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Peter O'Toole's Dramatic Comeback

by Robert F. Moss

Peter O'Toole is wearing his emerald green socks today. He is gesturing with his black cigarette holder, another long-standing adornment. The Apollonian face remembered from *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Lion in Winter* now appears permanently flushed and fatigued from a long love affair with "Madame Bottle," as O'Toole refers to alcohol. He looks a decade older than his 48 years. The famous blue eyes survey baskets of fruit that well-wishers have sent to his Beverly Hills hotel room. "Strange that no one sends a man flowers in America," he observes. The comment is O'Toole's equivalent of small talk. The cigarette holder is for effect. And, as befits an Irishman, the emerald green socks are for luck.

Oddly enough, the socks appear to have rewarded O'Toole's faith. After a long season of near-obscurity, the actor now has a room at the top again. This career is infamous for careening from remarkable highs (the lunatic earl in the film, *The Ruling Class*) to remarkable lows (a *Macbeth* on stage that one London critic proclaimed "the worst Shakespearean disaster since the burning of the Globe"). A year ago, O'Toole was on view only in expensive pornography (*Caligula*) and box-office bombs (*Zulu Dawn*).

This month, he is both an Academy-Award contender for his much-acclaimed performance as Eli Cross in *The Stunt Man* and the powerful star of the most expensive television series ABC has ever made, the \$22-million *Masada* (aired April 5-8). In this eight-hour mini-series, O'Toole plays General Flavius Silva, a

commander of Roman troops in ancient Judea during Rome's seven-year war against the Zealots, a Jewish sect whose refusal to surrender made their name a synonym for ideological determination.

O'Toole's remarkably swift comeback, like almost everything else in his professional and personal life, is extreme. An Irish Catholic who grew up in the slums of Leeds, England, he began his career as an outsider breaking the conventional mold of English acting. At the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, where technique is taught as objectively as mathematics, O'Toole studied alongside such famous classmates as Albert Finney, Richard Harris, and Alan Bates. He graduated just as the winds of change were beginning to rattle the English acting tradition.

Because the ideal of the British middle class has always been a suave surface, a complementary acting style had arisen. The poise, urbanity, and cut-glass diction of Alec Guinness, of James Mason, of Michael Redgrave are what we have come to expect from the long tradition of classically trained English actors.

But when O'Toole and his colleagues were embarking on their careers in the late Fifties, a new guard of English playwrights was introducing a new sort of English play: the working-class drama that would soon dominate the London stage. In these plays, beginning with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, lower-class heroes rebelled against the status quo. And so did the performers who appeared in them. The angry young plays of Osborne and his contemporaries required angry young actors, who hadn't

lost their empathy for the masses and the vernacular. Those playwrights found their voices in the dialects of O'Toole and his classmates. By the early Sixties, Kenneth Tynan, the Zeus of British theater critics, had pronounced O'Toole, Finney, and Harris the best actors of their generation.

At the forefront of this crowded field, O'Toole came to represent a new breed of English leading man, unlike any previous British actors, whose chilly temperaments and self-restraint seemed to preclude raw emotions. But these younger performers had no difficulty raising their voices in front of an audience. In comparing O'Toole to Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud, *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael astutely describes the central difference: "O'Toole's king (in *The Lion in Winter*) suggested physical strength and heroic power. He could bellow. (Can one imagine Gielgud bellowing?) He could be brutal. (Can one imagine Richardson as a brute?)"

Although his technical training places him within the British acting tradition, O'Toole's spiritual kinship is with John Barrymore, Marlon Brando, George C. Scott, and other powerful, impassioned American performers. His emotional storms could have blown across the Atlantic from Lee Strasberg's Actor's Studio, where the Method approach to acting reigns. Richard Rush, the American who directed *The Stunt Man*, notes that O'Toole, like Brando and other practitioners of the Method, works hard to "personalize" his roles. "O'Toole can reach back into a lot of personal experience in shaping a part," says Rush. O'Toole readily admits: "Brando has been a tremendous influence on

me." And certainly, O'Toole does bring to his work some of the sheer animal power for which Brando is famous.

In England, however, it is Lord Laurence Olivier with whom he is most often compared. Like Olivier, O'Toole first achieved international recognition as a handsome leading man who preferred to pursue diverse character roles. But there is an essential difference between them. Olivier assembles his performances in the empirical, British fashion: by observation, research, and painstaking accumulation of detail. He camouflages himself in a role, leaving the audience unable to discern the real Olivier. O'Toole, however, doesn't hide behind the part. With his excesses and intensity sprawling across the stage or screen, he often appears to be telling us as much about himself as he is about the character. And, on occasion, we feel as if we are getting to know the real Peter

oblique about O'Toole's pick-me-ups, asserting that the actor was on cocaine throughout the filming of that movie.

O'Toole's unconventional behavior has precipitated two instances of physical collapse, the dissolution, in 1975, of his 16-year marriage to actress Sian Phillips—and at least one lawsuit. Joseph E. Levine, who produced *The Lion in Winter*, charged that O'Toole's drunken escapades drove the picture over budget. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 1972, O'Toole recollected that one of Levine's people produced some "startling evidence": "I never knew what it was, but I gather it was something pretty hairy. I must have been urinating in a doorway or something." The costar, Katharine Hepburn, threatened to quit unless the hijinks were curbed. In an unsuccessful court battle, Levine sought to withhold a portion of his star's salary.

everyone else simply because his strides were much longer. Although O'Toole was already a major star on the British stage by his mid-twenties, *Lawrence of Arabia*, released in 1962, propelled him to international glory overnight. In his next film, *Becket* (1964), opposite Richard Burton as Thomas à Becket, he starred as the high-strung, histrionic Henry II, who seemed to have as many moods as he did subjects. In each of his first two starring roles, O'Toole captured an Academy-Award nomination.

O'Toole went on to win three more Oscar nominations: for *The Lion in Winter* (1968), *Goodbye Mr. Chips* (1969), and *The Ruling Class* (1972). But following the release of *The Ruling Class*, physical ailments, aggravated by his drinking, forced O'Toole into temporary retirement. When he decided to return to acting, he was stymied by a reputation for self-destruction and the box-office failures of his last few films (including *The Ruling Class*). Until recently, he subsisted on such perishable films as *Man Friday*, *Power Play*, and *Penthouse* magazine's notorious production of *Caligula*, in which O'Toole, as Emperor Tiberius, presided over a wall-to-wall orgy. He says now he took the role "out of hunger," and during the filming, he predicted that the movie was "so bad it will never be released."

While O'Toole's film career was soaring during the Sixties and plummeting during the Seventies, his career on the London stage was mostly troubled. When the popularity of working-class dramas began to ebb in England, so did critical enthusiasm for his bravura acting style. In 1963, his *Hamlet*, commissioned by Olivier for the opening of the National Theater, was pronounced too impassioned by the London critics, who preferred a more reflective, philosophical prince. Even in a vehicle conceived specifically for him—David Mercer's *Ride a Cock Horse*—he was not able to earn widespread critical acclaim.

The nadir of O'Toole's career came with his *Macbeth* at the Old Vic last season. Once again, the actor was chastised for letting his emotions pour out as prodigally as the blood with which the gruesome production was staged. In the *London Times*, Irving Wardle wrote that O'Toole's "tonal range varies between arrogance and

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O'Toole very well indeed.

The anger that O'Toole and his comrades brought to their roles surfaced in their personal lives, too. As critics tracked their professional coups, reporters smirked over their private difficulties. Alcohol, for instance, has undermined the careers of Richard Harris and Richard Burton. But for O'Toole, the collision between his private and professional lives has proven particularly damaging.

Asked about his alcoholism, O'Toole responds with quiet pride, "I haven't had a drink in nine years." (Several press reports have taken exception to that statement.) He has told interviewers that he stopped imbibing simply because "it was a bore." But another source comments, "He doesn't drink because if he does, he'll die. They took his pancreas out."

Boris Sagal, who directed O'Toole in *Masada*, considers his star "a self-destructive individual. The man never stops smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. And God knows what else he takes on the side to keep himself going." A former *Penthouse* executive connected with the *Caligula* production is less

O'Toole is well aware that he courts excess as much as success. In conversation, he gestures freely with his cigarette holder, and he favors, as does Eli Cross in *The Stunt Man*, florid outfits (turquoise pants, bright blue shirts, and silk scarves). "Of course I've had many troughs and crests," he acknowledges. "One must strive. Otherwise, everything would be bland and mediocre." As Pauline Kael wrote of the flamboyant film director in *The Stunt Man*, "Eli Cross could be called almost anything and it wouldn't be wrong and it wouldn't insult him." The same holds true for O'Toole. "There's a larger-than-life quality about O'Toole off-stage and on," agrees George Eckstein, producer of *Masada*.

In his finest professional moments no matter how flamboyant, O'Toole has drawn on his outsider sensibility that the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts couldn't erase. His most memorable characters have ranked as renegades, whether kings or commoners. In his first major screen role, O'Toole played Lawrence of Arabia, a visionary who was out of step with



O'Toole captures the vanity, valor, and despair of General Silva in *Masada*.

torment, allowing him no chance to show Macbeth's guile or diplomacy, let alone the unstained national hero of the first scene." When the Old Vic's artistic director Timothy West removed his

name from the production, O'Toole's ignominy was complete.

Mention of *Macbeth* still touches a nerve in O'Toole. "Feet-of-clay department," he says, uncomfortably.

"Each night became a process of proving myself. I do assure you that on the second or third night I could have done without it. But you see I had got it very wrong and I had to get it right."

Even in that humiliating hour upon the stage, O'Toole proved himself unpredictable: London audiences flocked to see the show. Its limited run was a sell-out, and the show eventually eliminated a \$500,000 deficit at the Old Vic. It was a most unorthodox—and thus, for O'Toole, most appropriate—sign that a comeback was underway.

Asked if there isn't a remarkable overlap between himself and the characters he plays, O'Toole gives a standard answer: Of course, it helps if you can find something of yourself in a role, but for him, it's an unconscious process. Still, it isn't hard to see this world-weary actor through the world-weary souls he portrays in *The Stunt Man* and *Masada*. Like Eli Cross, the swaggering film director he plays in *The Stunt Man*, O'Toole revels in unorthodox behavior. Like O'Toole, Cross is a grinning, sardonic Mardi Gras float, an outsized creature who uses theatricality to his advantage.

In *Masada*, an otherwise workmanlike TV movie, O'Toole displays true stature as General Silva, capturing the vanity, valor, and private despair of the character. He also demonstrates a poignant affinity for Silva's frailties: Saddled with irrational orders from Rome, the general turns to drink, and when his servant hands him an unsolicited glass of wine, O'Toole as Silva responds, "Is the need that obvious that you can read it in my face?"

Mad Merlin that he is, O'Toole is transforming his personal difficulties into professional triumphs. Whatever his claims, the residual effects of his drinking habits are evident. His face bears the burden of numerous nights spent with Madame Bottle; his once-hearty frame now looks spidery; he moves with the loose-limbed mobility of a marionette. And yet, even as he appears to be aging prematurely, he is forging an entirely new career out of the damage he has done to himself. This seems appropriate. After all, Peter O'Toole's best role has always been Peter O'Toole. ■

Writers I Have Known

by Norman Cousins

The vignettes of literary personalities that follow are previewed from a forthcoming book by Norman Cousins. The book, entitled *Human Options* (W.W. Norton), is a collection of the author's views and observations over the course of his 35 years as editor of *Saturday Review*.

WHO WAS HEMINGWAY'S GOD? HE said his god painted wonderful pictures, wrote some fine books, fought Napoleon's rearguard actions in the retreat from Moscow, battled on both sides in the American Civil War, did away with Yellow Fever, taught Picasso how to draw and Jim Thorpe how to play football and Walter Johnson how to pitch (the ball was as small as a marble when it crossed the plate, and it would kill you if it hit you, but the Big Train never dusted anyone off, ever), sired Citation, and killed George Armstrong Custer. What did Hemingway think about Scott Fitzgerald's god? Clearly monotheistic. Hemingway said he was convinced that Scott's god was Irving Thalberg, the movie tycoon.

People spoke about his pugnaciousness, his worship of bullfighters and prizefighters, his fondness for rifles and big game—all of them were real enough but they were not the larger part. The larger part was his ability to see beneath surfaces and to enable others to do the same; his sensitivity to irony and paradox; his belief in the innate heroism of people or, at least, in their need for it. He was a lover not just of life but of language. He was an atrocious speller and had trouble with grammar, but he knew how to put words together so that they laid claim on the creative imagination.

For all his literary honors, Hemingway was never sure of himself as a writer. He was miserable when he heard F. Scott Fitzgerald being praised. He liked to think of himself as Fitzgerald's mentor but for whom Scott's talents might never have fully matured. When he talked about Fitzgerald, it was always "Poor Scotty" this or "Poor Scotty" that. He tormented Mary with his worries over financial insecurity even when his lawyer persisted in telling him his royalties guaranteed him lasting financial independence. These wor-

ries never left him. Yet he was one of the three or four greatest writers—in any language—of his time. And a great writer, whatever his own inner agonies, is a prime resource of the human race. To enable people to live outside themselves is a gift beyond comparison.

WILLIAM FAULKNER DID MORE THAN to provide a literary portrait of a segment of the American South. He gave the South voice, pride, and spiritual nourishment, though many of the characters he brought to life in his novels were not distinguished for their spiritual dimensions. He was probably the greatest writer of his era and his growing recognition came at just the right time for a South that was seeking full restoration. He abhorred grandiosity. When he came to New York to revise his manuscripts and galley proofs, he would hole up in a little cubicle on the attic floor of the old 52nd Street mansion that went by the name of Random House. When I visited him in this New York setting he seemed strikingly out of



Ernest Hemingway



William Faulkner



Sinclair Lewis