

## His Feminine Side

Can Philip Seymour Hoffman do no wrong?

**The Observer, February 2006**

I really like it here,' Philip Seymour Hoffman says as he takes his seat on a sofa in a suite at the Dorchester. 'The place has some character. It's not just hotelness all over the place.' It is shortly after noon, and in a few hours Hoffman will receive a Bafta for his masterly portrayal of Truman Capote. He shed many pounds to play the role, and learnt to hold himself upright and immaculately, but now much of the weight and slouch and college-boy clothes are back on, and he is doing very un-Capote-like things. The strangest of which is something he is doing with the sofa cushions, taking two on each side and hugging them to his stomach and hips, a brocade buffer against something unknown - extended media interest, perhaps, or the prospect of his career profile changing from indie darling to something much bigger. For this is Hoffman's golden hour - a Golden Globe, a Bafta and in a few days probably an Oscar - and he declares he's finding it 'interesting'.

'Before this year I'd been nominated for a couple of Tonys and never won. I won a couple of smaller things. But I've never been nominated or won anything like this, and I've been acting professionally for 15 years. Actors know rejection - I understand not getting the prize, we're all there. So I'm coming to check this out and see what it's all about, and then maybe at least I can say, "well, I won't do that ever again".'

For a big star, Hoffman is relatively little known; even people who have seen many of his movies can't quite place the name. He has made 38 films, one for every year of his life, some of them too obscure even for the video store - My New Gun, Joey Breaker, Next Stop Wonderland - but many of them invested with a level of intensity that stays with you long after the ride home: Boogie Nights, The Big Lebowski, Happiness, Magnolia, The Talented Mr Ripley, State and Main, Almost Famous, Punch-Drunk Love, Cold Mountain. Even his walk-ons tend to be scene-stealers. But now something else is happening: leading roles.

He has done a couple of these before, most notably Love Liza, written by his older brother Gordy Hoffman, but Capote is the breakthrough. There are several reasons why this has taken so long. One of them is his willingness to make himself uglier than he is. He was quoted as saying that when he was on his drama course at New York University in the late-1980s he had told a friend that he would never be better looking than others in his class, so to get the work he would simply have to be a better actor. But now he doesn't recognise that comment.

'It wasn't like that at all. I wasn't a bad looking guy. I was thinner. I wasn't one of those guys in the corner with my hair hanging across my face going "I'm ugly..." I know I wasn't as handsome as some other guys, but I was OK with that. Good work is the only thing that would make me feel jealous or envious. Vanity is something that will only get in the way of doing your best work, and ultimately if you're truly vain you care more about your work than how you look in your work. I actually consider myself a pretty vain guy when it comes to that.'

I mention that when I saw his first films I thought he was gay. 'Because I played a couple of gay men,' he reasons. 'If I wasn't in *Boogie Nights* or I wasn't in *Flawless*, people wouldn't think that. Also in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, I was playing a very heterosexual man, but he was a dandy. I would read sometimes about people thinking I was gay and I would think, "Oh, that's so great!" I take it as a compliment.' (At his Bafta acceptance speech later in the day he made a special play of thanking his 'very hot' girlfriend, with whom he recently had a baby.)

Hoffman was born in Fairport, New York, in 1967, one of four children (his parents divorced when he was nine). His theatre work was supplemented initially by stints as a waiter and a lifeguard, but he's been creatively employed almost continually since leaving the Tisch School of the Arts in 1989. The theatre remains central to his ambitions - his direction of *Jesus Hopped the A Train* was a hit in London four years ago - but the challenges and rewards of movies have recently consumed him.

It is not easy to define the common characteristics of his film roles. Anthony Minghella, who directed him in *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Cold Mountain*, told me. 'Philip is an extraordinary actor, cursed, sometimes, by his own gnawing intelligence, his own discomfort with acting. He struggles for every moment in a film, overthinks, overanalyses, wrestles with the scene. It's a bracing collaboration for the director, but also a marvellous and rewarding one. There are few actors more demanding in front of camera, less demanding away from it. It's tremendous to see him getting the recognition he deserves.'

It is also possible to detect a feminine side to his work, and a propensity to play the psychologically challenged. 'But I think everybody's psychologically challenged,' he says as an assistant arrives with a pack of cigarettes. 'If you're a human being walking the earth, you're weird, you're strange, you're psychologically challenged. You're probably quite inept at certain things, quite good at some other things. You probably don't think you're as attractive as you are.'

For his part as Capote, Hoffman did the usual actorly rigmarole - he read the Gerald Clarke biography on which the film draws, he read the George Plimpton oral history ('basically a book of gossip, which made it excellent') and he got hold of all the tapes of Capote being interviewed and performing. And then he realised he was in trouble. 'I would talk to one person and they would say, "I adored Truman," but then another person would say, "Oh ... Just bitter." So right there you can see the difficulty, and it was something I was in denial of for a long time. I don't think I was fessing up to the levels of confidence I would need in order to play the role. It made for many bad days

for shooting, and really rough ones for me. And playing Truman Capote badly is an awful experience. It's awful.'

The reason why Hoffman is now being garlanded with awards is because he has achieved not just an impersonation but an embodiment: the delicate voice is there, of course, and the fey posturing, but there is also a deep empathy with his inner turmoils. 'It could be a really embarrassing situation if not pulled off correctly,' Hoffman says.

'I had it by myself in a room ... and with maybe one other person without a camera. It was months of working out what the hell he is doing with his mouth and tongue and chin that makes him sound like that. You can't just talk with a high voice, because that's not that unique - it had to be something else. I knew I could grab it at times before we started shooting - the entirety of him, not just an aspect - but once we started shooting it was "Oh, man ...". It was about the fact that he had something that I didn't have - this incredible fearlessness about putting himself on the line.'

When Hoffman felt he got Capote right, he was loathe to lose him. He stayed in character for six weeks as much as he could without frightening people. He would approach the catering bus with his Capote voice and nice posture, because 'the way my mouth works is completely differently from his mouth. It's hard just to drop and pick up again. I hate to put it this way, but it's kind of like working out or running a race, and if you take a break you stay on break.'

The film examines the five-year period in which Capote wrote his masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. He was already well established as a journalist, novelist and narcissist, a small, waspish, camp man possessed with great talent and an even greater sense of self-worth. He was a fine observer of human nature, and understood the power of reinvention; coming of age during the heyday of Madison Avenue advertising, Capote was his own supreme marketing campaign, transforming his put-upon beginnings in Alabama into a preening figure of tortured elegance in a jet-set to which he never truly belonged.

He never shook his innate fragility, and it is Hoffman's greatest achievement that he makes us understand that Capote's struggle with the book - his immersion in the brutal murder of a family in Kansas, the complex motives behind his befriending of the killers, his searing ambition weighed against genuine compassion for human frailty - was something from which he would never recover ('It just got too dark for him,' Hoffman reasons). The writer boasted that *In Cold Blood* was the first 'non-fiction novel' (there were other claimants), but the film is less concerned with his achievement than his methods. 'He led them on, he manipulated them, he lied to them and deceived them,' Hoffman says, 'but he also did genuinely care deeply for them, especially Perry Smith.' The key line of dialogue in the film is delivered by Capote to his childhood friend Harper Lee (Catherine Keener) not long after she has triumphed with *To Kill A Mockingbird*. 'It's as if Perry and I grew up in the same house; he stood up and went out the back door, while I went out the front.'

The film is a three-way triumph between the screenwriter Dan Futterman, director Bennett Miller and Hoffman, who have been friends for many years. Although most of the scenes in the movie occurred in some form, they were keen to take an impressionistic rather than documentary approach: 'We weren't making a piece of non-fiction, we weren't making *In Cold Blood*,' Hoffman says. We were hoping, poetically and artfully, to get at the truth of this man, without having to be perfectly factual. Hopefully at the end you say, "I think I get it," but you don't need to know how long exactly they talked in the cell ...'

At the beginning of the brief six-week shoot they believed they had made a mistake. 'We felt we were over our heads and had bitten off too much. That's true - it's not being dramatic. It was all "Oh, man, we got above ourselves". I think in the last two weeks Bennett and I were going "maybe we got something here". But not something of the scale that we ultimately found. I thought, "Maybe it won't be bad".'

It is fitting that a film about a work that transformed Capote's life has also transformed Hoffman's. But will he handle the fame in a similar manner? 'It's one of the things that Capote might not have been as fearful of,' he says. 'He would have embraced it more. That's the whole difference between the two of us. More notoriety was something he welcomed, whereas I don't. It is something that is fearful, as your anonymity is something to be cherished. But it's hard, because you don't want to complain. Life has given you a lot of good things to be grateful for, but it has taken anonymity, and when you lose that it's hard to explain to someone who hasn't lost it just how deep that is. Because it is deep. The fear is that you think you're going to lose it even more.'

The process has already begun. On the day we spoke, the American television programme 60 Minutes was due to broadcast a segment on him that revealed a period he spent in rehab after graduating. 'It was all that [drugs and alcohol], yeah,' he says. 'It was anything I could get my hands on ... I liked it all.' But he feels a little betrayed by the programme. 'You talk to your interviewer for a good four hours over a bunch of days, and that was about two minutes of it. It's not a major part of the story at all - it happened when I was 22. At the time I had to deal with it, in retrospect it was one of the major events in my life, but there are other events that form you. So to single it out as the one would not only be inappropriate, but not true.'

Hoffman adjusts his cushions. 'The strange thing is,' he says, 'I never thought I'd do films. I was studying theatre, and my dreams were about riding my bike to the theatre on Sunday afternoons to do a play, and they still are.' So movies have been a big long accident? 'I really like it here,' Hoffman says as he looks around the suite and fills his glass with ice.