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Movies

FILM; Tommy Lee Jones Snarls His Way to the Pinnacle

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At precisely 9 A.M., Tommy Lee Jones strides quickly into the lobby of La Mansion del Rio Hotel and impatiently enters a suite set up for breakfast. Except for the dark wraparound glasses, the actor could be just another Texas banker in his black boots, suit, white shirt and tie.

He removes his jacket and puts some fresh fruit on a plate. There is a knock at the door. He rushes over and flings it open. A chambermaid stands nervously outside.

"Yes, what do you want?" he barks.

"Spray the room?" she asks timidly, holding up a metal canister of air freshener.

"Spray? Spray?" he demands of the startled woman. "We don't need any spray."

She shrinks away.

Hey, it's Tommy Lee.

Tommy Lee Jones has, for years in films and television, rendered vivid, menacing portrayals of villains and assorted psychopaths and eccentrics -- from Clay Shaw to Howard Hughes to Gary Gilmore. With his battered face and lithe former football player's body, Mr. Jones has the versatility to shift easily from violent and over-the-edge characters to restrained, ordinary, even warm guys in leading and supporting roles. Yet full-fledged stardom has eluded him, partly because too many of his films faltered.

With "The Fugitive," which stars Harrison Ford, opening on Friday and three other high-profile films due in the next 12 months, the 46-year-old actor appears on the verge of a career breakthrough. His most recent film, "Under Siege," an action-adventure starring Steven Seagal, was a surprise hit last year. Mr. Jones and his other co-star, Gary Busey, virtually ran away with the movie as two nutty terrorists who hijack a battleship.

In "The Fugitive" Mr. Jones plays United States Marshal Sam Gerard, the relentless pursuer of the wrongly convicted Dr. Richard Kimble (Mr. Ford). Gerard is a steely, stubborn, sometimes volatile lawman who drives his colleagues almost as strongly as he drives himself and who emerges as a surprisingly sympathetic figure. The film was directed by Andrew Davis, who also directed "Under Siege," and is based on the classic television series starring David Janssen.

WHEN MR. JONES faces an interviewer he is irascible and bullying one moment, charming the next. He despises interviews and rarely gives them, except, he says, when his employers ask.

Michael Black, his longtime agent at International Creative Management, sums up the actor this way: "Some people say he's a hard guy to get to know. I suppose he is. Tommy doesn't open up. You meet some actors in the parking lot waiting for your car, and they tell you their life story in five minutes. Tommy doesn't do that. He's private."

Typically, Mr. Jones doesn't want to talk much about his character in "The Fugitive."

"What appealed to me was working for Warner Brothers, working for Andy Davis and working with Harrison Ford," he says tersely. He frowns. "It was a collaborative atmosphere. We created the characters as we went along. The screenplay tended to change every day."

Though he lives with his wife and two children only 15 minutes away, Mr. Jones has agreed to talk only in the anonymity of a hotel suite. And the response to some seemingly harmless questions may be a blast of anger.

"Do I play only bad guys? Do I play only violent guys? How can you categorize me? What pictures come to mind?"

Well, his most recent films include Oliver Stone's "J.F.K.," for which he was nominated for a best-supporting-actor Oscar for his performance as the devious Clay Shaw, and "Under Siege," in which he played a diabolical if funny madman.

"Villains! O.K.! Now you got me categorized. You happy?

"I don't play just villains," he adds. "I like to have parts that are not simply villains. And I find this entire subject, you know, just very uncomfortable and borderline stupid."

Another subject.

San Antonio is a graceful city, but does does living here limit his career? You know, out of sight, out of mind.

"It's a fiction," he says furiously. "What do you mean 'sight'? What are you talking about 'sight'?"

Don't most actors live in Los Angeles or New York?

"They do? I don't know. I see them on movie sets. I don't know where they live."

Ask Mr. Jones about Harvard, his alma mater, and he practically explodes.

You majored in English. English literature? What kind of English?

"The kind we're using now," he replies tensely.

Another question about Harvard leads to an outburst. "I don't understand the line of questioning," he says. "I don't get it. If you're saying,

Tommy Lee, you don't fit the image of the East Coast, social elitist wealthy people who comprise Harvard, the only thing I can say is you have no idea what comprises Harvard."

Tommy, you don't like interviews, do you?

"I have nothing against interviews," he says. "I don't pursue them. When people I work for deem it appropriate, I'm perfectly willing to serve."

Twenty minutes later, after more thrusting and parrying, the actor offers to take a visitor on a walk downtown to the tourist landmark the Alamo. "This is a very, very polite town," says Mr. Jones, who attracts a few glances on College Street. "We live in a nice neighborhood. It's a sweet old lady of a town. Not all star-struck. We sure appreciate it."

Mr. Jones also has a large cattle ranch in San Saba, his birthplace, which is north of San Antonio. (In the fall, the Harvard polo team practices at the ranch.) But most of his free time is spent in his home in northeast San Antonio. He met his wife, Kimberlea, who is from here, on a set in the early 1980's when she worked briefly as an extra after graduating from the University of Texas School of Journalism. They have two children, Austin Leonard, 10, and Victoria, 2.

To Mr. Jones, the San Antonio region and West Texas generally are ingrained in his blood. "It's been said that people from out here spend the first half of their life trying to get away and the second half trying to get back," he says.

"What appeals to me? There are things, points of view, uses of the language, habits of dress, ways of thought and believing that came to me from my grandparents and came to them from theirs. Things that are of good use in any situation, no matter what the future may hold."

If Mr. Jones's life has its contradictions, he brushes them aside with annoyance.

He is the only child of an oil drilling contractor and a housewife who worked briefly as a police officer. But he attended one of Dallas's more elite prep schools, the St. Mark's School of Texas, and went on to Harvard, where he majored in English, played football, became a close friend of Al Gore and graduated cum laude in 1969. (Mr. Jones, who has visited Mr. Gore in Tennessee over the years, campaigned for the Clinton-Gore ticket in West Texas.)

Although Mr. Jones shies from personal talk, he seems content to discuss acting in vague terms. He became interested in drama in prep school, immersed himself in Cambridge and Boston theater when he went to college, never took an acting lesson in his life and acknowledges that he had a relatively easy time in the New York theatrical world in the 1970's.

Ten days after he arrived in New York from Cambridge, he was cast in the Broadway production of John Osborne's "Patriot for Me," playing five different walk-on parts and speaking a total of five words. He then performed in various productions on and off Broadway, including some at the New York Public Theater. He also appeared as Stephen Dedalus in "Ulysses in Nighttown" with Zero Mostel, one of his idols (along with Laurence Olivier).

"It was great to watch Mostel's energy, where he succeeded, where he failed," says Mr. Jones. "Every day was a brave new world for me. It was an important period in my life."

Working in theater at night and television soap operas during the day, Mr. Jones prospered. Yet he felt stymied.

"I was bumping against a ceiling in the theater," he says. "I was reasonably well known as a young actor. But Broadway was going through a phase of decay. The plays were getting bigger, broader, less dramatic and coarser.

"And I was told two or three times a year that, yes, I was the right actor for a role, but I wasn't famous enough. I saw roles that I should have had go to people whose qualifications as a theater actor seem to have derived from sitcoms, from the fact that they were more famous."

So Mr. Jones moved to Los Angeles. "If I wanted my creative life to grow, the marketplace was telling me I needed to be more famous," he says.

His first movie role was in Roger Corman's 1976 film "Jackson County Jail."

Mr. Jones smiles. "It was the Roger Corman hero," he said. "Film-noir hero. Dead on arrival. Man without a country. On the lam. Fast pickup. Pretty girl. Big pistol. A lot of fun along the way." He pauses. "It was a neat little film."

He appeared in Arthur Hiller's "Love Story," and his credits, mostly in major roles, include "Coal Miner's Daughter," "Eyes of Laura Mars," "Jackson County Jail," "Rolling Thunder," the television mini-series "Lonesome Dove," "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" on Showtime and "The Package," a political thriller with Gene Hackman that teamed him for the first time with Andrew Davis. His 1982 portrayal of Gary Gilmore in the television film "The Executioner's Song" won him an Emmy. (Some of Mr. Jones's mishaps are "Back Roads," "Fire Birds," "The River Rats," "Blue Sky" and most recently "House of Cards," in which he is a child psychiatrist.)

Mr. Jones says he yearns to play Iago but also has a taste for over-the-top western characters.

At the moment, the future is rosy for the actor. He will co-star in Oliver Stone's "Heaven and Earth," due in December, in which he plays the husband of a Vietnamese woman. Filming begins soon on Joel Schumacher's version of the John Grisham best seller "The Client," in which Mr. Jones plays a United States Attorney opposite Susan Sarandon. He is now completing another Oliver Stone film, "Natural Born Killers," in which he is a prison warden. ("It's a satire on the subject of violence in America," he says.) And in the fall work starts on "Blown Away," in which he co-stars as a political terrorist with his friend Jeff Bridges. Next spring, Mr. Jones plans to direct a TNT adaptation of the Elmer Kelton novel "The Good Old Boys," a saga about West Texas.

Working with Mr. Jones, says Mr. Davis, the director, is a powerful experience. "He's very disciplined, and you can do nine takes with him and they'll all be different and all be fascinating. He loves actors. He has the veneer of a tough guy, his face and voice are very strong, but he can play a soft, gentle character very well.

"We work very collaboratively," he adds. "He's like a jazz musician improvising. The thing he fights is cliches; he's always fighting cliches. Whether it's a terrorist or the marshal, he wants it to be more theatrical, more alive than you would traditionally think of."

For his part, Mr. Jones refuses to analyze himself or his acting.

Asked why acting appealed to him, he shrugs. "The simple answer is it seemed like fun. The complicated answer is it has to do with an enjoyment of and necessity for a vital imagination. But I'm not that analytical. I'll stick with the simple answer. It's fun."