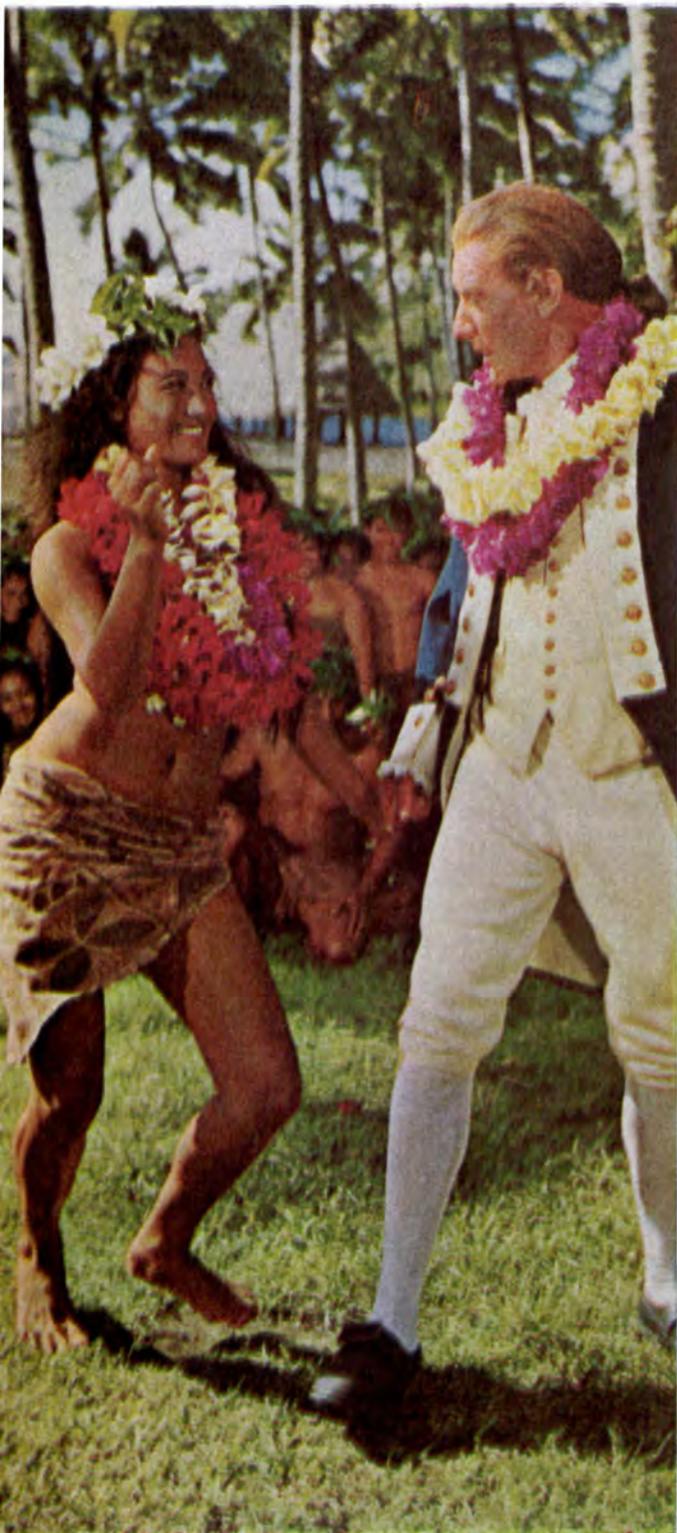
Marlon Brando were brought together in 1959—and a more explosive mixture has never been concocted in Hollywood.

The remake of the 1935 classic was masterminded by producer Aaron Rosenberg, a towering ex-All America football tackle, who in 1959 had just come to M-G-M after a distinguished career as a producer at Universal-International. Rosenberg told me, “I had never met Brando, but one day director John Sturges suggested that it might be one hell of an idea for me to do a new version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, with Brando playing either of the two major roles, Captain Bligh or Fletcher Christian, the ship's officer who led the revolt. When I contacted Brando he turned me down cold. A short time later Brando's agent came to see me, saying, ‘Marlon is interested in the idea again, but he doesn't want to redo the old picture, which was mostly about the mutiny. He wants to emphasize the period *after* the mutiny when the mutineers settled on Pitcairn Island, a complete paradise, and yet they ended up killing each other off. He wants to get across the message that the way our society is constituted, people can't live without hate even in a paradise.’ We arranged a meeting with Brando and myself and Sol Siegel, who was then the head of the studio, but the meeting got nowhere. Brando was unimpressed. So I decided to make the picture with someone else, and Eric Ambler was assigned to write the script.”

Continued Rosenberg, “After Ambler finished the script I decided just as a long shot to send it to Brando to read. He turned it down again, but again his agent said Brando wanted to see me. When we got together Brando kept emphasizing that he'd play the Fletcher Christian part if we'd rewrite the ending to include a long sequence on Pitcairn Island. I finally made a deal with him agreeing to give him consultation rights on that part of the picture. He signed a contract early in 1960 and we agreed to start shooting the picture on October 15, 1960. I then signed Sir Carol Reed, the British director, and I thought we were all set. But when I took Reed to Brando's house to meet him, I got shaky again. Brando spent two hours trying to get us to do a picture about Caryl Chessman, the executed rapist, before I could even get him to discuss *Mutiny on the Bounty*.”

The Air-Conditioned Man-o'-War

That was the shaky beginning, and it continued shaky as the contracted-for October-fifteenth starting date approached. Two other writers, Borden Chase and William Driskill, were assigned to work with Eric Ambler in remodeling the script to Brando's satisfaction. Then Rosenberg contracted with a Nova Scotia shipyard to build a \$750,000 copy of the original eighteenth-century British man-o'-war, the *Bounty*—except that the modern version of the sailing vessel would have hidden engines, camera mounts, air-conditioned dressing rooms and other goodies. Following that, Rosenberg went to England and signed a fine British and Irish cast, including Trevor Howard, Richard Harris and Hugh Griffith (who had just won an Academy Award for *Ben Hur*)—all with a provision in their contracts for the October-fifteenth starting date.



Tarita, a Polynesian girl who plays the feminine lead, entices tyrannical Captain Bligh (Trevor Howard) into a Tahitian version of the *Twist*.

a thing like this can happen," says the director.

Brando himself went to Tahiti with Rosenberg and director Reed to select the Polynesian members of the cast. To find his leading lady, Brando took each of sixteen prechosen Polynesian maidens into a room with him, one at a time, and threatened to throw himself out the window, in order to study their reactions. Since all of the ladies responded with giggles, this bit of Brandoesque procedure was singularly unsuccessful. Eventually he chose as his costar a girl named Tarita, who was employed as a dishwasher and waitress in a local hotel.

October fifteenth got closer and closer. The script still was not acceptable, and writer Ambler began yet another version of the Pitcairn Island sequence that Brando had demanded. Also, Rosenberg ran into shipbuilding trouble. Blizzards in Canada had delayed delivery of lumber for the *Bounty's* hull. As a result, October fifteenth came and went—and still no *Bounty*. Moreover, there still was no shooting script. Rosenberg now had on his hands 89 cast and crew members, all on salary beginning October fifteenth, including Brando. His contract called for \$500,000 as an advance against 10 percent of the picture's grosses, with a provision for \$5000 a day overtime for every day that the shooting of the picture ran over schedule (to date he has collected \$1,250,000 and the film is not ready for release).

The *Bounty* was completed in November, nearly two months late, and sailed from Nova Scotia to Tahiti under its own power. There were two shipboard fires en route and the ship, top-heavy with special riggings for cameras and other equipment, rolled frighteningly in heavy seas and caused acute seasickness among its experienced Nova Scotian crew. In the meantime the cast and crew of the picture flew to Tahiti and shooting began in earnest on December fourth. By now Charles Lederer had replaced the first three writers and was laboring with the still-incomplete script, barely keeping ahead of the shooting schedule.

Brando Tosses a Bombshell

Then Brando tossed a bombshell. With several weeks of filming already in hand (at the cost of \$55,000 per day), he suddenly decided he should play the part of another character, Seaman John Adams, the lone survivor of the mutiny, instead of Fletcher Christian. This novel idea, after giving fits to executives at M-G-M, was vetoed; Brando disconsolately went back to work as Fletcher Christian. By now, however, so much time had been wasted that the production ran into the Tahitian rainy season. Producer Rosenberg ordered the entire company back to Hollywood to regroup. During the regrouping period, director Carol Reed resigned and director Lewis Milestone was hired—and it was then that the *Mutiny of Marlon Brando* began in earnest.

Milestone began shooting indoor scenes at the M-G-M studios in California while awaiting the end of the rains in Tahiti. His starting date was February 11, 1961. On February twelfth, he and Brando already were in conflict. Milestone's idea of moviemaking is to set up the camera, tell the actors what to do and get on with the job. Brando's idea of moviemaking is for the actor to have endless discussions with the writer, director and

producer to attain the proper mood, and then when said mood has descended on the actor, to set up the camera to catch the actor's genius in flight. Milestone would tell Brando, "Do so-and-so." Brando would say, "Why?" Milestone would not answer. And the tug-of-war would be on.

Brando quickly indicated to associates his dissatisfaction with Milestone. Milestone was not aware of this criticism for about three weeks. "Then," he told me, "Charlie Lederer, the writer on the picture who had recommended me to be the director, came to me and said, 'You're working too fast. You better slow down a little.' I said to Charlie, 'Of course I'm working fast. Don't you think enough time has been wasted on this picture already?' Charlie said, 'Yes, but Brando says you're not really interested in the picture and you're speeding things up because you're just trying to get it over with as soon as possible.' I said to myself, 'Aha, it looks as if we're in for a rocky voyage.'

Which One Has the Votes?

"I was right. The next thing I knew, Aaron Rosenberg was on the set every day, and Brando was arguing with him about every scene instead of with me, and then they'd call Charlie Lederer and they'd both argue with him. Sometimes they'd argue over one line for hours before a camera would turn. I later discovered that they had decided on a complete democracy in making their decisions: Brando had one full vote and Rosenberg and Lederer each had a half vote. All I can say is, that's a hell of a way to make a picture. The arguments went on until His Highness had won either Rosenberg or Lederer over to his side. Very often I'd take a nap until they informed me His Highness was ready to submit to my cameras. It was harrowing for me, but in terms of the extra sleep I got, quite restful."

The company moved to Tahiti to resume outdoor shooting at the end of March, 1961. By now Brando and Milestone were barely speaking to each other, and Brando was leading an exuberant off-screen existence. He lived regally in his villa, surrounded by Polynesian retainers; he played the native drums in local celebrations and danced barefoot with Polynesian girls in the island's niteries. He would arrive bleary-eyed and unprepared for the day's shooting. According to Milestone and other members of the cast, he rarely knew his lines and would fumble his way through as many as thirty takes of a single scene. He constantly used "idiot cards"—pieces of paper with his lines written on them—which he concealed on his person or somewhere on the set.

The production dragged on in Tahiti for four and a half months. Says director Milestone, "It wasn't a movie production; it was a debating society. Brando would discuss for four hours, then we'd shoot for an hour to get in a two-minute scene because he'd be mumbling or blowing his lines. By now I wasn't even directing Brando—just the other members of the cast. He was directing himself and ignoring everyone else. It was as if we were making two different pictures. But I was having trouble not only with his private mutiny; he had rallied to his side every punk extra



The mutinous Mr. Brando nuzzles Tarita. Director Milestone says Brando, while in Tahiti, rarely knew his lines and fumbled time after time.

“It was eerie,” says a fellow actor,
 “like a ghost ship with no one at the helm.”



The star playfully pipes on a diver's snorkel. Beating native drums and dancing barefoot in local gatherings, he adapted easily to island life.



Producer Rosenberg calls Brando's antics "six weeks of hell."



Director Milestone: "It wasn't a movie, it was a debating society."

who claimed he was a Method actor. If I raised my voice to one of them, Brando would complain to Rosenberg. It got so bad that one eighteen-year-old punk walked off the set when I refused to reshoot an entire scene in which he 'emotionally felt' his performance was not quite right. I said, 'OK, walk. But don't come back.' Like his master, he sulked for a while—but he came back."

Finally the time arrived to shoot the fateful Pitcairn Island sequence. Lederer, having written eleven versions of the sequence, finally believed that he had it right. So did Rosenberg. When they showed it to Brando, however, the screams could be heard from Tahiti to Bali. "This isn't what I asked for! It doesn't show man's inhumanity to man. I wanted to draw a parallel with what is going on in Africa today."

The Star as Cave-Dweller

There was another series of meetings; this time Rosenberg and Lederer stood firm. Brando suggested that he himself write the ending of the picture. "OK," said Rosenberg. "Put it on paper." It took Brando two and a half weeks to get his ideas in script form. For the most part, the sequence had Brando sitting in a cave in contemplation of society's ills, while the other men raped, pillaged and murdered on Pitcairn Island. He had, in effect, written himself out of the entire last part of the picture. Rosenberg indicated to Brando that his efforts as a writer were awful, and that they would continue to shoot Lederer's script. Said Brando, "You're making the biggest mistake of your life. You've made nothing but mistakes since the picture started. OK. This is what you want; this is what you're going to get. I'll just do anything I'm told."

From that point on, Brando's mutiny was in high gear. He appeared on the set every day for five weeks, but he just went through the motions of acting. For example, when he was supposed to slug Richard Harris in one dramatic scene, he merely flicked Harris's face with his fingertips, in imitation of a daintily outraged female. After several such takes, the angry Harris repaid him in kind by pretending to dance with him, and then stormed off to his dressing room. "When you're ready to work," he shouted at Brando, "call me." Throughout this period Brando feigned inability even to read his idiot cards. He would no longer speak with Rosenberg, and the producer in turn became furious with Brando. After viewing the film that had been shot during this "six weeks of hell," as he calls it, he knew that with Brando just going through the motions the entire sequence was a disaster. It had cost \$2,000,000 and there wasn't a single foot of usable film.

Then, just as abruptly as it began, the Mutiny of Marlon Brando subsided. The entire company had long since returned to Hollywood in despair, and Rosenberg was wondering what he was going to do with his multimillion-dollar white-elephant film when Brando came to see him. "I'd like to see the picture," he said. Rosenberg arranged a screening of the roughly put-together movie. After Brando had sat through it, he came to Rosenberg's office at M-G-M. "You know," said Brando, "that's a pretty damn good picture—but

the ending's no good." Rosenberg laughed hollowly. "You're telling me," he said. To his amazement Brando then suggested that they try to put together a new, brief Pitcairn Island ending. He agreed to forgo his \$25,000-a-week salary for two weeks of further shooting.

Rosenberg feverishly went to work with Lederer and writer Ben Hecht, whom Lederer called in on an emergency basis. The new ending was shot on an M-G-M sound stage in Hollywood, under peculiar circumstances. Director Milestone looked at the script and refused to shoot it. He was about to walk off the picture when Rosenberg prevailed upon him to stick it out for just two weeks more. "Fine," said Milestone, "but I won't go near the camera or Brando." He thereupon sat in his dressing room reading magazines while the final scenes were filmed with no visible director behind the camera. All instructions, of course, were coming from Brando and from a nervous Rosenberg standing in the wings. "It was eerie," says Richard Harris, "like seeing a ghost ship with no one at the helm."

And so the long, trouble-filled saga of the dual mutiny finally came to its conclusion last October, nearly two years after it began. If still another ending—the one proposed by Billy Wilder—is to be shot, another several months and another half million dollars will be tacked on to the sad history of the production.

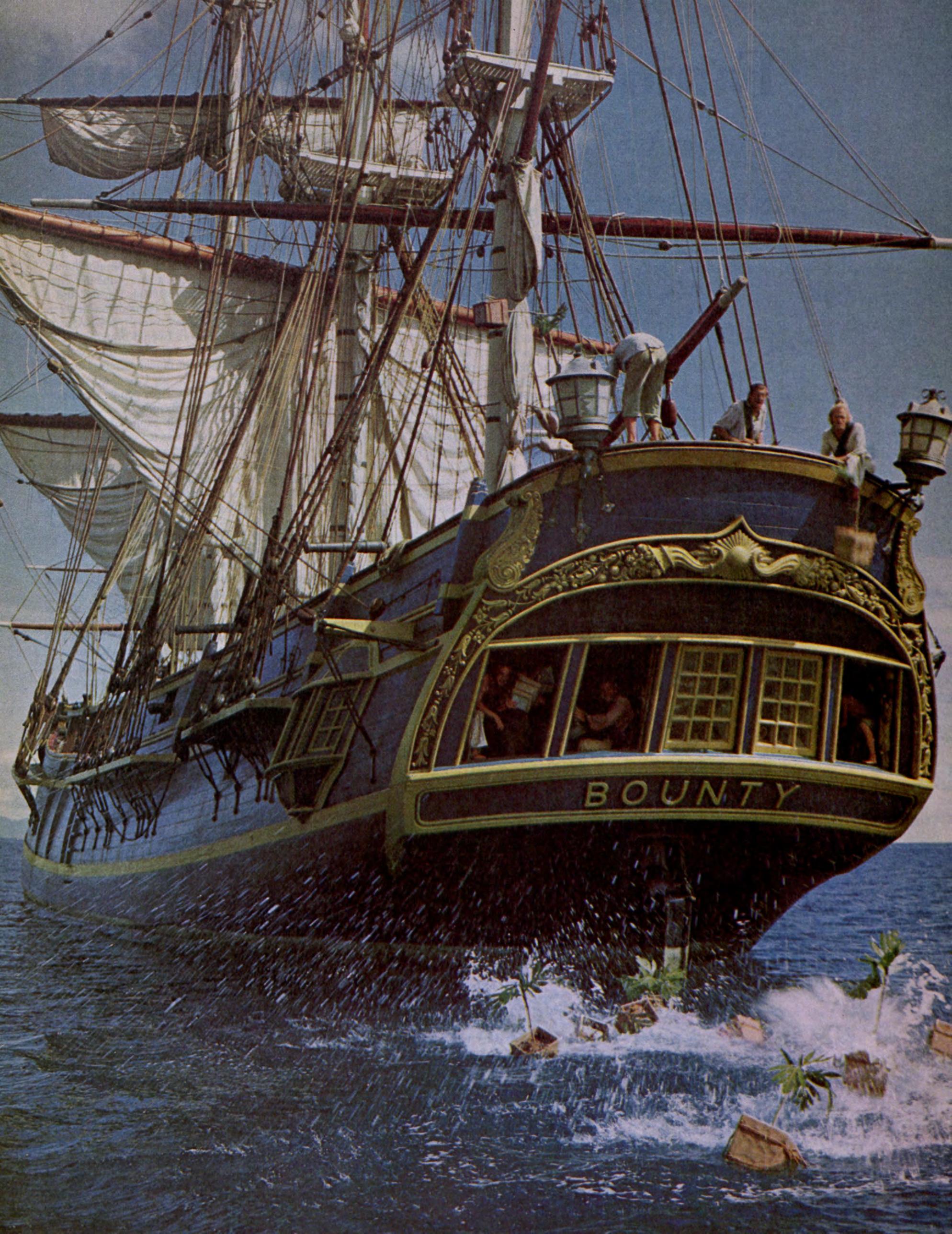
The End of the Star System?

Although the film may be a good one and like *Ben Hur* an eventual financial success (the few scenes I saw were breathtaking), Hollywood thus far has reacted with total shock to the disastrous, \$27,000,000 experience. Typical is the comment of Academy Award-winning producer-director Robert Wise, who told me, "I think the *Mutiny on the Bounty* problems with Brando, plus the problems with Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, might well mark the end of the star system as it exists in Hollywood today. The big-star monopoly—the monster that we ourselves created out of our fear of television—has now become such an expensive luxury and so loaded with trouble that it's just not worth it. I, for one, am discarding it. I made *West Side Story* without giving away control of the picture to any actor or actress; I am making *Two for the Seesaw* without giving away control of the picture to any actor or actress; and I am doing my next two films on modest budgets with no stars whatsoever. Amazingly enough, the financiers have now come to their senses and they are giving me money on this basis, for the first time in years. I think this is the new pattern for the industry—a turning point for all of us. Brando's behavior has made us realize how far out of hand the situation has gotten. More and more of us are saying, 'The hell with the star. I'll make little black-and-white pictures with good scripts and unknown actors.' We must do that to survive. A few more mutinies by stars and we'll all be out of business."

Brando himself says nothing. He has simply gone to work—for another million-dollar stipend—in Universal-International's *The Ugly American*.

THE END

In an important scene the mutineers cast breadfruit trees, the ship's cargo, upon the waters. The marathon production, now tantrum-free, has moved to Hollywood for finishing touches.



BOUNTY