



## The Man Who Gets It Done

### Robert Duvall sits in at his own wake

**I**N ADDITION TO HIS EARLY STAGE WORK, Robert Duvall has played some 130 characters in film and on television. He has a dozen or so production credits and has directed four films, three of them from his own screenplays, including the sublime *The Apostle* (97), for which he received an Oscar nomination for Best Actor, and after that, the undervalued *Assassination Tango* (02).

It's natural to think of Duvall in terms of the way he crossed over into film in 1962 as Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—as the man in the shadows. You can spot him in *Bullitt* (68), *True Grit* (69), and *M\*A\*S\*H* (70), before he emerged as Tom Hagen in *The Godfather* (72). Memorable Duvall roles yield an embarrassment of riches: Bull Meechum in *The Great Santini* (79), Mac Sledge in *Tender Mercies* (83, winning him an Oscar), Lt. Col. Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* (79), Gus McCrae in *Lonesome Dove* (89), not to mention Stalin, Eisenhower, and Eichmann. Most recently, in *Crazy Heart*, he played the dependable friend Wayne, who never judges Jeff Bridges's Bad Blake.

Duvall's men embody something iconic about America, central to how we think about ourselves. Deep into a nearly 50-year career, Duvall at 79 still embodies can-do

America, a mindset that has been hard to watch fade away whether it's overseas or down at the local auto-supply store where the clerk doesn't have the part you need. Unfailingly, Duvall finds the part. He's the guy who gets it done.

Now comes Duvall as Felix Bush, a crazy old coot at the head of a cast that includes Bill Murray and Sissy Spacek in Aaron Schneider's debut feature, *Get Low*, set in Depression-era Tennessee. (The film premiered at last year's Toronto Film Festival.) Trust Duvall to find a character close to where he's at, consciously or not: a contentious holdout, sure of his own opinion and strength, a man of the South who understands power and sin—and is hell-bent on sitting in at his own funeral.

Duvall has manners. He's succinct, a straight shooter even as he is unfailingly polite, a Southern gentleman. In conversation, his verb is the most important thing, the specific subject or object often coming as an afterthought. That's because, as Duvall says, it's all “action” and “cut,” anyway.

**Get Low is about a man who's dying and wants to get clean. Is this something you think about as you get older?**

No, sir, I have nothing to get clean about.

**Your character is a kind of holdout, a Southern male you don't see much anymore.**

I'm sure there are guys like this in Montana, Maine, or wherever. When I was in the Army, I bunked over a guy from Virginia, then later a potato farmer from Maine. There was a difference but a kinship: country people.

**Do you think of yourself as a son of the South?**

No, I think of myself as an American who has roots in the South. My mother's people were from southeast Texas, my father's from Virginia. So I have certain ties.

**Your family was pro-North.**

My father's family. They were pro-Union Southerners, tobacco farmers. And they named my grandfather Abraham Lincoln Duvall. There were pockets all over the South that didn't believe in secession.

My father was born and reared in Virginia. He went to a one-room country school, went to high school when he was 11, then went to the Naval Academy when he was 16—the youngest guy in his class.

**Your father was military for how long?**

For 30 years. He fought the Nazis.

**Did he want you to be military?**

No.

**Did you want to be military?**

No, no way. They pushed me into acting, my parents [*laughs*]. They nudged me into the “acting profession.” I was kind of floundering around. I went into the Army for two years, but when I was in college they said, “Change your major and try acting.”

**Did they see acting in you as a little kid?**

I think so—we did skits and sang songs around the house, this and that. My mother had been an amateur actress. On an academic level it paid off: I got my first A. After I got out of the Army, I went to New York, straightaway.

**When you were starting in the Fifties, what did you think a career in movies could mean?**

I went to New York to be a stage actor. That was the deal. I did a lot of theater.

And you got \$37 a week take-home pay doing Off Broadway, and they had to let you in and out to go do TV in L.A. After *American Buffalo* [77], that was about it. I wasn't drawn to theater anymore. If there was no film, I could've been in repertory theater someplace. It's all the same—you just speak up a little louder on the stage. On TV I did Stalin, Adolf Eichmann, *Lonesome Dove*, *Broken Trail*. TV can be just as good, sometimes better than movies, so why not do both?

**You've worked with some great directors. Who taught you something useful?**

Who are the great directors you think I worked with?

**Ulu Grosbard, Coppola, Altman.**

Right. I did three plays with Ulu Grosbard, one film. *American Buffalo* on Broadway was one of the highlights of my career. And Coppola, too, was great to work with. Those are the guys who wait to see what you bring rather than say "Do this, do that," like the old directors. One director once said to me, "When I say 'action!' tense up, goddammit!" Can you imagine saying that to Joe Montana in the middle of the Super Bowl, a coach? A good director isn't going to say something like that, one who understands acting. Coppola, Altman, and those guys see what you do, what you bring, and go from there.

**Did you know the line "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" would become immortal?**

No, sir. I had no idea. John Milius wrote the original script. It was a little much. In the first draft, I was called Col. Carnage. They had me in cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, which was ridiculous. People still come up to me and say the line like only you and they know it.

**What have been your favorite roles?**

There are a number. But Augustus McCrae in *Lonesome Dove* was my favorite, because you had eight hours to develop it.

**Horton Foote was special to you.**

He gave me my start. He came one night to the Neighborhood Playhouse, where

we were doing one of his plays, with his wife Lillian, Robert Mulligan, and Kim Stanley. A couple years later Lillian said to Mulligan, "That boy we saw in the play would be good for Boo Radley." If I'd have just had a small career with Coppola and Horton Foote, that would've been a wonderful career.

**Some actors disappear into a character, like Alec Guinness or Max von Sydow.**

Gunnar Björnstrand was better than that guy. Sometimes the people who submerge themselves in characters are bad actors, because they don't really understand themselves first. You have to understand yourself first in order to play a character. Then you turn yourself in a certain way, as if you become the character, but it's still you doing it.



**"Sometimes the people who submerge themselves in characters are bad actors, because they don't really understand themselves first."**

**Any character you want to play?**

I went to Cuba about six months ago to do research for a project with Jimmy Caan and Al Pacino. It's about three guys who go back to claim what's their own before the Revolution. I don't know if it will ever happen. There's one with Terry Gilliam [*The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*] where I play Don Quixote. And I would love to play Devil Anse in *The Hatfields and the McCoys*. Warner Bros. and Brad Pitt own it. They talked to Scott Cooper about directing it.

**And what about the film by Xavier Giannoli, about the Texas border?**

Yeah, we're working on that. It's not the thing I want to do about the Texas border. There's another thing with an original script written years ago by Bill Wittliff, who adapted *Lonesome Dove*. But this French director [Giannoli] became obsessed with it and is trying to get it off the ground.

**It's different than the one you wanted to do?**

The thing I wanted to do is about the tick riders under the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who ride with guns on long, lonely shifts to keep cattle from coming over from Mexico with ticks and infecting our cattle. It's nothing to do with law enforcement—that's all they're allowed to do. We were going to do it with AMC, but after we put 'em on the map with *Broken Trail*, they forgot about us.

**That would be for TV?**

Two-part TV. You can do an indie film and sometimes six people see it. When we did *Broken Trail*, 30 million saw it. Sometimes TV is a better outlet. Some people won't do TV, and I say, "Why not? It's all 'action' and 'cut' anyway."

**Has it been hard for you to be a conservative in a progressive Democratic industry?**

I got one answer for that: name me one black or Hispanic head of a studio or agency. So, how liberal is it out there in Hollywood, really? I do what I do. I am what I am. I'm an American. I like my country, and I'm not going to run it down. This country is like a big giant kid with a lot of talent that's made mistakes. If the United States went down, it would be a dark world. But ya know, I get along, I get along. □