Williams Writes Definitive Hollywood History

I was surrounded by puppets. Really nice ones, sure—there was Cher, and the governor, and different Al G. McGee—but they were puppets. And I was here to interview the author of what will probably go down in history as the definitive book on Hollywood. I was greeted by publisher Georgia Skirnet, who knew my name and ushered me into the private office of Gregory Paul Williams. I was in the right place. Williams entered with gale-force energy. Sitting at his desk, his conversation was highly animated with an infectious enthusiasm. It was evident that 14 years of hard work to produce The Story of Hollywood: An Illustrated History had started growing on its own. I was stunned by his photographs—indeed there is a book about Barrymore and his friends and they talk about Wessleman as part of the gang. Finding was a really poetic story about them losing their infant son. To console themselves they would take the carriage, led by a striking pair of white stallions, and just drive around the Los Angeles basin looking for somewhere to get away from the grime and bustle of Los Angeles. They found a little fig orchard [the Weid family owned Holly Canyon near the fig ranch] came down from the canyon every day, crossing the Wilcox’s property on their way to the Cahuenga Pass school, so Wilcox just named their paths to school after them, Ivar and Selma.”

But I wanted to know how this book was going to be different from all the other Hollywood books.

“One thing that compelled me to finish the book was that as I did all the research I realized there was no book like it,” Williams said, “When people write about Hollywood, they go up to a certain point—they talk about the founding of Hollywood, Sid Grauman, that sort of thing—then they follow the movie business out of town and leave Hollywood. The last parts of these books don’t really deal with Hollywood as a town, rather as an idea. What happened to poor old Hollywood? I wanted to stay in Hollywood and just let it morph around me and see what happened—like a time machine.

“It got kind of ‘dark’ toward the end because as I researched, I was falling in love with all these little buildings around Hollywood and Vine and they were all getting burned and trashed. If you find something in Hollywood that’s over 50 years old it’s remarkable. We almost lost the Egyptian Theatre. I was involved with Hollywood Heritage after the earthquake and we had to make a stink because they were just going to leave the theater open to the elements where the walls had collapsed. This is important, a historic theater almost became a flea market.

“All these new developers are taking whole blocks and turning them into ‘Times Square’ with the big screens. Everything is looking ‘Bladerunner’ now, with the animated billboards. When the CRA came here they said the billboards were going to be different, but when we turned the buildings into a restoon of billboards. They’ve brought in more blight.”

What’s next for Williams and his publishing aspirations?

“Maybe an addendum with just pictures, no text,” he muses, “There are so many photos we didn’t have room for. And I’d like to do a documentary using moving images, both rare archival footage of old Hollywood and the city as seen in major film productions.”

Now that’s a film I’d stand in line for.

Kurt Reichenbach