

## >>brief encounters

Anthony Hopkins on renouncing the Hollywood game and renewing his passion to create  
By Harlan Jacobson



### Lion on the Loose

AROUND THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM, ANTHONY HOPKINS STARTED making bold moves. He ended his marriage of 30 years, met Stella Arroyave, a San Francisco antiques dealer, and ended up marrying her. He renounced his U.K. citizenship but not his knighthood, and became an American.

When we caught up to him in August at the Locarno Film Festival, he had just showed *Slipstream*, which he wrote, directed, and scored, and which Stella produced and has a prominent role in. A Russian doll of movies-within-dreams-within-movies, *Slipstream* is a kind of vaudevillian's nightmare, in which a screenwriter suspiciously named Felix Bonhoeffer (Hopkins says he'd been reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer and wanted to show how a book enters a writer's dreamwork) is summoned to a desert movie set to do rewrites, after the actor (Christian Slater) playing a hit man keels over on the set, dead.

At Locarno Hopkins seemed a leopard. His eyes burned bright. He would just take a bite wherever and whenever he wanted. When he left the 4,000-seat Fevi auditorium after the *Slipstream* screening, he took the time to sign autographs for a hundred young stragglers who waited an hour to see him. "Hannibal Lecter" he signed one girl's card, then ran the blue marker in a scribble up her forearm. Time is on no one's side, but Hopkins, who's built a career on controlled fury, accelerated his big-picture thinking about his life when he made this little picture about a screenwriter taking his leave of the world. Hopkins reached a point, he says, when he just stopped caring about what people thought and decided no more cages. And that seems to be enough for him to open up and say what he thinks about the life he's leading now, about to turn 70 on New Year's Eve.

*Slipstream* and *The World's Fastest Indian*—and even *Titus*—seem to be companion pieces. All three are about men who come to a point where their freedom becomes terribly important and they have to deal with their mortality, decide what matters and what doesn't. Is that your frame of mind now?

Oh indeed it is. I'm almost 70 now, and three or four o'clock in the morning, those are the witching hours when I wake up and ask, "What's it all about?" I don't ponder it, because I don't want to be miserable. I enjoy this age. I'm fascinated by the nature of mind, the nature of destiny, and the nature of illusion. The insight into the subconscious mind, the extraordinary thing that we are such vast depths of unconsciousness, and that [per] Gurdjieff, we walk around asleep.

I've been reading Goethe lately, and Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyich*, and Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*, and Emile Zola's *Nana*, and all deal with mortality and the final end of it all [*sweeps his hand across in a wide arc*], and I find it all really fascinating.

**Bonhoeffer is a man taking the measure of his life and times: Nixon, Hitler, World War II, Vietnam. You get the sense that this is a writer who when he's writing gets to be God. And yet he's a god whose stuffing is falling out of his head, and he's trying to make sense of it.**

Stella and I have arguments about this, but she's a happy woman. She is usually puzzled with my not-quite obsession with 20th-century history. I remember the suicide of Hitler, the death and carnage, the opening of the concentration camps. When that girl in the film is talking all that New Age and bipolar stuff they talk about in California, I didn't mean it as an attack on them, but I'm sitting there as Bonhoeffer thinking, "Jesus Christ, they really don't know what they're talking about." What I can remember is the carnage and the brutality. The horror of the world. I get tremendously emotional about it and can't talk about it. And so I thought I'd put it into the movie. If there's any connection, as I was writing *Slipstream*, it's that the mainstream media is the Body Snatcher. When you watch the TV and

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listen to the news, it's sucking our souls dry. Because people are desperate . . . When Christian [Slater] says "They're mainstream! Mainstream!" that's my take on life, actually. I created Bonhoeffer, and Bonhoeffer created Christian Slater's character for his script. So it's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

**You started in Wales and you've had quite a journey: from baker's son to a glorious career to knighthood to American citizenship. What would your parents have thought of that?**

My mother only died four years ago, so she saw most of it. When my father saw the beginnings of my success, he'd get very emotional; he'd start crying and all that. But he worked himself so hard—he died at the age of 73. He had a tremendously powerful influence on my life, because he was so grounded. I have his build and his tenacity. He had no time for affectation. He once met Laurence Olivier in the dressing room in London. He asked Olivier how old he was, and Olivier said [*stentorian*], "I was born in nineteen hundred and seven." My father said, "Same age as me—we're both going round the bloody

hill now, ain't we?" My mother said, "You can't talk to him like that, that's Laurence Olivier." And my father said, "Well, he breathes air just like we do." So my father was really meat and potatoes.

**You grew up down the road from where Richard Burton had lived, and later directed his daughter Kate in *August* [*Uncle Vanya* set in Wales]. I think of you very much in the Burton mold: he as someone who would steal your wife and you as someone who would steal your life.**

[*Laughs*] I never really knew Burton. I asked him for his autograph in the dressing room of *Equus* in New York, where he'd replaced Tony Perkins, who'd replaced me. It was such a strange destiny, because we were born at the same time. What I loved about Burton was that he shook to the rafters. He wasn't a member of the gang. He went out and did what he did. Elizabeth Taylor said, "You people who've written him off have sold out." He did exactly what he wanted to do—like Peter O'Toole. The two of 'em may have burnt out a bit, but they had the guts to do what they did, whether they dam-

aged their health or not—fine, they were Faustian. I was fortunate to have survived that. I've got the same passion and drive to create, now more than ever.

**What triggered the recent changes in your life?**

When my mother died, she was 89. I'd taken her from Wales to California, and she had a great life. I began to think I can't go on just churning it out, as lucrative as it is. The politics of Hollywood were beginning to get under my skin. I've had a wonderful time there—but I was shooting *Proof* in London, playing a Southern nutcase. There I was at 66, getting up at 4 A.M., coming back to the hotel late at night, and I was worn out. Stella said, "Do you really think it's worth it?" And I began to think, no, not really.

Because it's become a different game. I thought maybe I should get out before I have my first heart attack. You can go on, then [*snaps fingers*] have problems, and for what? I had five hours of memory loss from a concussion in Mexico—a terrifying experience. I worked a little too long and lost control of my senses. Very dangerous for an actor, if you take it so seriously. You cannot violate the body for the sake of art.

I am pretty obsessive, I'm a hard worker. So Stella said, why don't you try writing a script? That's how *Slipstream* started. I wrote it as an accidental tourist—it wrote itself. And I never knew where it was going to go. It's a great time of my life. I have no regrets, no fears. I'm writing another script. I'll keep it more centralized, one location in Los Angeles. But, you know, I can't think beyond the next 10 minutes.

***Slipstream* seems very meditative. Mahler wrote a Ninth Symphony thinking he was going to die. Everyone else had died after having written a Ninth Symphony, so he thought it was his turn. There's something final about the film—it ends with "I'll Be Seeing You." Is it your Ninth Symphony?**

It is. Many years ago in my tequila days, I heard that Jackie Gleason song, "I'll Be Seeing You," and I remember it was so emotional. I don't know why it's had such a powerful effect on me. I thought at the end, when the director says, "That's a wrap—that's it, everyone," it's like John Ford at the end of *The*

*Searchers*: "And . . . cut!" □



**A man in full:** Sir Anthony Hopkins, American, with Lisa Pepper (top) and Christian Slater (federal