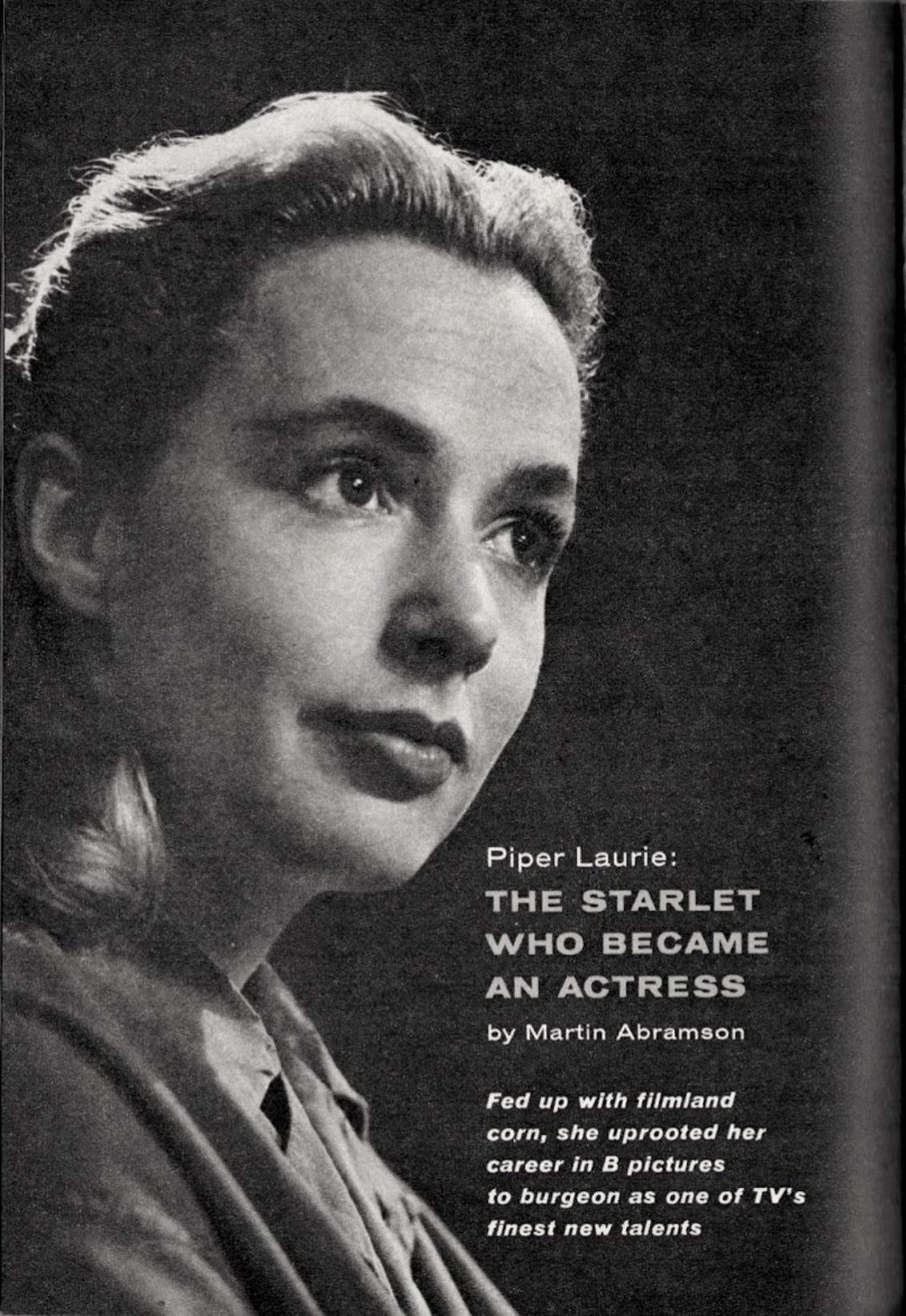


Piper Laurie:

THE STARLET WHO BECAME AN ACTRESS

by Martin Abramson

Fed up with filmland corn, she uprooted her career in B pictures to burgeon as one of TV's finest new talents

THREE years ago, a Hollywood actress received a new script from her studio, read it, and immediately had a bad case of hysterics.

When she finally settled down, she called her agent and told him not only that the script was so bad she wouldn't do it—but that she wanted the studio to release her from her contract.

The actress was Piper Laurie, a girl finally reacting with a cry of pain and protest to a needle that had been jabbing her side for seven years.

During those seven years, Piper Laurie had been a photogenic clothes-horse in "B" Technicolor pictures whose parts called for her to smile and mumble clichés, then be rescued from some trumped-up peril by the handsome hero. Her pictures tickled the teenagers and always made money.

Therefore, she was well-paid and well-publicized. Her bosses at Universal-International Studios referred to her as the "sweetest thing." She cooperated on everything, she never argued, she went along with promotional stunts such as eating flowers for dessert, taking milk baths in the back yard, and posing for pin-up pictures commemorating everything from Ground-Hog Day to National Pickle and Sauerkraut Week.

This all seemed fine. But behind the smiling glamor girl there was a Piper Laurie the public never knew—a girl so miserable she was on the verge of a breakdown. "I hated everything I did in Hollywood," she says. "I detested the name of Piper Laurie and everything it stood for."

When she revolted, Hollywood thought at first it was a huge joke, then insisted she had buried her career for good. But the astonishing aspect of the Piper Laurie story is that through television this "B" picture caterpillar has recently been reborn as an artistic butterfly. Her performances in *Studio One* and *Playhouse 90* dramas sent critics reaching into their grab bag of superlatives.

"For the new Piper Laurie, the sky's the limit," observes Bob Weitman, vice-president of CBS, former Paramount official, and a shrewd judge of talent. "Every producer of an important, worthwhile property will be beating a path to her door."

How did a girl with so much artistic ability become a symbol of Hollywood banality in the first place?

To understand Piper Laurie, a girl whose exquisite features, oval face, slim, gently curved figure, and winsome brown eyes combine to make her a photographer's dream, you first have to understand Rosetta Jacobs, an unattractive, torturously shy girl who couldn't make friends, and who coveted an apparently unattainable career in show business as a means of getting recognition for her obscure self.

"As a girl growing up, there was nothing about myself that I liked,"

Piper, nee Rosetta, says frankly. "My hair was too bright a red; I always imagined people were laughing at it. I had a thousand unsightly freckles. I wore braces on my teeth. I was clumsy. I didn't seem to have any skill. I had no shape. I was afraid of boys and they had no interest in me. I didn't know how to express myself and I had such a fear of saying the wrong thing, I usually said nothing at all."

Piper was born in Detroit, but when she was seven her father, a furniture dealer, moved the family to Los Angeles. It was a devoted family, but a neighbor recalls that Piper's mother and her older sister were lively, vital people whose personalities blanketed Piper's.

In school, a friendly teacher coached her to do recitations. Then one morning, she was asked to recite a poem in the school auditorium. "I knew every word by heart," Piper recalls, "but when I got out on stage and saw that sea of faces, I became terrified. I couldn't say a word, yet I couldn't move either, so I just stood up there with my mouth open. Finally, someone led me off."

The teacher didn't give up, but taught Piper comic monologues which, after a while, she was able to deliver in class. They were good and their success gave the youngster her first craving for the footlights.

"Suddenly, desperately, I wanted to be an actress," she says. "I didn't want to be a movie star in the sense of becoming a glamor girl. I wanted people to notice me, yes, but to notice me as a person who could do something worthwhile, who wasn't just a useless lump."

When Piper was 16, Nature suddenly came to her rescue. Her hair turned from glaring crimson to a soft brownish-red. Her freckles receded. The braces came off her teeth. Her round lumps of body flesh slimmed down, giving her a very attractive figure.

Piper summoned up the courage to enroll in a dramatic school run by a man named Benno Schneider. Her new appearance and her new medium for self-expression helped thaw out her personality a little, but her basic feelings of inadequacy still ran deep.

One day, a graduate of Schneider's school took Piper along with him to see his agent. The agent decided to set up a screen test for Piper.

"If you get into the movies, you can't use your real name," he said. "Rosetta Jacobs sounds too old-fashioned."

Piper said that as a private joke she'd been experimenting with the name "Piper Laurie."

"Now that's a real Hollywood name," the agent told her. "We'll use it."

The test was shown to Universal officials and Piper was hired as a contract player. Her salary was $100 a week, and the contract, at the

During Piper's cheesecake days, signing pin-up photos for servicemen was typical chore.

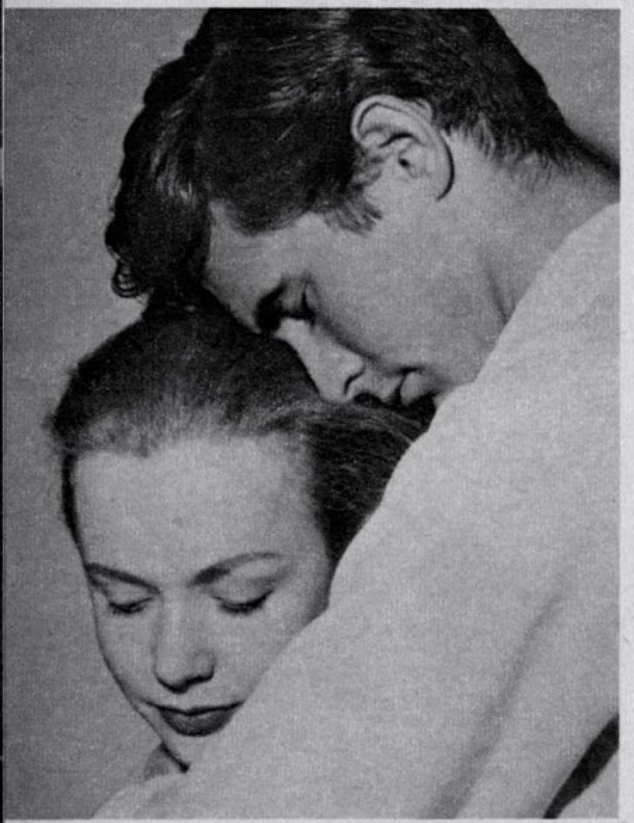
studio's option, was to run for seven years. Automatic raises were to be awarded by the studio each time they picked up her option, until she reached a high of $1,000 a week.

For her test, Piper had done a serious, emotional scene. But Universal's talent scouts saw only a girl who photographed with intoxicating sweetness, whose features reproduced like a Dresden doll, and whose red hair and ability to wear brightly colored clothes were made to order for Technicolor.

"I thought the director would teach me to act," she says, "but all he'd say was, 'Just give it the old personality, Piper!' It was maddening, but I didn't know what to do about it. After all, I was just 18."

The double life of Piper Laurie continued for six more years. "I was well paid," she says, "but I would gladly have traded that money for one part that had substance to it, or to have neighbors or co-workers say something to me about my *acting*, instead of saying, 'Oh, you looked so nice in your last picture, Piper.'

"Most of my social life was arranged by the studio. I was told to go out with so-and-so because it meant good publicity, so I went, even though it was sheer terror for me to spend an evening with someone I didn't know. People



Piper, shown in a scene with Tony Perkins displayed emotional depths as TV actress.

thought of me as a lucky, untalented, rather stupid little thing, and they never really *listened* to what I had to say."

Inevitably, Piper began having hysterical crying jags in the locked privacy of a dressing room or a bedroom. Only two people knew about them. One was Susie Kirkpatrick, a studio hair stylist who accompanied Piper on trips. The other was the late Leonard Goldstein, one of Hollywood's best-liked producers who had developed a close relationship with Piper after producing one of her films. Because of their disparity in ages, Goldstein was more of a devoted uncle than a suitor, and she leaned on him for advice.

On the eventful day that Piper finally found the nerve to turn down a script for the first time and to ask out on a contract that had become a torment, she examined her new-found strength. Part of it, she decided, came from the sudden death from heart failure of her good friend Leonard Goldstein two years before. It left her with nobody to cry to or fall back on. The tragedy seemed to make her aware at last that she could not go on behaving like a scared child all her life.

It took another year and two more picture commitments—which Universal insisted she fulfill—before Piper became a free agent. She spent the next year sitting things out in California, foregoing a salary that had reached $1,500 a week, while hoping for offers to do roles she could believe in.

But the offers that came were to do more "Piper Laurie" parts.

She went to New York to try the stage, and auditioned for a play called *Maiden Voyage*. It was the first time she'd ever auditioned for a Broadway role and the gloomy, empty stage, together with the fear that the theater-wise people out front held her in contempt, sharply accentuated her feelings of insecurity. She started to read and the words froze. All over again she was the little schoolgirl who couldn't recite.

The theater people were kind and gracious, but Piper finally fled from the stage, sobbing wildly.

A few weeks later, she heard about another play and asked the playwright if she could read for it. The playwright kept putting her off. Finally he told her the truth: he thought his play had a chance for the Pulitzer Prize and he couldn't risk that chance by putting a Piper Laurie in the cast.

"I knew already that my name was a synonym for bad acting," Piper says. "But that was almost more than I could bear."

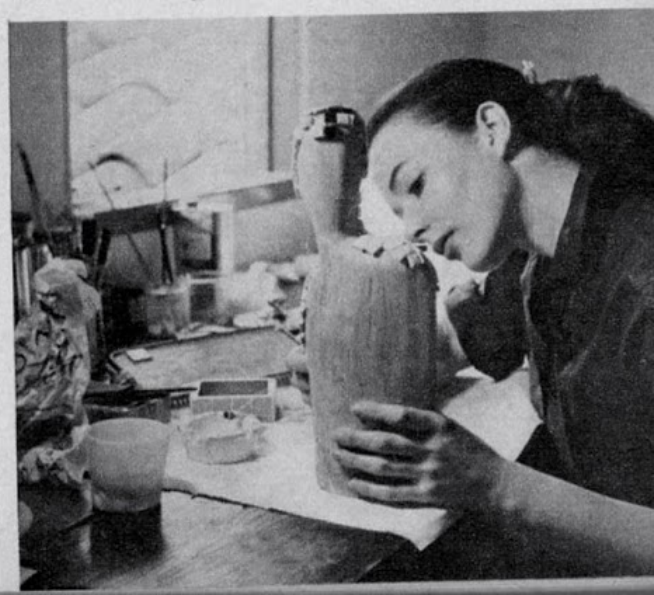
She read for more plays without success. But meanwhile she started going to drama classes again, and spent her odd hours acting out roles in all the important dramas that interested her. Her chance to change the meaning of the name Piper Laurie came not through a Broadway part, however, but a part in a *Climax* TV play. It was a mediocre drama, but it gave Piper one compelling scene, and she played it well.

Some reviewers noticed it and commented on Piper Laurie's "surprisingly good scene."

TV producers noticed it too, and made offers. Those she chose projected her skill as a dramatic actress with stunning impact. As the only young female survivor of an atomic bomb blast in a *Playhouse 90* production, as a deaf mute in a *Studio One* drama, as a star of three sequences dramatizing love in America through the years on *Seven Lively Arts*, she became the critics' new darling.

The future holds bright promise for this girl who has enjoyed little brightness in her 26 years. She realizes that her life is

As an actress, instead of a glamor doll, Piper has more time for her hobby, making ceramics in N.Y. apartment.



still one-dimensional—that she should have a husband, a family of her own, interests outside of show business, to make it richer and fuller.

"But all that will come in time," she says. "I've only gotten started on my first project—to make myself the best actress I possibly can."

Her artistic successes have already made important changes in her personality. She has always been interested in art and literature, but it is only recently that she has found the time—or made the time—to explore these fields deeply. She visits the galleries, paints intensively, and works on mosaics and ceramics.

She is usually up late each night reading, mostly classics and history. And she writes a good deal of poetry in blank verse, short stories, and mood pieces that stress her childhood memories. But she never expects to have any of them published.

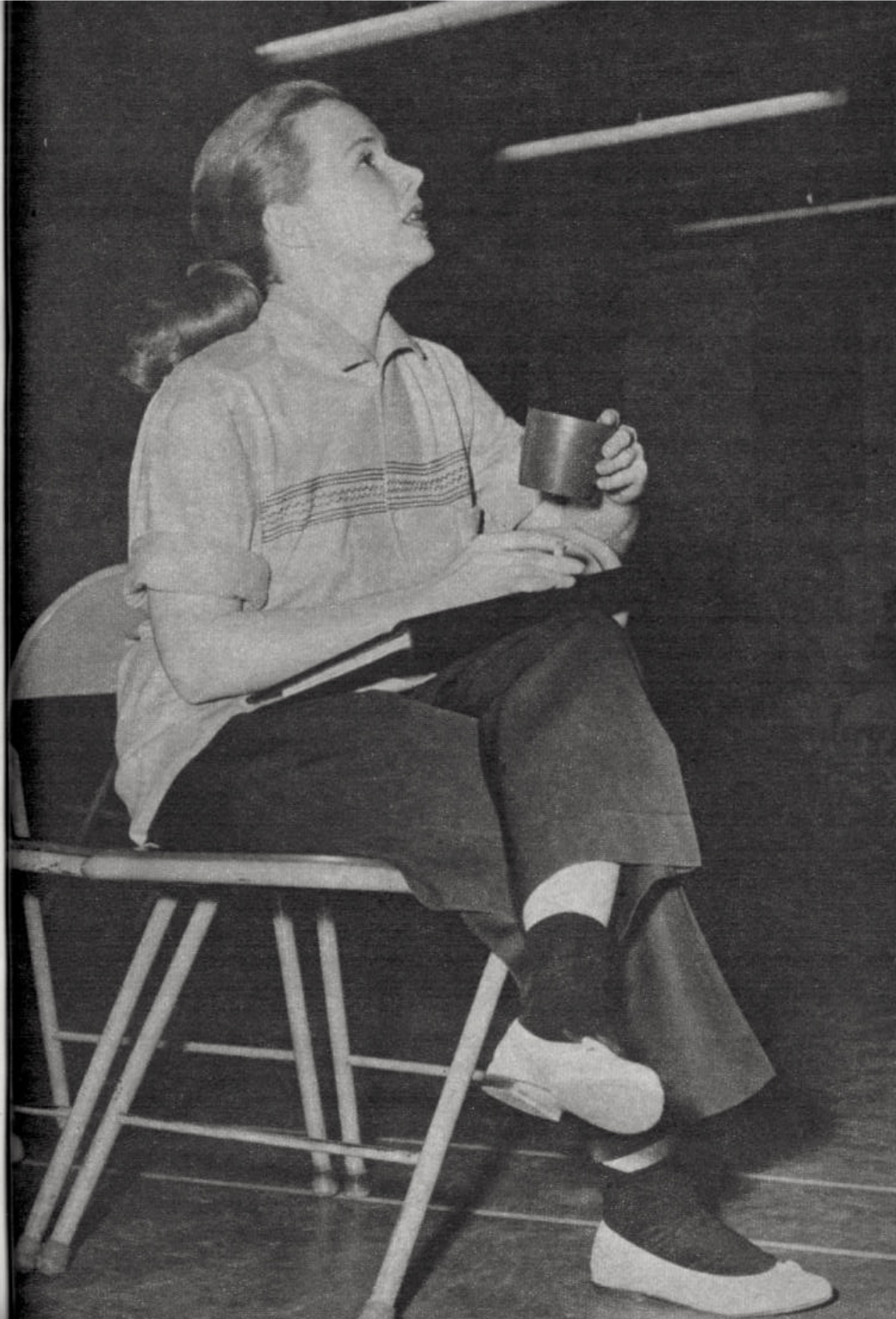
As a teenager, she used to be good at cooking and sewing, then neglected both activities during her "glamor" years in Hollywood. Now she has picked them up again, and is becoming what she calls "a second-rate amateur expert on Italian cooking." She is an avid walker and has a strange yen for strolling for miles in pelting rainstorms.

Piper has dates with actors and directors, but much of her social time is actually an appendage of her career—going to the theater, seeing the better movies and watching others perform on TV. She can enjoy shows and movies now "because I no longer squirm and say to myself, 'Look how good *their* acting is. Why can't I do the same?' "

The new model Piper Laurie even had the nerve to stand up to Maurice Evans, the great Shakespearean actor, when she bowed out of a recent TV dramatization of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Piper was to have played opposite Evans, but she withdrew because she felt that "drastic changes" made during rehearsals turned the production into a play in which she could no longer believe. Evans blasted her "half-baked ideas" in the press, but when the show went on the air, it lost much of its audience after the first act, and ranking TV critics panned it.

One observer remarked, "It may seem impossible to some people that Piper Laurie, a refugee from B pictures, could be right about a Shakespearean play and the great Evans could be wrong, but that's just what happened!"

When one of her old Hollywood co-workers asked Piper how she had ever found the backbone to stand up to Evans, she answered quietly and simply, "You can do a lot when you have your self-respect."



The "new" Piper Laurie (right) has faith in her critical judgments.