

ANTHONY Hopkins

By Tom O'Neill

THE US INTERVIEW

SIR ANTHONY HOPKINS' TRAILER on the set of his next film, *Meet Joe Black*, in Brooklyn, is, as might be expected, elegantly appointed, with little bits of evidence — scattered about like deliberately placed props — attesting to his taste and erudition. Look a little closer, however, and you'll notice a few things that don't fit the picture. An unsupervised expedition into the bedroom (conducted, admittedly, moments before his arrival under the usual pretext of "just looking for the bathroom") turns up a metallic contraption known as a stomach cruncher (a distant late-night television cousin of Suzanne Somers' Thighmaster) and, under a table, behind the TV, an entire box full of self-help guru Tony Robbins tapes. Could it be that one of the most highly regarded actors in the world, recipient of, among other things, the Queen's Order of Knighthood, an Oscar, and two Emmys, is actually a disciple of the toothy telemarketer? "He gets people off their asses!" bellows

The restless knight on his impeccable memory and why he gets his kicks on Route 66



this baker's son from a small Welsh village reveals that he's more down-to-earth than one might expect, if not more complicated.

Steven Spielberg, who directed the actor in DreamWorks' searing *Amistad* (which takes place in 1839), says that working with Hopkins gave him the unusual sensation of feeling "as though I [was] actually there, back in time." Yet that might have less to do with the actor's prodigious talent than it does with the fact that the character he's

Hopkins when confronted with the evidence. "I think he's very impressive." That Hopkins, 60, is something of an infomercial junkie seems, at the very least, incongruous with his regal persona. But during the course of two interviews conducted over a year — a snowbound visit to the Canadian Rockies for last year's action-adventure film *The Edge* and a fall trip to Brooklyn, where he was filming this summer's *Meet Joe Black* with Brad Pitt —

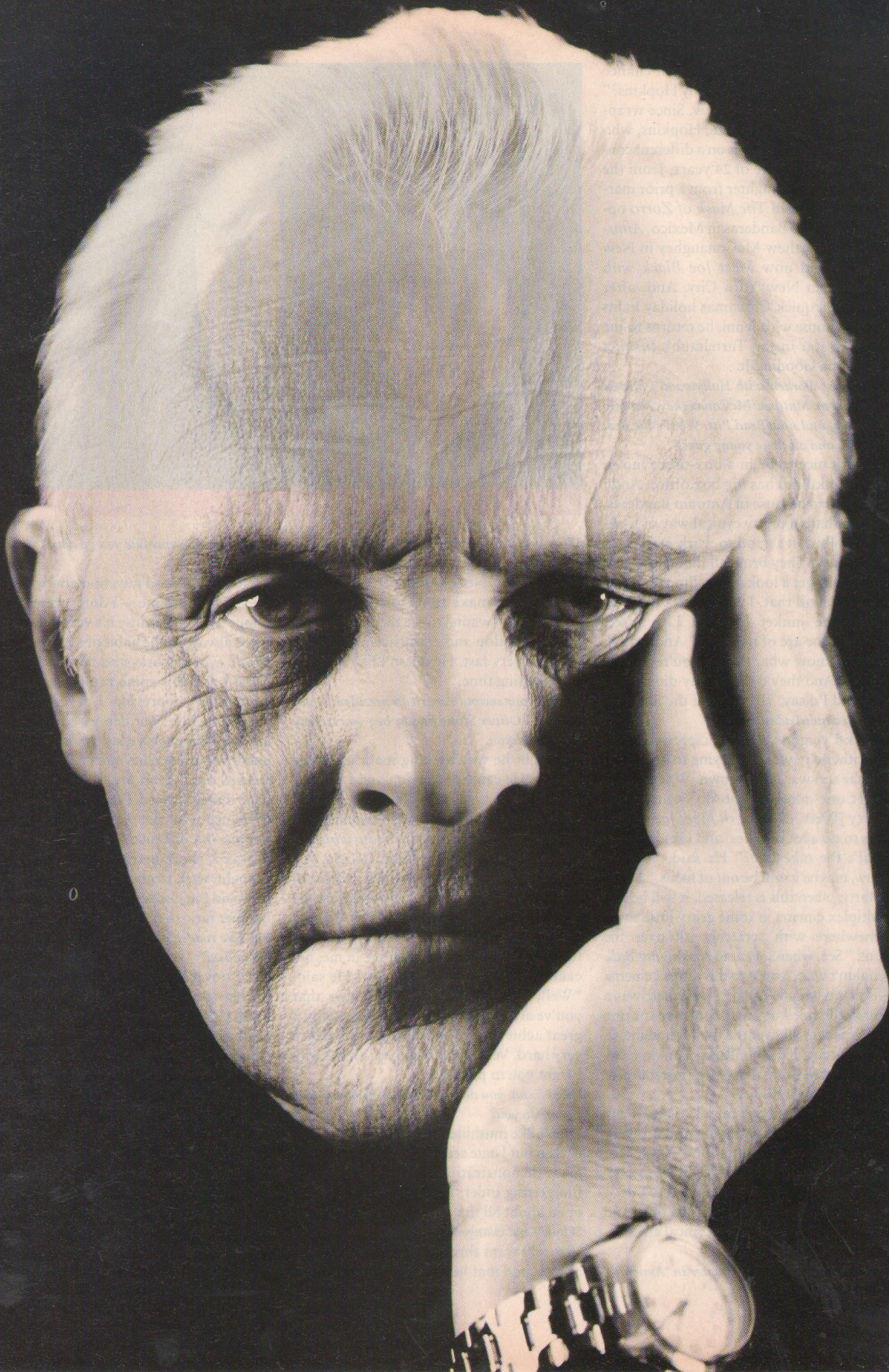
playing, the brilliant, yet tortured, former president John Quincy Adams, is a lot like Hopkins himself: an iconoclastic outsider who can never fully find peace with himself. Hopkins, an only child who describes his boyhood as miserable and lonely, doesn't like socializing with fellow actors ("I'd rather go home, read a book and go to bed"), parties ("tiresome") or talking about his craft ("I tell them I just learn my lines and show up").

Despite such nonchalance, or perhaps because of it, Hopkins has become something of a guru to the younger thespian community.

Fellow Brit Kristin Scott Thomas credits him, no less, for the cool refinement that has become her onscreen trademark. "Do you see how I jiggle around in real life but not when I'm on camera?" asks the actress, who worked with him nearly a decade ago on a movie called *The Tenth Man*. "Well, that's because he told me to keep still. I'll always remember that."

Alec Baldwin readily admits that he probably wouldn't have agreed to appear in *The Edge* if it had not been for Hopkins. "I wasn't wild about playing the part," says Baldwin, "but I thought, how many more

Photograph By LEN IRISH



movies do I have in me and what chance will I get to work with Anthony Hopkins?"

Well, probably quite a few. Since wrapping *The Edge* in late 1996, Hopkins, who is married but often lives on a different continent from his wife of 24 years, Jenni (he has one grown daughter from a prior marriage), has filmed *The Mask of Zorro* opposite Antonio Banderas in Mexico, *Amistad* with Matthew McConaughey in New England and now *Meet Joe Black* with Brad Pitt in New York City. And, after spending a quick Christmas holiday in his London home with Jenni, he returns to the States to star in Jon Turteltaub's *Instinct* with Cuba Gooding Jr.

You've just worked with Hollywood's hottest leading men: Matthew McConaughey, Antonio Banderas, and now Brad Pitt. What's the deal with you and all these young guys?

Well, it's nice to be in a box-office movie and I think Brad has *big* box office. And I made *Zorro* because of Antonio Banderas. I mean, that's a pretty cynical way of looking at it [but] it's good to work with these young guys. They bring all these little girls in and they get a look at *me*. I'm very practical about all that. I was asked questions during the junket for *The Edge*, like, "What is the arc of the part?" And I'd say, "I don't know what the f--- you're talking about." And they'd say, "Why did you do it?" And I'd say, "Because of the money." *That's a candid admission.*

I think I've got a good perspective on it. The other day we were trying to get a shot and the sun was going down. We managed to get one take and the sky went black. Marty [Brest, director of *Meet Joe Black*] likes to do a lot of takes, and I said, "Well, what's the take like?" He said, "I don't know, maybe it will be out of focus." I said, "Marty, when this is released, it will be at a multiplex cinema in some gritty little town somewhere with scratches all over the print." See, when I went to see *Raging Bull*, I couldn't wait. I went to this duplex cinema — is that what you call it? — and there was a drunk, the smell of urine, someone snoring and scratches all over the film. I thought, so much for art. It's all bullshit. You do it because it's the instant thing — the instant rush.

Interesting perspective ...

I give 115 percent of myself. I learn my lines, know what I'm saying and I'm very good at what I do — and I don't give a f--- what the critics or all those a--holes say, because that's their problem. I come, I do it and I go home. The check is in the bank and that's it. People say that's a cynical attitude, but it's not. It's practical.

Sounds a lot like your character in 'Amistad.'



TO SIR WITH LOVE: HOPKINS WITH WIFE JENNI AT THE RECENT PREMIERE OF 'AMISTAD' IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

What was it like working with Spielberg?

I like him. He makes movies that he wants to go and see. Not like these artsy-fartsy directors who make films for their friends and nobody [wants] to see them. He brings a great passion and enthusiasm to the set and he's very fast. He doesn't like hanging out, wasting time.

This is your second American president. I understand Oliver Stone had to beg you to play Richard Nixon.

I thought he was barking mad. Me, play Nixon? He came to London and I went to his hotel to have breakfast. I'd already made up my mind that I wasn't going to do it. I saw him and he said [in a low whisper] "Hi, sit down, how you doing, OK? So, you don't want to play Nixon, huh? *Chicken shit.*" I said, "You tell me why you want me to play Nixon." He said, "Why do you want me to tell you that?" I said, "Because then I'll know what it is you see in me, because I can't see a hope in hell." He said, "Well, I read in several interviews that you've always felt like an outsider, you're a great achiever, very ambitious and you're very hard. Very single visioned. *That's* why I want you to play him."

Like Nixon, you don't wear your heart on your sleeve, do you?

I don't like mushiness. I'm a very emotional person but I hate sentimentality. I don't like great demonstrations of emotion. But as I'm getting older, I'm getting much more open about all that.

Why? What changed?

[Pause] I went through psychotherapy for a while and that helped me a lot.

How does someone like you go about finding a shrink?

I had a very good guy. Somebody recommended him to me — I don't want to talk about it much because it's very personal ... I was always in the habit of constant work. Work, work, work, and never letting up. Then I had this spine problem and I was feeling very depressed. I never suffer depressions, but I felt depressed and I went and saw this guy as a last resort. We talked and it was quite relieving. I realized that I'd bottled up a lot in my life and [that] I'm very much a loner. I don't like long relationships with people and I always keep people at a distance ... [quickly] anyway, it was a short period. In the end I just thought, well, I know enough about myself now and I'm just going to get on with it. I'm happier now than I've been in a long time. *You like road-tripping across America. What's the appeal?*

I love traveling. I like to keep moving. I love the big open spaces in America and when I finish [*Meet Joe Black*], I'm going to drive to California from New York. I'm going to get a Budget rental car, go up through Chicago, down to Route 80. I've got my map right here — the Rand McNally. It's my bible.

Assuming you don't wear disguises when you're driving, what kind of reactions do you get along the way?

Earlier this year I got in the car one day and thought, I'll go to Texas. I did the whole of Texas in one day and thought, God, this is pretty flat and monotonous, I think I'll go up to Seattle. So I turned left somewhere and drove up. I stayed in Vail one night,

Salt Lake City another and then in this tiny city just over the Washington border: Yakima. I stayed in this little motel and was having the buffet breakfast the next morning and there was a couple there, a husband and wife in their 60s, and I was drinking my coffee, reading my book and I'd look up and she was [*he pantomimes staring, then looking away*]. She went out to the lobby and then came back and said [*in a flat, Mid-western accent*], "You are who I think you are. What are you doing in Yakima?" I said, "I'm on my way to Seattle." And she said, "Oh, we're on our way to Seattle to see an opera! Would you like to come and have some coffee with my husband and I?" So, I went and joined them for a little while. I think it's wonderful meeting people who you'll never see again, people who run America, people doing things that will never be recognized. I get awards for things but there are millions and millions of people who do things and just get on with their

"Port Talbot, my father's a baker." "Oh, yes," he said, "I know. You're opposite the co-op. I used to work in there. The shoe department. I was terrible at it." I thought, there's a kindred spirit — he wasn't good at what he did when he was a kid, either. [*Excitedly*] It's all coming back again. I can recall it in the cells of my body. Sybil was sitting at the table reading the paper; they'd just had breakfast and were about to go to the international rugby match. He said, "Do you like rugby?" I said, "No, not much." He said, "Then you're really not Welsh." [*Grins*] He was taking the piss out of me. I went out of the house and I was walking down the street, slowly, looking at his autograph, and the Jaguar car came down the road and Sybil waved and I thought, I've got to get out of this place. I've got to become what he is. And I think something deep in my subconscious mind, or whatever it was, [*snaps fingers*] set the target. I thought, I'm going to be famous.

and I think, well, my life's none of my business anyway, because if I'd have made it my business I'd have ended up in the nut house or dead. I tried to run my own life and it didn't work. I just let go as much as one possibly can and roll with the punches, go with the flow, and all that Zen stuff. I've become more relaxed over the last 20-odd years, I guess.

It seems that your marriage is back on track after you separated last year. What — Taboo.

That's off-limits then?

Yeah. My life's fine. That's it.

OK. Well, where are you living now?

Well, I have a house in London ... I'll get to your answer this way: We have a house in London, but I've got a house in Pacific Palisades, California. I live there and it's beautiful. I love California. My wife and I have lighthearted arguments about it. We lived there for 10 years, she likes it, but she doesn't want to live there. She likes to visit. I said, "Well, it's going to make a difference because you're not too keen on it and I am." She said, "Well, I like visiting, but I couldn't live there. I couldn't live in that Hollywood atmosphere and I don't want you to be corrupted by it." I said, "Well, I'm not being corrupted by it." So it's taken us a bit of working out and this is the way it is.

You haven't always been the happy man you are now, yet she's stuck by you.

Well, she went through the time of my drinking years. You know, I drank for some years and I was really very sick with it and she had the patience to put up with that. I mean, I wouldn't give me more than two minutes. I was a jerk, a drunk, *awful*. She says, to this day, 21 years later, "You weren't that bad. Sometimes you were a little bit troublesome ..." See, the trouble we had was I didn't want to stagnate. There's something in my nature, something so restless in me that I've just got to be somewhere else all the time. I don't want to settle in England. I want to be in America. I've always wanted to be in America.

Have you ever considered writing your memoirs?

A publisher asked me to write an autobiography and I sat down and started but I got very self-conscious and I kept thinking, oh, this is bullshit! I can't be bothered. I'm not that interested in my own life, but I remember everything. Back to the age of two or three. I'm obsessed with dates. My wife will say, "When did we do that?" And I'll say, "October 20th, 1974." As long as I can remember, I've been a savant.

Since you were born?

Well, since we moved house, my parents and I, on September [*Continued on page 88*]

"I have no interest in Shakespeare and all that British nonsense ... I just wanted to get famous and all the rest is hogwash."

lives. I think it puts everything in perspective and reminds me of everything I've come from in my own life.

You grew up in the same small town in Wales as Richard Burton. Did you ever meet him?

I got his autograph when I was 15. He'd come from Hollywood with his wife Sybil, who has since become a close friend of mine. Everyone knew when Richard was back because he used to pass the shops in his Jaguar, and nobody had ever seen a Jaguar in the postwar years. I remember knocking at his door and being invited in by his sister and there's Richard shaving with an electric shaver. [*Quietly*] I'd never seen an electric razor. He said [*deep, grave voice*], "What do you want?" "Autograph," I said. So he signed the autograph. He said, "Do you speak Welsh?" I said, "No." He said, "You're not a real Welshman then. Where you come up?" I said,

Did you ever meet him again?

Twenty-two years later in the dressing room of the Plymouth Theater, in New York City. The same dressing room I'd occupied for eight months to play *Equus* — he'd taken over the part. This was just before the play was about to start. I went in with my wife and he was in the same clothes I wore in the play. Elizabeth Taylor was coming that night and I remember thinking, this is incredible: Here's this man from the same place, educated in the same schools, brought up in the same valley as me — it doesn't make any sense! He said, "Why haven't we worked together?" I just said, "I don't know." That's the last time I met him. When he died in 1984, I was very sad. I was sad that I never got to know him. So, destiny ... [*a long pause*]. I don't know what the hell any of it means, but I just go along for the ride now. I'm very fatalistic

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the 17th, 1948. I remember details of *everything*. In fact, I had dinner with this actor a few years ago ... what was his name? [Chuckles] I can't seem to remember ... some famous American actor, redhead, almost albino. Ed Begley Jr. And he asked me a question about something, he said, "When did you do that?" And I said, "December 29th, 1975." And he said, "It was a Monday." I said, "Jesus, how did you know that?" He said, "I don't know. I just know." I said, "Well, I'm pretty good, too. I'll test you: October the 16th, 1954." He said, "Saturday." I said, "October the 26th, 1962." He said, "Friday." See, I've got a very clear memory but he can actually go back to 1900 and know the day of each month.

Let's switch gears here. Would you do a sequel to 'The Silence of the Lambs' if they asked you? If it's a good script, I'd do it. Hannibal Lecter is a great character to play.

Can you give me some insight into Jodie Foster? Not much. I can't, really. We met in New York at the Orion building on a Monday for a reading of the script ... um [looks distracted]. I was introduced to her and I gave her a kiss. I was nervous because she'd just gotten the Oscar. I was very impressed by all that.

What about some of your other leading ladies? Emma Thompson, for instance?

[Distracted, not listening] Monday the 16th of October. Oh, oh, oh — yes: Monday the 16th of October, 1989 was the night of the reading, so there you are!

Impressive.

[Laughing, absolutely delighted] I'm sorry, what was the question?

I was asking about Emma Thompson.

The earthquake in Los Angeles, er, San Francisco was on the 17th of October, 1989. What?!

I wasn't in San Francisco. I arrived in Los Angeles from New York after that reading with Jodie Foster and the earthquake happened.

OK, I'll play. Name the day you met your wife. December 3rd, 1969.

What day of the week was it?

Friday.

God.

[Roars with laughter] Try again.

That's enough. Now tell me about the first time you met your friend Emma Thompson.

My agent phoned and said Merchant Ivory — I thought Merchant Ivory was a tea manufacturing firm from India — "want you to do *Howards End*, with Emma Thompson." I said, "Oh yeah, she's a good actress." I had

to go to this makeup studio in North London and talk about the style of my hair, and Emma was there with Helena Bonham Carter. It was the first time I'd met her. I won't tell you what she said, but she was so bawdy!

Oh, c'mon. She wouldn't care.

[Grinning] No, no, no, I won't!

Just real vulgar?

Well, she uses quite a lot of ... [reconsiders] no, no, no!

Can you give me the essence of the Emma Thompson experience without using the word?

[Reluctantly] She always talks about ... um, well...flatulence [giggles].

And that was the first thing she said to you?

Yes. She's got really sort of British lavatory humor. But she's a hoot. She really makes me laugh so much. And we use a term in England, taking the piss out of someone, which means, ribbing and all that, and that's all we did right through the film. I'd always make her laugh and James Ivory had never worked with people like us before. He's very cool. I used to do impersonations of people and crack jokes and then go straight into it. My thing was to try and crack Emma up and we'd be standing there about to do a very intense scene and they'd say, "Stand by, please!" And I'd say [whispering], "God, you're so boring in this part." And she'd say, "Oh, f--- off!" Then I'd say, "Who did you have to sleep with to get this part? You're just pathetic." You know, do all that sort of thing. But it was nice, it kept everything very casual.

And what did your co-star Vanessa Redgrave make of all these shenanigans?

I played her husband [but] I didn't have much to do with her. She seems like a nice woman. She's a bit on Planet 9; I don't know where she is.

You seem drawn to the larger-than-life people, especially Americans. Your eyes literally light up when you talk about macho stars like Alec Baldwin.

Well, if somebody's volatile and has a great personality and energy, it threatens many people because they don't want to be threatened. They want to be with safe people, and that's OK, but it doesn't make for much of an exciting time. If you're with somebody as powerful and as energized as Alec, it makes things very interesting because you've just got a powder keg waiting to go off.

That must be why you're so attracted to America. It's full of alpha males like Oliver Stone, Alec Baldwin and David Mamet, all of whom you've chosen to work with. Is that a fair assessment?

[Eyes widening] Yeah, they're the movers and shakers. They don't let things settle. They just shake the rafters off the roof. And a lot of people feel uncomfortable with

that, like the press, which is uncomfortable with Oliver Stone. This guy moves. He actually *does* things: He makes people talk. He makes governments respond whether one agrees with what he's doing or not. He gets people's backs up. That's wonderful. [Richard] Burton was that way. People used to say, "Burton, what a wasted talent." Well, it wasn't a waste of talent. He did exactly what he wanted to do. He became world-famous, married Elizabeth Taylor and sure, I think he died prematurely and sadly. But people get so mealy-mouthed: "He should have come back to the theater." Why? I remember when somebody said that about Marlon Brando, [Elia] Kazan [who directed Brando in *On the Waterfront* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*] said, "Why? Why is it a shame he didn't come back to the theater? He became one of the world's greatest movie actors." And I think that's good. All this mealy-mouth Puritanism about talent and dedication and working in some little back-street theater for the rest of your life, what does *that* mean? *Are there people in England who've accused you of selling out?*

Oh yeah, yeah, but I don't give a damn.

Why not?

I do what I want to do and I'm having a wonderful life. A very close friend of mine in London was asked by some casting agent from the National Theatre, with a very condescending look on her face, "How is Tony?" He answered, "He's very happy, he's in Hollywood." She said, "Pity he sold out." "Yeah," he answered, "and he's very rich and successful too." [Between clenched teeth] Drives them mad. I got away. Because they want you to be *there*. I'm not saying this is just England, it could be any country if you desert it, but there are people who want to hold you back, keep you in with the convicts. It makes *them* feel safe.

But you got the last laugh — you got away.

Yeah, and it's a good life. I feel so much like my father. My father was a down-to-earth basic man. He'd hear me playing the piano and ask, "What's that you're playing?" I'd say, "Beethoven." "No wonder he went deaf! For God's sake, get out of the house." He was real meat and potatoes. Didn't give a shit about culture and neither do I.

So, in the end, you've become your father?

Yeah. I have no interest in Shakespeare and all that British nonsense.

But did you once?

Only through ambition. I just wanted to get famous. All the rest is hogwash. ■

Tom O'Neill wrote about Tibet for the January issue of 'US.'