

July 2024



"It's your New York!"

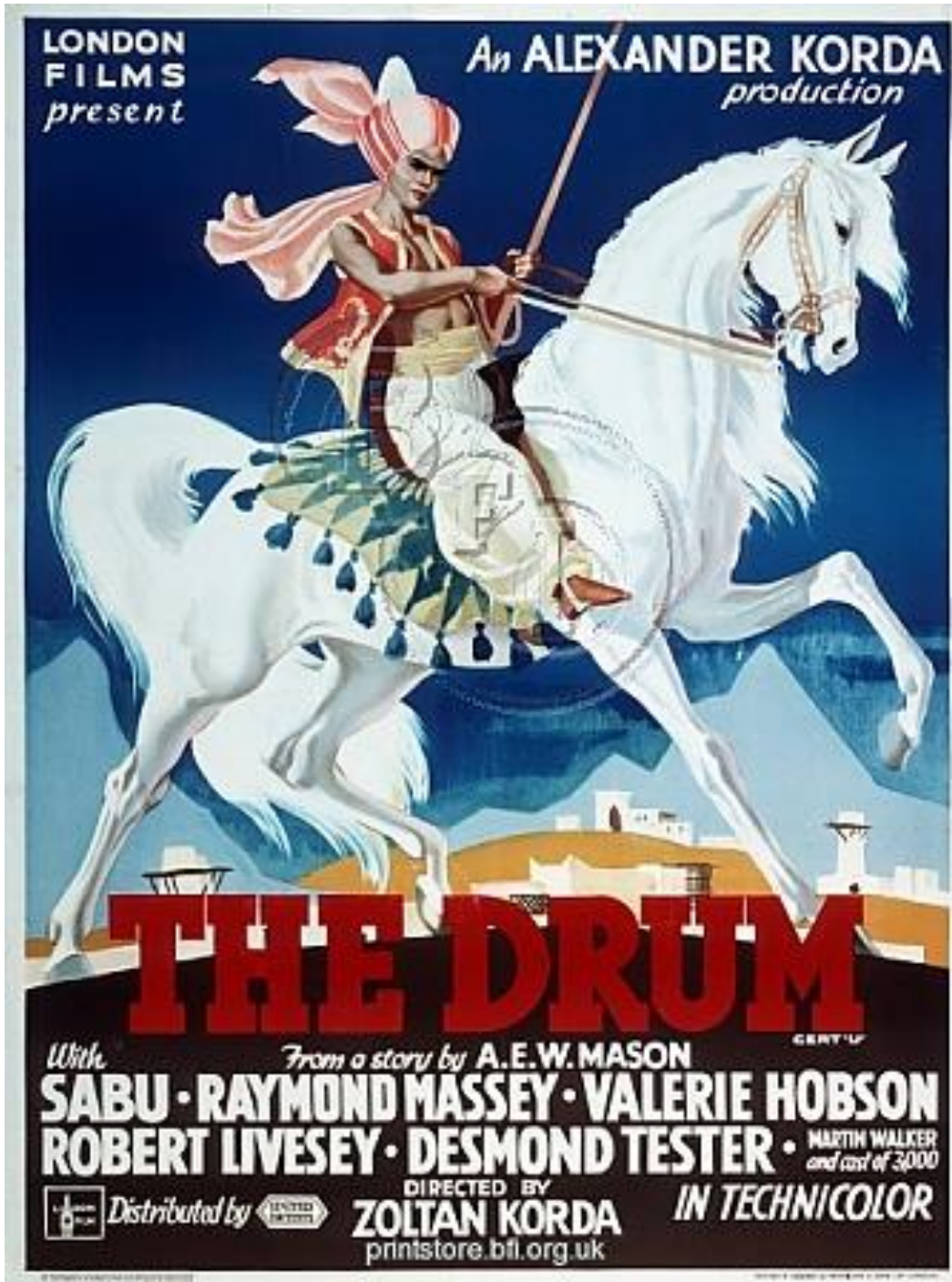
# *The Rondout Reader*

## **American Salute**



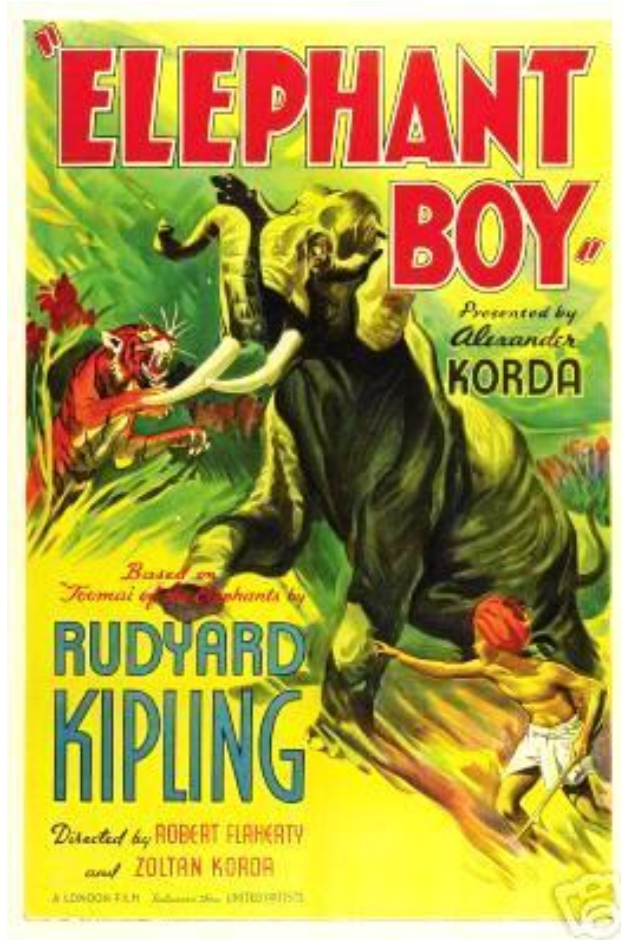
### **A Hero's Tale**





*"My story is of such marvel that if it were written with a needle on the corner of an eye, it would yet serve as a lesson to those who seek wisdom."*

Anonymous, *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*



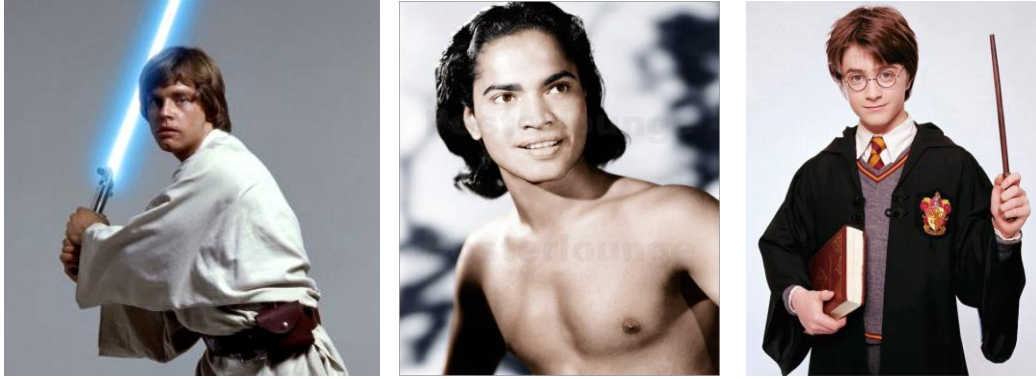
My name used to be Selar Shaik, before I became world famous.



No, no, NO! Not the wrestler or the hacker or the drummer. No comparison to me, the first, the original *Sabu!*

*What?* What do you mean?

How can you *not* know me, never heard of me? I was the Hollywood fantasy hero of my decade, the innocent, exotic boy braving incredible adventures, the world's first single-name superstar!



All make-believe. It was my *real* life that was magical!

Beginning with the elephants...



I was born in the Indian jungle. The first dozen years of my life, I had merely existed, my bold and daring spirit trapped by tradition.

My father was a *mahout*, an elephant trainer and veterinarian for the Maharajah of Mysore. He died when I was eleven and it was ordained that I would take his place. My older brother drove a taxi cab. Our mother had died when we were very young, so I had grown up with the Maharajah's elephants



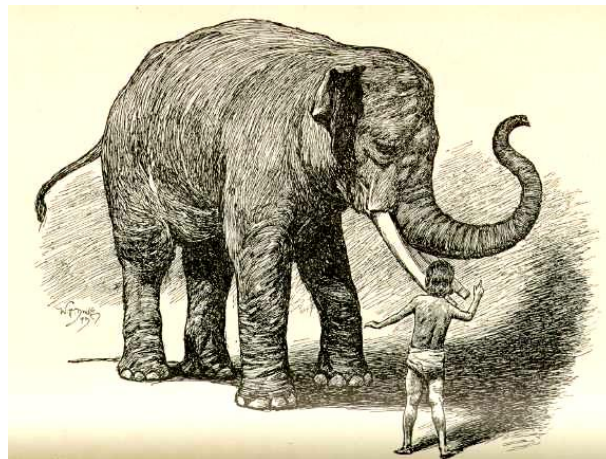
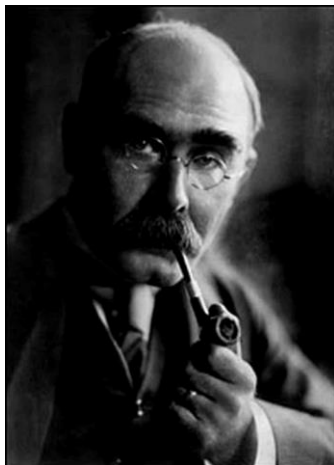
My cradle had been rocked by an elephant and I rode atop my first one when I was three. By studying the skills of the maharajah's chief elephant driver, I mastered my father's elephant when I was seven and became a ward of the maharajah, earning seventy-five American pennies every month.

I didn't want to go to school, but they kept sending me back every time I ran away. I felt I was going nowhere. To stand out, I chose the biggest, strongest elephant in the herd. *Irawatha* and I became trusted friends right away and I taught him many tricks, much to the delight of the maharajah.



In February of 1935, when I was 11, the Englishmen came. They were as white as ivory and very important. The maharajah ruled Mysore; the Queen of England ruled all of India.

They were going to make a *movie*, a 'documentary' from a story by a great British writer.



And they wanted a 'native' boy for the lead role.



The English entered the royal stable at lunch time while the senior *mahouts* were away. Wearing only a *lungi* and a turban, I put on my own show, performing acrobatic stunts while effortlessly guiding the elephants.

My foreign audience applauded. After several camera 'tests', they offered me a new job. And then a new life.

I, now named *Sabu*, would become their 'Toomai of the Elephants'!

And I had a new family. I wish I could speak English, but I'd work hard to learn it. My confidence and curiosity had won me an incredible opportunity and when the film crew changed locations, fearing nothing and wishing only to serve my white *sahibs*, I, and my brother and pet mongoose, went with them.



Britain was another world! I was enrolled in school immediately and began working extra hard to learn English. In the studio, I was free. The director wanted to adopt me, but because he was divorced, was not allowed to. To make me feel like a star, he bought me a car!



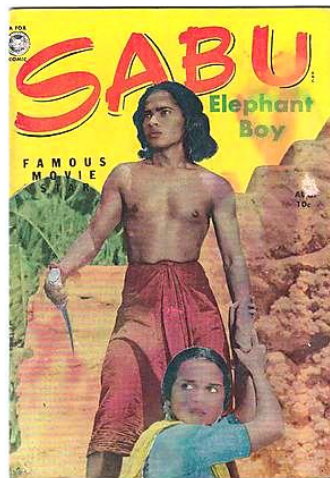
SABU RIDES AROUND THE LONDON FILM STUDIO IN HIS AUTOMOBILE. MARLENE DIETRICH'S CADILLAC IS IN THE BACKGROUND

Finally, on April 7, 1937, 'The Picture With a Thousand Elephants and Million Thrills' premiered at the Leicester Square Theatre. Then I took to the stage as the English audience cheered.

So did the **Kipling Society of England** which endorsed the film, and me.

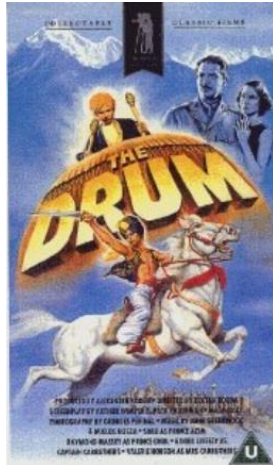
## THE TIMES

*"...A great thing that the Indian boy, Sabu, plays a chief part in it....natural with unselfconscious grace...a perfect foil for his elephant."*



To promote the film, I appeared on English radio programs and met with Queen Mary herself.

**Elephant Boy** was an international success. The studio quickly planned my next movie which would be known with different titles, singular and plural.



My 'Elephant Boy' had become a Technicolor prince!



## The New York Times

*"...A richly colonial atmosphere...  
Be charmed by the rightful prince, Sabu."*

I had become so popular that a rival studio wanted to 'borrow' me to make another Kipling movie, but it didn't happen and a much older actor played the title role, and he modeled himself after me!





Off to America, to New York City, to see the President and the First Lady, and then Hollywood! After the premiere of *Drums*, I found out my next film would be what they'd later call a 'remake'.



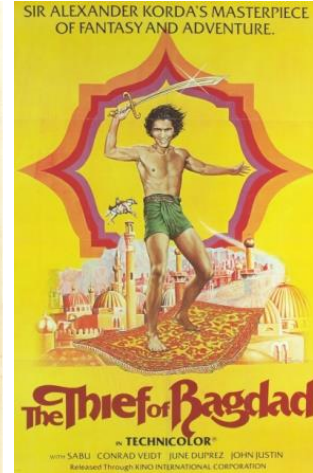
Our *Thief* will be the most fantastic fantasy film ever made, with a royal love story, a wicked wizard, and...



A genie bigger than *King Kong*!



Early on, it had become apparent that making a movie was not unlike domesticating an elephant; to fully produce 'the *magic* of the art', one must meld oneself with 'the *spirit* of the creature'.



*Thief* had plenty of 'magic', but the *melding*...

There never was a complete script. We got it in sections with about a million changes. The studio head hated the first and second directors. The first sets weren't 'big enough' for the production. The 'special effects' were beyond any other film ever made.



A third and then a fourth director. The score was "a symphony accompanied by a movie." The Technicolor brighter than ever. We made a horse and a carpet fly, and a gigantic hungry spider!



Through chaos and confusion. we worked as hard and as fast as we could, and just when **Thief** was finally coming together...

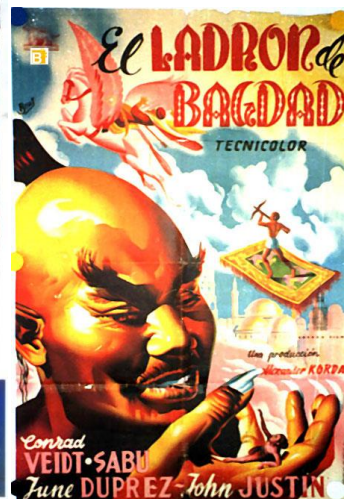
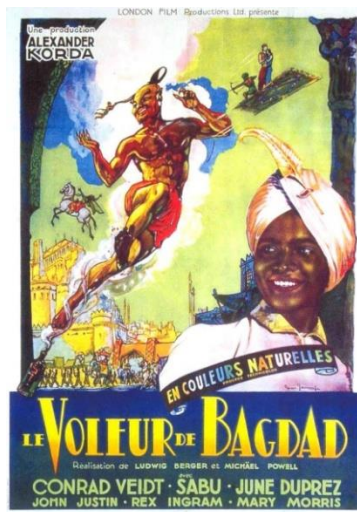
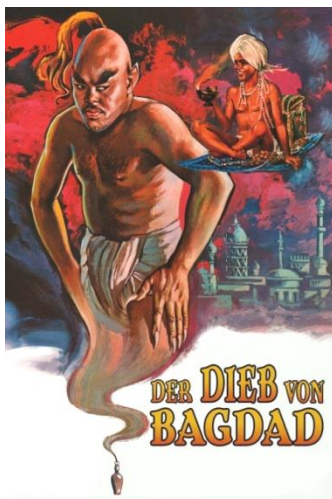


On September 1st, 1939, England and France declared war on Germany after the Nazis invaded Poland. Thousands of miles and a world away, my India was also at war.

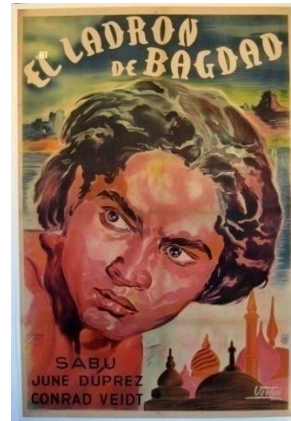
Production was shut down for a month. The 'Desert Fox' would soon be shooting in our African locations. Off to America to film in the Grand Canyon.



**The Thief of Bagdad** premiered at the Carthay Circle Theater in Los Angeles on October 17th, 1940. Then opened around the world on Christmas.



All the critics raved!



*"This 1940 movie is one of the great entertainments. It lifts up the heart."*



Unlike black-and-white American film stars, I got to sing in Technicolor!



*"I want to be a sailor,  
Sailing out to sea...  
...I want to be a bandit,  
Can't you understand it?  
Sailing to sea is life for me..."*



[eat@hashfoodny.com](mailto:eat@hashfoodny.com)



**“Fit for a Kerhonkson King!”**



**“And the SHADOW in Eddyville!”**



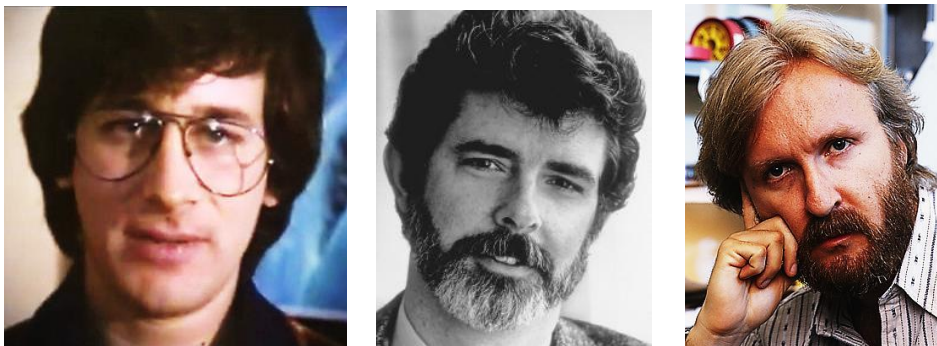
**Thief of Bagdad** won three Oscars. Outside of India, suddenly, I was more popular than Gandhi!



The three great fantasy films of my lifetime:



The director of the next not yet born.



**Thief** began with me, Abu the thief, son and grandson of thieves, who 'always wanted to be a hero'. Condemned for stealing, I meet the deposed king in jail and help

him escape. Caught by the evil magician, I am turned into a dog. Then, on a deserted beach, I free a giant genie who wants to kill me!



Rex Ingram's brilliance would inspire future iconic performances.



But smart thief that I am, I trick the genie into granting me three wishes.



The power of film and fantasy...we won many awards, made more money than I ever dreamed possible and became 'world famous', but there was something far more... I made people *imagine!*

Eighteen months after the film was released, the Nazis had invaded the Soviet Union and surrounded the city of Leningrad, 'The birthplace of the Revolution'.



In the darkest days of the Siege, hope was hard to come by. Braving the bombs and shells, there was one theater in the city still showing movies. And for *Thief of Bagdad*, the house was packed.

When the genie granted my three wishes I replied. "I can't think on an empty stomach, I wish I had some sausages like mother used to make."

The genie snapped his fingers and in the palm of his hand...

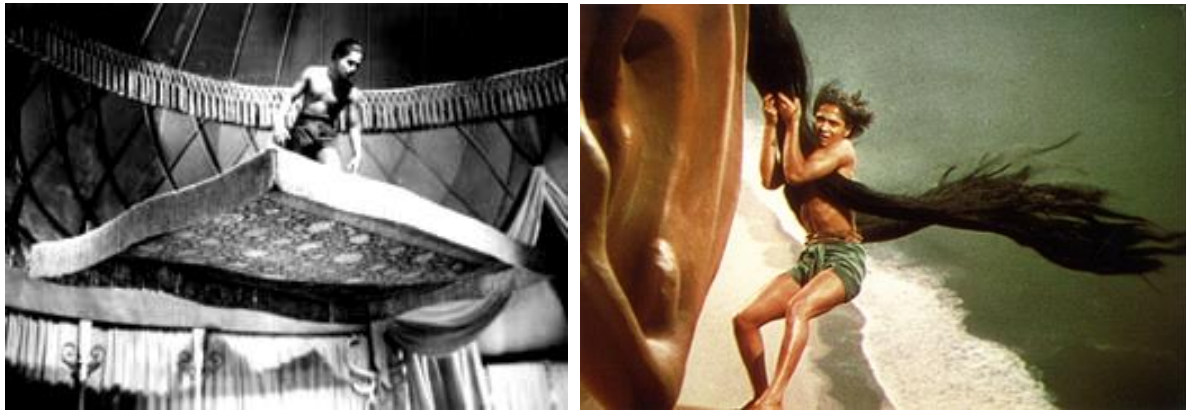


*"Your sausages, master!"*

The starving Russians rioted. Shots were fired to drive back the mob. In 900 days, more than one million Leningraders would starve to death. And not for many years would Abu, the genie, and the magic sausages be seen again in the Soviet Union. I might have used my three wishes more wisely. As for my fourth...



I had fallen in love...with America! To prove myself to my new country, I left Hollywood and enlisted in the US Army. As I already had plenty of experience, I wanted to fly.



The Army had me touring the country, selling War Bonds. Only US *citizens* could fly.

What a ridiculous regulation! Or was there more to it? For years the Army had insisted that Negroes 'lacked the needed prerequisites to be pilots' while the English believed that the Japanese 'inner ear flaw' prevented them from flying well.



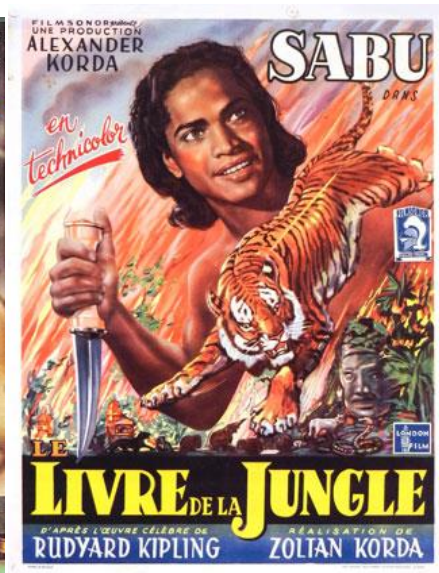
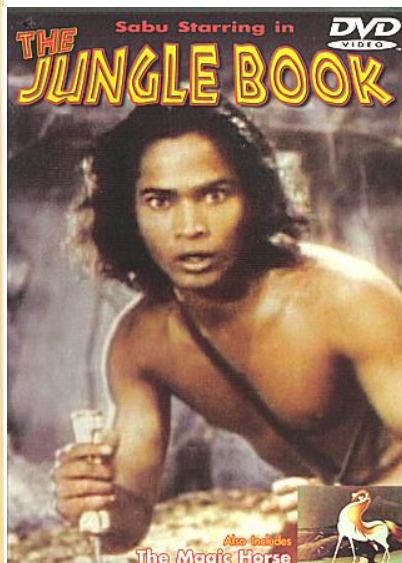
War gave both the chance to prove otherwise. I was 'colored', but not a Negro. Asian, but not Japanese. Who would speak up for an Indian who wanted to fly for America?

Hollywood did. Not to help me get my wings; the studio wanted me back. I got special permission from the War Department to return to work, making another movie from a Rudyard Kipling story.



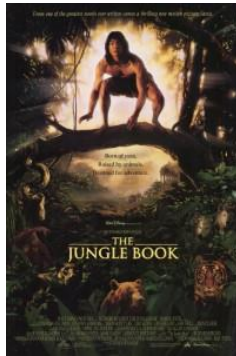
NEW YORK  
**Herald Tribune**

*"The chief asset...is the presence of Sabu...perfect in the role of Mowgli."*



The film was a huge success, making me even richer than the maharajah of Mysore!

Many 'Mowgli's' would follow.



But for many who saw me first, I was the true one.



I bought a Cadillac, dated beautiful starlets, and made three more movies.



Not what I wanted most of all. I studied my English and American history every day. Then passed the official test with flying colors, and took the oath - I became an American citizen!

This time around, the Army Air Corps accepted me, trained and assigned me to the 307th Bombardment Group as a ball turret gunner in a B-24 *Liberator*.



The first B-24s had no belly turrets and were vulnerable underneath.



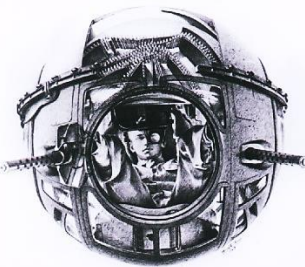
I, who had fought and defeated mythical monsters and jungle beasts, found myself in the belly of a machine ready to fire twin massive guns at the enemy. But by 1944, in the Pacific Theater, American forces had pushed the Japs back, closer and closer to their homeland.

After my first 25 sorties, I joined the 13th Army Air Force. Stopped counting the hours sitting in my glass and plexiglass ball, eager to fight. This is what I had dreamt - to be at the front defending my country, the United States of America!

Then came that bombing run on Borneo. Out of the sun they flew, fighters of the Japanese Imperial Navy hell bent on killing us all!



I reacted like the trained warrior I was, lighting up the sky with fifty caliber tracers! The Zeros zoomed closer, cannon blazing. Far from Hollywood, ripe with reality, I was fighting for my life and the lives of my friends.



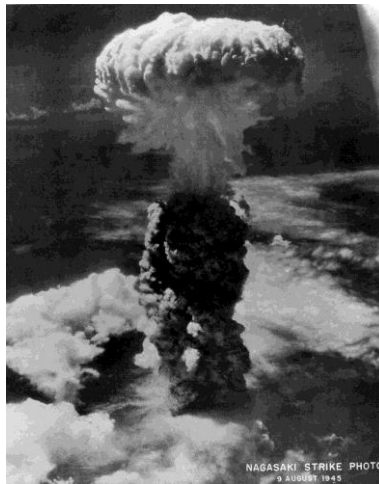
"They're coming in too fast!"

***"Why would I go looking for somebody who wants to kill me?"***

Not a tiger or a cobra or the blackest panther, not an evil magician or the murderous palace guards or a monstrous spider, but another airman, maybe not much older than me, fighting for his country...to the death.



I fired long full bursts and yes, I hit him! Not a 'kill' or a 'damaged' but I, Selar Shaik, son of an Indian *mahout*, and a new American, had struck the enemy and sent him smoking into a cloud.



The war ended. I had won a Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal with clusters, flying more combat missions than Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart combined.



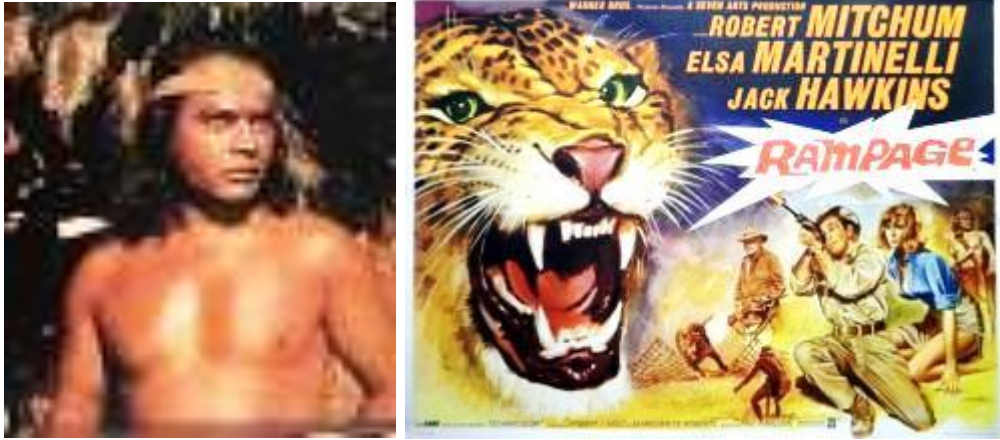
But I was not a hero like the thousands, the *millions* of Americans and English and Russian and Indian fighting men who gave their lives for our freedom.



*"Everything is possible when seen through the eyes of youth."*

I'd left a boy, a 'child star' and returned a war veteran, a man to a changing Hollywood. No longer who I used to be, I got lesser roles in forgettable movies...





But I did well because of my investments in real estate and in Marilyn Cooper, who became my loving wife and the mother of my children.



Indian and America had one inescapable thing in common: too few rich, and many too many poor. Two different worlds and between them a near uncrossable gulf.

I enjoyed the adventure of growing up. With a little luck and a lot of hard work, I had become a rich, respected, educated man of the world. What an incredible journey my life has been.

On December 1, 1963, I had my required physical examination. The diagnosis: "If everyone was as healthy as you, there would be no need for doctors."

Two days later, I had a heart attack and died in my Marilyn's arms.





*"Farewell, little master of the universe!"*

But I'm still very much alive. I'll live on for as long as you remember me.



*"I'm going to find what I want. Some fun and adventure at last!"*

