

THE DEATHS OF JAMES MASON

BY

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A stage. Maybe a leather armchair and a small table with a decanter of whisky or water and a glass. A screen.

James Mason enters. He is anywhere between 50 and 75. He is dead. He is smart and dapper. He watches the screen.

The screen shows a photo montage of the actor in his various film roles accompanied by music – it ends with a still of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.

MASON

The great Jules Verne classic 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea was chosen by Disney as a lavish action film – not, thankfully, a cartoon with a talking seal and a dancing octopus.

I wasn't sure about taking the role of Captain Nemo when offered it and my agent went through many hoops to get the contract and billing sorted out. I lost out on the top billing to Kirk Douglas. So be it. You win some, you lose some. I did, however, manage to negotiate an extra deal. This I called The Portland Clause.

As this was to be a Disney picture I asked if the great man would lend me a new feature film of his choosing each week – a treat for my daughter Portland. It was meant a little bit tongue in cheek, but Walt agreed to it!

I was happy and went ahead with the film, though it was far less fun to make than you might think, seeing the end result. Douglas himself got to go on some fancy locations, whilst Paul Lukas and I were more or less confined to ordinary studio work. But the final cut was pretty good.

The studio set up a special screening for the team and I took my wife, Pamela, and Portland along. They enjoyed it. However, Portland seemed a little angry after it was all

over. She had a bit of a go at me over the regularity in which I ended up dead in my films.

It was a funny thing for her to come out with and I hadn't really thought about it, but I didn't dismiss it. So I had a look back at my film career and started making a list of the films where the character I played died and the ways in which I had been killed off.

I must say I was rather startled by the results and added to the list over the years that followed.

So, I will, with your indulgence, outline a number of instances where I met my maker on screen. Possibly some may find this rather macabre, but this is fantasyland of course. Somewhere I have spent all my adult life. This is amusement and entertainment and I think it maybe goes to show what a very odd world I have inhabited.

So in the Verne I was shot and drowned. I had been shot before in 'I Met a Murderer' directed by my wife's then husband. Pamela was in it too and we collaborated on the script. I was the murderer.

Being shot just by itself is a little dull and doesn't necessarily cause death, so being finished off in another way makes it far more satisfactory.

Of course, there is being shot and being shot. In period pictures like 'The Wicked Lady' and 'Fanny by Gaslight' it's far more glamorous to be fired at by a splendid and decorative pistol. In the latter it was in a duel and there were all the lavish costumes and so on to help you take your mind off actually dying. In the more contemporary dramas like 'Odd Man Out' and 'The Mackintosh Man' it was less flashy I suppose, though the former did provide me with one of my better parts and I am rather fond of it.

Drowning is rather less common than being shot, though I have done my share of it too. 'Pandora and the Flying Dutchman' saw me make a pact with Ava Gardner which

had us ending up in the water. And although you don't actually see his last throes, Norman Maine in 'A Star is Born' just wandered out into the sea when he lost all hope. A low-key death and happening off screen. A Greek tragedy. The reaction of the critics was similarly tragic – a big thumbs down. Difficult to believe isn't it. A fine film and a performance I really enjoyed putting on screen.