



THE
MOVIE
ISSUE

90



PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN HAS ALWAYS BEEN
A CHARACTER'S BEST FRIEND. HE MAKES US WANT TO
SPEND TIME WITH THEM—EVEN WHEN WE DON'T LIKE THEM

BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY
PHOTOGRAPH BY JILL GREENBERG

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PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN'S CHARACTERS

are not easily erased from memory. The half-dressed loner making sex calls to strangers in *Happiness* or the nurse tending to Jason Robards in *Magnolia* would, on paper, be supporting roles. Hoffman, though, has a way of filling out ordinary folks until they burst with the hidden facets of their ordinariness—shame, tenderness, vengeance, adoration. Provocatively human, they force us to recognize shards of ourselves in their reflection. In *Capote*, for which he won an Oscar in 2006, Hoffman captured the writer with such graceful authority that audiences could almost mistake the film for a documentary. ¶ Last year he portrayed a rumpled CIA agent in *Charlie Wilson's War*, directed by Mike Nichols; a professor whose life is hijacked by his father's dementia in *The Savages*; and a callous older brother whose get-rich-quick scheme targets the family jewelry store in Sidney Lumet's *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*. We'll see him next in Charlie Kaufman's directorial debut, *Synecdoche, New York*, and later in the year in the film version of *Doubt*, John Patrick Shanley's play about a priest who may or may not have molested a student. Hoffman, who is 41 and the artistic codirector of the LAByrinth Theater Company, lives in Greenwich Village with his girlfriend, Mimi O'Donnell, a costume designer, and their young children, Cooper and Talulah. He talks to us about surviving the Oscars, being difficult, and riding his bike to the theater.

Did you see Julie Christie in *Away from Her*?

I made sure to watch it the night before the photo shoot, and she's wonderful in it. Meeting her was great. I've grown up watching her, and to finally meet her... We laughed a lot. I'm awful with photo shoots. She was wonderfully disarming.

Your character, Gust, in *Charlie Wilson's War*, is disarming, too. Did you come up with his look—the black hair, the pinkie rings, the gum?

I wish I'd gotten a chance to meet him—I think we'd have hit it off. The little bit I got of him, which wasn't much because he was a CIA agent, was from photos and from the book. There was a bit of video of him hanging out with his friends in his hometown, and I took up communication with his son Greg, which was helpful. He was of Greek working class—not an Ivy League guy—and very proud of his heritage. I'm very Irish, and I knew there were some specific things I had to do.

What was that set like?

I had a ball, I really did. I don't always feel that way. Sometimes work is work, and that's not a bad thing. But Mike Nichols, Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, and Amy Adams are very fun people to hang out with. They know how to run the day and do good work and still have a good time.

You often say you're difficult to work with, but you've been in three of Paul Thomas Anderson's movies, worked with Mike Nichols twice, and costarred with Meryl Streep in *The Seagull* in Central Park and now in *Doubt*. You can't be all that annoying.

Well, I don't think I'm an easy guy to work with sometimes. Ultimately I'm a good guy, though. At the end of the day, I don't make it personal. My appreciation and respect for whomever I'm working with is clear. So, more times than not, I walk out of there on good terms with the directors or actors. I rarely if ever cross over into a place where any damage happens. It's more that I'm difficult because I'm trying to get it right and I'm frustrated.

Your character in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* initially seems like pure evil, but a single line about his childhood reveals a chink in the armor.

Yes, you get the idea that he was not a loved boy and that the other children were paid more attention, probably in an extreme manner. He's not a murderer. It's really a story about circumstances coming together and how they can turn a person into a killer.

When you're playing nasty characters, do you have to find a way to like them?

Judging your characters is really an error. If you're reading the script and you don't get the part they want you to play—if you don't like the person or you're judging them all over the place—don't play that part. Somehow you have to get behind the character, get in his shoes, advocate for him. You have to play that person, and that person thinks the decisions he makes are to better the situation. Somehow you have to understand him.



The professor you play in *The Savages* is lovable.

Some people love him, some people don't. It's a great lesson: People's opinions about characters come from what they know or what they care to let themselves know or understand. It's the same for actors. We read the material, and if we can't seem to let ourselves know, or can't open ourselves up enough to know, or aren't advocating or understanding the character, even as awful as they might be, we don't take the part.



What's the last movie you went to a theater to see?

I just don't see that many movies anymore. I go to plays more because I have a lot of friends who are in plays and there's an immediacy to that. You can't see a play once it's closed, but I know I can get to the film later. I have two kids now, and I'm working a lot, so it's harder. But I took my son to see *Ratatouille*.



Does having kids change your approach to acting?

It's not about you so much anymore, so you're not sitting there thinking it's just you and your work and your girlfriend. So you pick jobs you want to do, people you want to work with, and you try to do the best you can, but the whole time you're thinking, "When can I spend time with my kids?"



IN THE MOMENT:

(from top) Hoffman with Laura Linney in *The Savages*, with Ethan Hawke in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, in *Charlie Wilson's War*, and as Truman Capote in *Capote*

Has your son seen you in any movies?

He's glimpsed me in posters, and he's seen something on the TV at his aunt's house—we don't have a TV at our house. I don't have a lot of kid movies to show him. When he gets a little older, maybe *Twister*. He understands me more as a person in the theater than in films because he comes with me to the theater when I direct.

Do you watch your movies?

It's part of the process. I want to know what I did. I want to know if it worked and if it was any good. I learn from it. I'll watch and go, "That sucks" or "That scene's good." Even in films that might be getting a lot of praise, I'll watch totally differently. Someone will say, "How did you like your work in the film?" I'll go, "Eh."

What made you want to be an actor?

My mom used to take me to the theater when I was a kid, community theater in Rochester. I loved going—it's still my most favorite thing to do, go see a play. I never thought, "I'm going to be an actor." I just thought, "God, I'm never not going to go to the theater, it's such a great thing." And then in high school I got involved in it because I wasn't involved in sports anymore.

Because you were injured?

I had a head and neck injury when I was a wrestler. When I was a junior or senior, it clicked in that I might want to study acting in college. I just thought, "Wow, I want to ride my bike to the theater and that will be happiness." And it is. I became an actor so I could ride my bike to the theater, leave it at the door, and do a play.

So people can have the same experience I had when I was 12 and saw *All My Sons*. That's still why I'm an actor.

You bounce from off-Broadway plays to big-budget movies. Do you make a concerted effort to mix it up?

I'm not that conscious of it. In blanket terms, I get sick of myself. I get burnt out on something, like anybody. You've just been in a run of a play for four months and think, "I'm probably not going to want to do a play for a while." Or you do a film and you have a couple kids and think, "Maybe I need not to do a film." Your feelings ebb and flow, but it's not specific like, "I gotta get me a role as a drug addict."

You often play characters who are socially apart, who are uncomfortable to watch, like Allen in *Happiness*.

I think everyone has the capability of making everyone else in the room uncomfortable. Everyone has the capability of being socially apart. Being human means you're really alone. It's never easy for anyone, even the people who seem to have an ease with it. Ultimately, in the great roles, what's being revealed is a person's struggle, and that struggle will reveal

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architecture and the movies."

"I like what you said, that movies are about the process of discovery," Spielberg replies. "You turn a corner and there's a discovery. That's a nice idea for the museum."

With that, the floor is thrown open, and the ideas become much more specific. Kennedy hopes that as visitors walk from exhibit to exhibit, they will be able to access a museum Web site with handheld computers or phones. Spielberg suggests that there be walls that are not really walls but illusions visitors can enter just like they enter film. "It's *Alice in Wonderland*," he says, "through a glass darkly." Hanson insists that the structure must contain at least one element so soaring and distinctive that it can be seen all over Los Angeles, like the Griffith Observatory or the Hollywood sign or the Capitol Records building. Kennedy adds that a dramatic tower could not only serve this purpose but also provide a site for the Governors Ball following the Academy Awards.

As everyone in the room free-associates, Portzamparc mostly sketches, filling page after page. Before walking into the meeting he said, "It's frustrating to speak about a building that right now is just a feeling in my mind. Or as we say in France, it's hard to *vendre la peau de l'ours*—to sell the skin of the bear before having killed it." That killing will be done at his drawing table back in Paris.

Portzamparc hopes to complete the renderings and models of the museum in the next few months, at which point DreamWorks Animation CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg, who has agreed to chair the fund-raising drive, will begin the selling. While the Academy is committed to putting \$100 million into the project, the remaining \$300 million must come chiefly from the Industry. "Jeffrey is a very enthusiastic kind of guy," says Bruce Davis. "Initially, he acted like he could come up with the money with a morning's worth of phone calls." But as he realized the size of the task, Katzenberg grew more sober. "You could tell he believes it'll be difficult," says Davis. Portzamparc's drawings and models will provide the tangible lure Katzenberg will dangle before David Geffen, Robert Iger, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sumner Redstone, Jerry Bruckheimer, and hundreds of others interested in seeing their names on an enduring monument.

"I share Jeff's enthusiasm that we can do this," says Davis. "But I'm not going to be the guy who breaks the Academy's bank. If we can't raise the money, the property will simply be an investment, and we'll sell it for more than we paid." Not that this is what Davis foresees happening. "I think this spring when people get a look at Christian's drawings, they'll open their wallets." ■



The Crimson Tide

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 124] brothers, *The Darjeeling Limited* is particularly striking for the way it exists outside any genre and untethered to any agenda. About the time you've concluded it's a lark—or as a friend suggested to me at dinner one night with not a trace of malice, "silly"—the tragic intrudes; dark and light rub shoulders, neither able to elbow the other out of the picture completely, barely realizing that not only can they exist in the same universe, but one can't exist without the other.

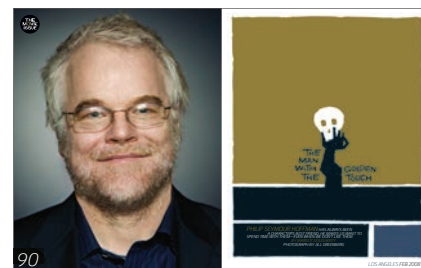
Particularly with the Parisian prologue that director Wes Anderson unwisely amputated from the picture, *Darjeeling* is at once his most freewheeling and most mature film. But my guess is it's too willfully singular for an Academy that, confronted by nihilism on the one hand and a guarded and eccentric sanguinity on the other, seems likelier to opt for the somber "ambiguity" of *Atonement*. A handsome British period picture based on a prestigious novel about lovers torn apart by small lies and big wars, it's romantic and has a dash of the postmodern, in the form of a narrator who believes she's somehow redeemed herself by whitewashing her role in the unhappiness and death she's caused. Emerging as this year's *The English Patient*, *Atonement* shrewdly turns its moral confu-

Los Angeles

VOLUME 53, NUMBER 2

» **LOS ANGELES** (ISSN 1522-9149) is published monthly by Emmis Publishing, L.P. Principal office: 5900 Wilshire Blvd., 10th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90036. Periodicals postage paid at Los Angeles, CA, and additional mailing offices. The one-year domestic subscription price is \$9.95. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to LOS ANGELES, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or other materials, which must be accompanied by return postage. SUBSCRIBERS: If the Postal Service alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within two years. Copyright © 2008 Emmis Publishing, L.P., a subsidiary of Emmis Communications Corporation, One Emmis Plaza, 40 Monument Circle, Suite 100, Indianapolis, IN 46204. All rights reserved. Best of L.A.® is a registered trademark of Emmis Publishing, L.P. Reproduction in whole or in part of any text, photograph, or illustration without written permission from the publisher is strictly prohibited. » **Subscriber Service** 800-876-5222. GST #R133004424. Printed in the USA.

sion into "complexity," which some might find either funnier or more depressing than the final scene of *There Will Be Blood*. In any case it's right up the Academy's alley, and if you've forgotten, *The English Patient* is the movie to which the Coen brothers lost the last time they were up for an Oscar, more than ten years ago with *Fargo*. If the Coens care about winning awards—and it's not clear they do—they may need to abandon Cormac McCarthy to New Mexico's cruel mesas and start trolling Man Booker Prize shortlists. ■



The Man with The Golden Touch

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 93] the part that makes someone uncomfortable and apart from anyone else. I've never come across a character who doesn't have those traits in some way.

When you won your Oscar for *Capote*, were you delirious?

I had a few moments of real panic. You don't get any more nervous than that, and it's televised every minute. You're literally grasping for the next thought and you know you're going to forget and it's just *survival*. You walk off and think, "Oh, fuck me, what did I just do? Oh, my God." You're freakin' out. It's not like, "Oh, I won an Oscar!" It's "Oh, my God! All those people!" In that moment the stakes are so high for pure humiliation.

Did winning change things for you?

That it happened. I can't un-happen it. I hope that makes sense. Now you have won that thing. You can't go back. Your anonymity gets lost more and more. Ultimately, and this is the good thing, it helps you get films made. If it raises your awareness in any way, it gives you a little more leverage.

Is it weird to be in the hardware store and have someone you don't know say, "Hey, Phil!"?

No, that's been happening for some time now, and it's part of my life. When I'm with my son, it can be a little awkward. People will see you and have tunnel vision and not notice that you're talking to someone. You might be walking across the street holding your son's hand and they're talking to you, and your son is like, "What the hell is going on? Some stranger is talking to my father." But mostly it's just, "Hey, man, what's up?" ■