# DVD Booklet

These are only a sample of the full thirty or so TV “specials” with my name in the title that were made over the course of twenty years, but I think it fair to say that they are among the best. When the subject was a whole city and not just a single person, the form took a while to develop. We learned the hard way that the research team had to come home with the whole cast-list fully worked out. Often, in some place like Buenos Aires, there was a hairy, locally resident British professor who had to be sidelined at the last minute because there was not time to tell the whole history of the country, there was only time to imply it. Implication was everything. From my angle the task while we were on location was to spot opportunities: the meanest and ugliest senior female sampan driver in Hong Kong, etc. When we got home with the footage, my job changed to helping fine down the edit so that the right words met the right pictures. In my book *The Blaze of Obscurity*I talk at some length about just how fascinating that process was, but let me say again that it was a disciplined task – far and away the most nose-to-the-grindstone writing I have ever done. When I made a mistake, I never forgot it, and it’s still the first thing I see when I view the show again. Mercifully, most of the time I’m still pleased by how everything clicks. The job, really, is very closely akin to writing a poem: you pick on something precise so as to give a sense of everything, and there mustn’t be a word out of place from start to finish.

**Clive James in Las Vegas**

My personal problem with Las Vegas is that I find gambling and gamblers pitiably boring. I could have gone to gaol for libel for what I wanted to say about some of the gambling families, consisting mainly of people so obese they were spherical, who crammed the elevators on the way down to the acreage of slots and black-jack tables where they would have their money removed from them with surgical precision. Luckily my crew, having assessed my negative attitude, timed the shoot so that we were there at the same time as Caesar’s Palace hotel laid on the American Grand Prix in the hotel’s car park. The mere presence of my no-bull compatriot Alan Jones was deeply comforting before another round of meeting the gamblers. One of Jones’s mechanics that year bore an uncanny resemblance to the actress Susan George but we weren’t allowed to shoot the scene. The same applied to Alain Prost: he had a mechanic who looked exactly like Princess Stephanie of Monaco. In those days the drivers could still get away with it.

**Clive James Meets Roman Polanski**

The “Clive James Meets…” format cost less than a full-blown postcard but it still had to be prepared thoroughly. Polanski, after several years in exile, had written an autobiography and was temporarily available. He lived in Paris, in a marvellous apartment on the right bank, but it seemed a better idea to get close by booking a table for two at the then-fashionable little restaurant L’Ami Louis where all the Hollywood stars came by private jet so they could order off the menu. Polanski went for the deal in a big way and was soon rearranging the salt cellars while our crew put the finishing touches to a lighting rig that filled the whole restaurant. He was very careful of his appearance – always making sure that his sweep of hair met his open collar just so – but refreshingly he was not at all careful when answering the key question, about liking young girls. Later on somebody in America made a big-budget documentary about Polanski and they used a fragment of our documentary at a key point, running it at the wrong speed for some reason, so that I quacked like a duck. Polanski knew very well that we wouldn’t be editing in the same sequence as we spoke but he didn’t mind the apparent effect of two grown men starting a meal with coffee and ending with the snails. Neither did I, and in fact nobody noticed anything about the décor because it looked so exactly right. The viewers were focussed on the man who had already made *Chinatown* but had not yet made *The Pianist*, so he was a genius between masterpieces.

**Clive James Meets Katherine Hepburn**

Katherine Hepburn had spent a lifetime terrifying interviewers with her reputation for intelligence and I was no exception, but I thought too much of her to be content with anything pale. Loudly announced in advance by her PR heavies, the two big no-go areas were her love affair with Howard Hughes and her long *de facto*marriage with Spencer Tracy. (The lesbian strand in her life was still an unknown quantity and was never mentioned while she was still alive.) At her apartment in the Upper East Side of New York she settled us in with tea and buns. I was already making my plans, and about twenty minutes into the interview I asked exactly the right question. “Some people think that falling in love with you was the only sane thing Howard Hughes ever did.” Or words to that effect. The effect was electrifying. She was off and running, with results that you will see. After that, raising the ghost of Spencer Tracy was a cinch. I loved the thing she said about his drinking. “Tracey found life *difficult*.” So do I, but one way or another I have always enjoyed my job, which makes things a lot easier. I mean, if you’re going to spend half a day talking to someone on film, it might as well be Katherine Hepburn. When we were finished she gave me a paper bag full of chocolate brownies for the trip back to my hotel, about a hundred yards away. She had me sussed.

**Clive James in Dallas**

Having to do a Postcard about Dallas was my inevitable fate because the show *Dallas* was still a burning memory and as a TV critic I was supposedly obsessed with J.R and Sue-Ellen Ewing. Actually the prospect didn’t thrill me at all, until I got there and found that the oil tycoons and their “best-dressed” wives were highly sophisticated people. For the society women to be “best-dressed” was a daily requirement: otherwise they would not be fit to appear at lunch, pronounced in the show *Dallas* as “lernch” but in the actual Dallas definitely pronounced as “lunch” by impeccably coiffed women in Givenchy and Saint-Laurent couture originals. My director, Terence Donovan –gone now, alas -- hated doing homework shots because he found them trite, so the footage of my interview with the supreme socialite Nancy Brinker arrived back in London minus the necessary coverage. We had to shoot the backgrounds the following year and a keen eye will spot that either they don’t match up or that Nancy Brinker decorated her parlour differently at each end. It was also possibly an error to interview one of the Hunt women in the open air beside the swimming pool of The Mansion on Turtle Creek, because there were airliners going overhead every five minutes into Dallas-Fort Worth’s main runway. But things like that provided added roughage and I didn’t mind them. Harder to forgive myself for was that I didn’t get a few minutes interview out of Tom Landry, legendary coach of the Dallas Cowboys. But he never spoke to anybody.

**Clive James on Safari**

In my book *The Blaze of Obscurity* I give a long account of how we filmed *On Safari* because it was the show from which I learned most about how to set up effects. When being stalked by a lion, for example, always position the camera behind you, not off to the side. With the camera behind you, both you and the lion will be in shot, whereas if shot from the side the two of you won’t be linked up visually. My co-opted co-star Dennis Zaphiro had a marvellous driver called Kungu who taught me quite a lot of Swahili, a language I’d be reading now if there was anything written in it. *Taka kwenda, toka hapa m’paka pali.* “I want to go from here to there’. A useful phrase if accompanied by the right gestures. There is a sadness about the show because we were coming in on the twilight of an era. What Kenya produces most of is people and eventually they will do the animals in. There’s no way around it, although I loved it all so much that I made a plan to approach Kerry Packer and persuade him to arrange an Ark to Kakadu. But I got shy, and anyway, Australian quarantine laws would never have allowed it. Cane toads yes, leopards no.

**Clive James at the Playboy Mansion**

This is the one I should never have done, although that fact didn’t become clear to me until we were a week into the shoot and there was no chance of pulling out. The main idea was to build the whole thing around an interview with Hefner and then illustrate the result lightly with a few deft, or if necessary daft, touches from the ambience of Playboy Mansion West. But Hef, patently nice and gentle though he was at all times, was also a bore on an epic scale. Apart from its obvious absurdities, I thought there was quite a lot that was true in his “philosophy” and I can proudly say that I didn’t lead him to misrepresent himself. But if our colloquy has been edited down to what was interesting in it, we would have had a show about twenty minutes long. So I went along with the idea of clowning it up, and in less time that it takes for a man to make a fool of himself I was in the hot tub with three of the magazine’s centrefold lovelies. Actually at least one of them was very smart – she was English – and they spoke nothing but the truth when they said they were volunteers. But as some Greek philosopher once said, all images are binding images, and from then on I was the guy who jumped into the Jacuzzi with the crumpet. The scene saved the show, I think, but you can never expect credit for that. After all, the show was your idea. And it still seems to me a legitimately interesting idea to have had: to beard the ogre in his castle and ask him to explain himself. If only he had been an ogre. Alas, he turned out to be a vacuum cleaner salesman in pyjamas.

**Clive James and the Heroes of San Francisco**

Did you know that one of the tight ends of the San Francisco 49ers collects real aeroplanes, like John Travolta? Neither did I, but there was the fact, gleaming out of the preliminary research, and so before I even got there I already had some idea of how wealthy the team was. Their famous star quarterback Joe Montana was out of the game that year but still around to be filmed in all his glory, like Achilles on holiday. The man to talk to, however, was Bill Walsh, the team’s coach, and he was universally celebrated for never talking at all. Research was harder in those pre-Google days, but one of the researchers came up with the key fact that Walsh was a student of the American Civil War. So there was my way in. I had read Shelby Foote’s three volumes on the conflict and as soon as Walsh found that out he was all set to go. I might say that the numerous parallels between American football and war don’t stop me liking American football. If only war was always like that, with dancing girls. The 49ers cheer squad, by the way, is very decorous; not like the Dallas Cowboys cheer squad, which is unashamedly a sexual provocation; but I liked the 49ers’ attitude better. Nobody pretended that football wasn’t a serious business. I agreed, though I risked becoming unpopular for my opinion that the best place to watch American football was in England, where an hour of play could be compressed into an hour of broadcasting, instead of spread over four hours, interspersed with hoo-ha. Take a look at Bill Walsh, though, and ask yourself if there is anything hoo-hah about him. The tight end who took me flying was another grim-jawed type. The only really radiant smile I saw came from Joe Montana, in a year when he was being paid several million dollars for doing nothing.

**Clive James in Japan Part 1**

Not just because it was a big subject, but because we had twin motives, we decided to do two programmes in Japan and call them the same project. One motive was to evoke the country, and the gripping story of what had happened to it since it came back from the ruins of World War II to produce pocket calculators the size of wafers. (It was the age when people still marvelled at innovation: now we take it for granted.) The other motive was to track down the context of the Japanese game shows that I had been screening excerpts of on TV in Britain and Australia, and if possible to involve me in the process of their making. This second motive, being the more obvious, provided the easier footage. On one of the game shows I was dressed in a red tracksuit and duly ran up and down looking idiotic. Well, I owed them that one. But the cultural stuff was far harder. At its lower end, Japanese culture in the everyday sense was a bit like a game show anyway. Whole families sat with their grandmothers in the mud, etc. My visit to a capsule hotel provided footage which I knew at the time would be worth it, even as I squeezed myself horizontally into a space meant for a small Japanese man. I sprained everything.

**Clive James in Japan Part 2**

But Japanese culture in its higher sense was a harder subject. I had long loved the subtlety of Japanese art and architecture but it was hard to show: the camera is always too impatient of stillness. Making fun of the capsule hotel was a cinch, but how to convey the majesty and delicacy of, say, the Ni-Jo palace in Kyoto? It couldn’t be done. I sat through the whole of the tea ceremony, but we would have had nothing to show for it if we had not included a beautiful actress. That was the problem with the culture and, for me, with the whole country: there was no shorthand. I began learning the language –in the next five years I got a fair way with learning to read and write – but even if I could have spoken it in the show the result would have been just more incomprehensibility Nevertheless there are whole stretches of the two films which I think convey the beauty along with the fun; and most of the fun was being had by the Japanese people. There was no question of making fun *of*them. They were too rich. It should be remembered that at the time of filming, the Japanese economy was right on top and we were looking helplessly for their secret.

**Clive James – Racing Driver**

The Australian Grand Prix had invited me to drive in the challenge race and we had accepted, long before anyone realised that I didn’t have a licence to drive anything. Since time was short, the only solution was to make learning to drive an ordinary car part of the movie. Stirling Moss kindly agreed to be my teacher, and he was very nice about it when I took us off the track at high speed first time out. As we span on the grass, he asked “Don’t you know *anything*?” I didn’t, but it was fun finding out. For my road licence, he taught me some crucial stuff – do your braking and gear-changing in a straight line, *then* turn the wheel – and I sailed through the test. In Adelaide I got down to some speed training and was soon whipping around the speed bowl, fancying myself to be as good as, say, Rowan Atkinson. Actually Rowan is a real driver and no civilian is likely to be anything like as good. In the actual race I came nowhere, which is just what I deserved for being fond of my chances. Watchers of *Top Gear* might like to know that our cars were doctored –taps screwed down, etc – so that they couldn’t do more than a hundred knots, but the effect was still pretty stirring when you were going at full chat down the long straight next to the wall. James Hunt caught me casually “breaking in” my driving shoes in the hotel bar and said “Hah! Posing”. He had just been busted by one of the airlines for piddling in the aisle – the same problem that Gerard Depardieu has now. Depardieu would have been a natural racing driver but they don’t make helmets that size. I was lucky they had one for me. But after my having achieved such an ignominiously lowly place my head started shrinking again to more appropriate dimensions.

**Postscript to the Postcards**

Clearing and compiling the material for this collection has taken a lot of time, and much meticulous effort from Grant Taylor and his team at Madman; and in the last couple of years I have been often ill, and unable to be of much help. But I wouldn’t want anybody to think that I value this work low when comparing it the rest of my writing. Recently I’ve had several close-ups of death’s door and have each time made a note that I should tackle any seemingly casual archival job, such as this booklet, as a chance to nail down what I mean, and what I meant. What I meant with the Postcard programmes was to do the best writing I could within the limits of the form, and thus, perhaps, to push those limits a little further. One of the strange penalties of my several subdued years of illness is that I am at last being taken at a solemn estimation by the kind of critics who always thought I was wasting my time in television: they are grandly letting me know that they can excuse me all that frivolity now that I have at last been able to turn to higher things. I myself never thought that way. First of all, television, unconfined by studio walls, was too much fun. If I started to list the producers, directors and staff that I roamed the world with, the list would go on for a yard: but there is no need, their names are all on the credits. Second, there was the salutary discipline of not being allowed to waste a word. It affected all the rest of my work, and especially my poems. The poetry that some of my more recently arrived champions so approve of began in the editing room. Other critics, smarter all along, used to pick out phrases from my programmes and TV columns, and either praise me for precision or condemn me for excess. That’s the criticism that counts, just as the creativity that counts is when you get people in, persuading them, correctly, that if saying things was what they did for a living, they would say what you say, plus or minus the odd trick or twist. So these discs are part of my most serious writing, even when I look like a fool; perhaps especially then. All I have to offer is a regard for humanity: personal dignity can look after itself.