

# Douglas Thompson

## An Interview with Tommy Lee Jones

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He's not a man you feel you should interrupt when he's playing with a bottle of Budweiser -- no glass -- and a few words. They can be pleasant pastimes but Tommy Lee Jones appears to be someone who takes everything seriously. But, as in Chinatown, nothing is as it seems.

In the ego-revolving world of Hollywood this onetime oil field worker and Harvard graduate -- and former room-mate of American Vice-President Al Gore -- who talks in an accent as thick as a Dallas traffic jam is one of the leading man of the moment but without the usual posing. Or posturing.

Oh, he's snapping at Harrison Ford's heels -- as he was in his Oscar-winning performance in 'The Fugitive' -- and might not be getting the Tom Cruise and Michael Douglas offers but Tommy Lee Jones is a grown up star. He has arrived. In a big way. After a lot of promises.

He's the original combustible cowboy who, at 48, has made more than forty movies and appeared in landmark television productions like 'The Executioner's Song' -- as the "I want to die killer" Gary Gilmore' -- and most memorably in 1989's epic Western saga 'Lonesome Dove'. From a cast of hundreds including Robert Duvall and Anjelica Huston he stole the show by saying very little indeed.

He's got a more difficult task this summer if he wants to get accused of felony scene larceny. Now, it's more maniacal cackle than dialogue in 'Batman Forever'. In the third and remodelled of the 'Batman' adventures (the first two have grossed more than \$700 million dollars) he appears as Harvey Two-Face. A trifle of an acid accident turned half his face purple and peculiar and made all of him a very bad boy indeed. This is The Joker with more than a split personality.

But also around to confuse the Caped Crusader is The Riddler (aka Edward Nigma) who is brought to life by another hot star, Jim Carrey who this month (MAY) was voted by America's youngsters (aged 14 -- 19) as their best actor. Carrey won his fan club for 'Ace Ventura: Private Detective', 'The Mask' and the present release 'Dumb and Dumber.'

But for Carrey and Tommy Lee Jones that was all a run-up for the worldwide attention and exposure and money-machine of 'Batman Forever'. Director Joel Schumacher has taken over control of the fantasy franchise from Tim Burton. The wunderkind Burton gave us a Dark Knight much in contrast to the camp 'Sixties television 'Batman' and the comic (rather than comic book) Saturday morning matinee antics of many yesterdays.

In turn, Schumacher is giving us his version of the good and bad colourful celebrities of Gotham City. And to help Batman (the younger Val Kilmer replacing Michael Keaton) compete with Harvey and The Riddler we finally get to see Robin (Chris 'Scent of a Woman' O'Donnell) complete the Dynamic Duo for the first time since the new adventures began.

Burton's films were termed 'Gothic' but Jones says that 'isn't appropriate' for the new movie. 'It's spectacular and it's rather, you know, arch...'

Now, at first appearances you wouldn't place 'arch' in Jones' vocabulary. But here he is playing naughty games with two fellows in capes and gender-defining bodysuits. He has a black pistol in one hand, a silver one in the other. The crazed grin spreads across his face it just changes colour half-way there.

Jones's own face is an honest one which appears to have seen more than one day at a time. It is like a relentlessly over violent volcano, potholes and creases everywhere. It didn't prevent his Tommy Lee Spree of films which has headlined him in and through the 1990s. He is naturally taciturn about it. His friend, the singer Willie Nelson, jokingly explains: 'Tommy Lee always thought he was a household name.'

But the work ethic has always been there. It's, he says, like being thrown from a horse. If you can't ride him without spurs don't get back on. The critics have usually adored him and now the public -- as much through his television work as his films -- knows him. But he will keep getting back in the saddle.

After scoring, to most people's pleasure, the Best Supporting Oscar for his obsessed Marshal Gerard in 'The Fugitive' -- he gave another great performance accepting his statuette saying: 'The only thing a man can say at a time like this ... I am not really bald' -- he reported not to the champagne reception but to bed and work the next morning at 6am

His head was shaved for his role as American baseball's haunted hero, the mean Ty 'Cobb'. In the biographical film Jones, makes you care for if not like the violent, boozy sporting God. He narrowly missed another Oscar nomination.

Before it was 'The Client' the hat trick of film adaptations of best-selling author John Grishman's legal tangles with Susan Sarandon protecting a young witness and Jones supplying the goods as a publicity crazed Federal prosecutor. He was also a wily Irish bomber matching tactics with Jeff Bridges' Boston bomb squad officer in 'Blown Away.' And in 'Natural Born Killers' as the prison warden he was part of an ensemble cast including Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis in Oliver Stone's satire about love and violence and the American media. 'Natural Born Killers' was another major as well as controversial landmark in Jones' career.

Every director and producer you talk to wants to work with him. He's not very sure: 'I've called home and said: "I'm making the best movie I've ever made - possibly the best movie that's ever been made in the history of the media". And then it turns out to be a howling pooch.'

He's an eighth generation Texan -- 'I just don't like to get very far from a horse' -- and a remarkably civilised man. He likes Oliver Stone because he gets every literary reference Jones makes. He was a scholarship lad at Harvard ( his father did OK but not wonderful working a driller on the world's oilfields ) and appreciates his learning.

This Spring it was his fifteenth wedding anniversary to the former Kimberlea (Kimberlea) Cloughley now known to all around San Saba , Texas , as Mrs Jones. The town 150 miles north of San Antonio is the closest to Jones' 3,000 acre ranch: 'Being a cattleman is as creative as acting. Agriculture is an art. Things don't grow automatically. If they did we wouldn't have overgrazed this country and seen all the erosion.'

Jones looks and talks tough but when you ask his wife she says: 'He has a very rough looking face and maybe a rough demeanour but he's a sweetheart inside.'

Well, she can ask him to put down his Budweiser and offer a few words.

'I get bored defending myself against charges of being sullen, morose and belligerent,' says Jones before offering: 'And in fact you piss me off.' Ah, Mr Jones is brightening up.

He's really quite a funny man. He played American football at University and admits: 'It's only beginning to dawn on me that I'm never actually going to play for the Dallas Cowboys.' Instead he is one of America's best polo players with a string of horses and his own fields near the home he shares with his 36-year-old wife and their two children, Austin, 12, and four-year-old Victoria.

He's a character. Asked the size of his ranch he replies: 'Are you asking me how much money is in my bank account? Although I won't offer and statistics I will tell you that I'm not fooling around.'

His film work is important but he says: 'Over the years it's made me famous and by any standards well-to-do. But I usually don't pay much attention to the glorification.'

He prefers simpler things:

'I've talked myself into believing I remember the day that I was born. I hang on to my memories with cat's claws. I can remember tornadoes in Knox County when I was three. We were living in a trailer next to the hospital and near a cotton field. The tornado jumped over our trailer and hit the hospital. I remember seeing X-rays from the hospital floating down over the cotton plants in bloom.

'Some of my memories are clear -- very clear. Both my mother and my father used to go to honkytonk bars to do what everybody in that part of Texas did -- drink. I'd wait for them outside in the car, alone. I remember hearing music and singing coming through the walls of the saloon to me in the car. I remember lying there just waiting, just waiting alone.

As an actor he has always been admired but he has waited for the attention he's getting now. Andrew Davis who directed him in 'The Fugitive' is a fan: '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.'

Jones is asked why he goes on acting when it would appear he's happier in the real saddle: 'The simple answer is it seemed liked fun. The complicate answer is it has to do with an enjoyment of and a necessity for a vital imagination. But I'm not that analytical. I'll stick with the simple answer. It's fun.'

Which is, he says, what 'Batman Forever' is all about.

There are all sorts of freaky and weird gadgets used by the same sort of characters. Jones talks of Harvey Two-Face like jut another other member of his repertory. He's simply 'Harvey'. And Jones/Harvey like the movie: 'The Batmobile drives into a wall and straight up it. I think that's pretty cool.'

'Arch' and now 'cool'. Another Budweiser? But Jones is wary of some items: 'I don't want anything to do with the machine that robs people's brain waves. It transfers them directly to Edward Nigma's (that's The Riddler's) brain. I don't want that in my toy box.

'Acting silly and villainous was fun -- and playing this strange character especially jumping around with Jim Carrey.

'One day you're jumping out of the helicopter into an airbag. The next day a big steel ball is crashing through the wall. The next day you're speeding down an alley towards some blazing car crash. At other times your character is impersonating an old homeless lady pushing a shopping cart with a baby in it. I mean, pick any day. It was a lot of fun. Really.'

Nicole Kidman (aka Mrs Tom Cruise) changes style from a leggy redhead to a leggy blonde to play Batman's 'love interest' Dr Chase Meridian. The busty (it's a Wonderbra) doctor finds herself filling the space between Batman and Robin. Well, what is the relationship between Batman and the Boy Wonder?

'All I know is they're both terribly cute -- and I'm jealous as hell of whatever is going on between them.'

Jones' view: 'I think it's Socratic. Batman is the teacher, leader. And Robin is a good student. Yeah, I think it's a very decent, all-American relationship.'

'Batman Forever' is expected to make something more than \$400 million dollars at the box office. The expectation is that big. There will be pots of millions more from marketing including everything from Harvey Two-Face dolls to a fast food franchise link-up.

That, of course is, fun too for Jones.

He's more glee than threatening about that. And there will be a 'Batman 4' and he would like to be part of it.' I hope Harvey 's back, the Riddler's back. I hope all the villains are back. I feel certain that good will triumph over evil even if they are coming back. That's all I can say.'

So, in 'Batman Forever' what you see is, like Chinatown , not always as it seems? Jones does not reveal secrets except to say:' I want to play Two-Face in the next Batman.'

These days Tommy Lee Jones tends to have his wishes granted. And it can only be a bonus for the producers. He's safe hands.

Bill Wittliff was the writer-producer of 'Lonesome Dove' which was an enormous logistical undertaking. He recalled:' Tommy Lee is somebody you could trust with with anything. There is a saying in Texas : "He'll do to ride the river with." That's Tommy Lee.

'Smooth water, rough water, you can depend on him.'

Hollywood 's diving rod has got that message.

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