Philip Seymour Hoffman's Human-Scaled Artistry in *The Savages*

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FEATURES — AUG 12, 2024

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When Philip Seymour Hoffman starred in Tamara Jenkins's *The Savages* (2007), he had little left to prove. After breaking through in the 1990s with a series of scene-stealing performances in films like *Boogie Nights, Happiness, The Big Lebowski,* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley,* he had become an in-demand actor's actor. Thanks to a 2000 Broadway production of *True West* and his work as co–artistic director of the LAByrinth Theater Company, he also garnered a reputation as one of the best stage actors of his generation. By the time he won the Best Actor Oscar for *Capote* in 2005, he had become a one-man symbol of quality. When *The Savages* was released, it was one of three Oscar contenders featuring Hoffman (along with *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* and *Charlie Wilson's War*) running in theaters at the same time.

He also had only seven years left to live. This is the struggle in writing about Hoffman: stories tend to derive their meanings from their endings, and his was tragic. But he was not a story—he was a man, filled with all the complexity and contradictions that any of us carry with us. Articles about him written after his death tend to be acts of mourning: the work matters because we won't get more of it; the man matters because he must have been so tormented. When Hoffman made his films, however, he had no idea what the rest of his life would hold or how long it would last. He derived *his* meaning from the work. "The thing about Phil that was amazing," his acting teacher and coach Tony Greco recalled to me, "[is] he was really willing to just say, 'I'm willing to tank my entire career each time I take on a new role.' "

The Savages does not feature Hoffman's showiest performance. He isn't the lead in the film; he doesn't even appear in it until almost twelve minutes in. But it is a perfect showcase for the unique qualities that made him so good—and so important to the craft of acting in his lifetime. When we first see Jon Savage, the depressed, stalled-out theater professor played by Hoffman, he is shrouded in darkness, asleep in his house in Buffalo. In the movie's opening eleven and a half minutes, we've come to learn a great deal about his sister, Wendy, played by Laura Linney. Her life

as an aspiring playwright and lower-Manhattan temp is detailed in quick, devastatingly funny strokes as we witness her apply for grants, steal office supplies, take care of her cat, and screw her married upstairs neighbor.

Jon, on the other hand, is a mystery. If you don't know the movie's premise, you don't yet know who he is or why he's in the movie. Soon, we learn Jon and Wendy are siblings, and that she's calling him in the middle of the night because their estranged father is writing on bathroom walls with his feces. Then something curious happens: Jon does not sit up in bed, panicked. He does not try to make a plan. He does not cry. Instead, he complains about having to wake up early in the morning, mocks his sister's anxiety, and gets off the phone as quickly as possible.

Atypical behavior is the material out of which character is built, particularly for an actor like Hoffman. As he once said in an interview, "You're trying to ask the appropriate questions that can very well start with, Why am I here? Who am I to this person?" The task of finding the specifics of a character and living within them is one of the building blocks of the Stanislavski-based technique that Hoffman studied at Circle in the Square Theatre School, one of the studios that make up New York University's acting BFA program. Unlike many of its peers, which are devoted to a specific interpretation of Stanislavski's teachings, Circle in the Square is notably eclectic in its approach.

While studying there, Hoffman was drilled in the basics of Stanislavski script analysis, which pays particular attention to the given circumstances of a narrative (everything known about the world of the play and the character's life) and the objective (the goal that the character is pursuing with everything they do). Actors are trained to break down their text into verb statements, and they are taught that each action—a line, a physical gesture, a movement—should be undergirded by an objective phrased as an infinitive verb. Well into his career, Hoffman spoke about his continued practice of this technique: "I'll always sit there and think, What's the *word*? . . . when you try to think about the word—the active verb—it can begin the conversation."

Hoffman makes both the objective and the given circumstances palpable in that first phone-call scene. Jon has just been woken up in the middle of the night, his neurotic sister is calling freaking out about something, and he wants to stay out of her mess. We will come to learn that steering clear of emotional chaos is a big part of what motivates him. And in this moment, his methods of avoidance entail not indulging Wendy's fantasies of going to the desert to find their lost father, like characters in a Sam Shepard play.

Approaching a character purely through textual analysis can lead to performances that are too logical, schematic, and, to quote Greco, "boring." So, Hoffman supplemented this with work on "etudes"—short, fictional improvisations in which the actor must live within given circumstances provided by the instructor—and also did a great deal of work on himself, using exercises that Lee Strasberg had developed for teaching the Method. According to Greco, Hoffman did a lot of "sensory work" (learning to respond to imaginary sensations) along with "private moment" (recreating things the actor only does in private, to help train their ability to ignore the presence of an audience) and "affective memory work" (exploring strong emotional experiences from one's past in order to use them in the creation of a character). But it wasn't just his educational background that made Hoffman special. "He had an incredible actor's brain," Greco said. "If you taught him in class

and you had a room full of actors, he wasn't somebody who'd just put his chair randomly in a corner. He found the corner 'accidentally' where the best light was."

The combination of Hoffman's training and his talent is the key to his much-vaunted versatility. Usually when we think about that quality in an actor, we have physical transformations in mind, but Hoffman was an internal chameleon, not an external one. As Bennett Miller, the writer and director of *Capote,* put it, "if he's not connecting with the truth of the moment, if he ever became lost, it became very, very false." Certain gestures recur throughout his body of work—the half-open-mouthed smile of incredulity; the pedantic left hand placed on the hip while the right hand chops through the air making a point; the sharp swivel of his body for comic effect; a hand raised by his head as if he's a revivalist preacher, indicating his resistance to whatever he is being told. Most of these make an appearance in *The Savages,* but Hoffman is living so fully within the truth of Jon's circumstances that they feel like integral expressions of the character. There are subtle shifts in Hoffman's physicality as well. Jon's history, like all of our histories, is written on his body, in the hunch of his shoulders, the slackness in his face, the puffy parka he wears like a suit of armor. It's there in his hesitant movement and the way he rubs his face constantly. Jon is a man worn down by his forty years on this earth.

Particularly after Hoffman's death, the idea that he was a great artist of male self-loathing became almost a commonplace in discussing him. Since many of his most beloved performances (including his work in *The Savages*) have little to do with self-loathing, this reputation might say more about our assumptions about overweight men who don't care about ingratiating themselves to audiences than it does about Hoffman's actual achievements. A year before his death, he was asked about this subject, and his response was revealing: "Everyone struggles with self-love. That's pretty much the human condition." While seeming to agree with the interviewer, he actually flips the question on its head. Struggling to love oneself is not the result of hatred and disgust turned inward. The struggle to love is an action—an objective, even—that can turn us outward toward the world.

Jon's struggle is not only to love but to allow himself to feel, well, anything. He has convinced himself that his lot in life cannot be changed, and has sublimated all the attendant rage and sorrow this stuckness produces. His home is filled with bachelor furniture and piles of books, an externalized mess hiding the tightly controlled man inside it. We know that he is working on a book about Brecht, but we suspect that he will never finish it. Rather than marry his long-term girlfriend, Kasia, he breaks up with her when her visa expires; because the job market for academics in their field is difficult, they wouldn't likely be able to live in the same city anyway. The impulse behind this decision—pushing pragmatism so far it becomes illogical—is the essence of Jon.

Wendy shares her brother's background, but she is all self-dramatization and neurosis. Late in the film, we see Jon teaching in front of a blackboard with the elements of dramatic and epic theater listed, aspects that could stand for the siblings themselves. The dramatic theater (what we might call traditional theater) relies on "emotion, sensation, suggestion," while epic theater (the highly ironized and polemical form of meta-theater devised by Bertolt Brecht) is "thinking, argument, reason." Laura Linney's performance—one of her best—highlights this contrast. She brings an incredible warmth to Wendy, a warmth that is inseparable from the character's neediness and insecurity. There's a thrilling life to her work in the movie, because, in Linney's hands, Wendy is constantly reacting to whatever the world throws at her, ducking and weaving in her attempt to find some dignity and love for herself. When she lies to Jon about getting a Guggenheim, we do not sense a diabolical mind at work, but rather someone backed into a corner simply trying to get her brother to say he's proud of her.

Wendy is more humane and sympathetic than her brother, even as she defrauds the federal government, sleeps with a married man, and lies about her life to her brother. But the film provocatively suggests that Jon, who can blithely talk about institutionalizing their father and then, without skipping a beat, ask a bartender for more nuts, is the one who is needed to make the hard decisions. "Don't make me out to be the evil brother who's putting away our father against your will," he

protests. "We're doing this together, right?" In one of the film's few unsubtle gestures, Jenkins then cuts to the bar's entertainment for the night, two elderly cabaret performers singing the Johnny Mercer and Bobby Darin duet "Two of a Kind."

The sort of journey that Jon is on can't help but come with the big emotional moments that we tend to associate with "good acting," and *The Savages* has these. The scene that most resembles an Oscar clip depicts Jon losing it on Wendy in the parking lot of the nice nursing home to which she wants to move their father. "Right inside that beautiful building," he yells, "right now it's a fucking horror show! And all this wellness propaganda and the landscaping is just there to obscure the miserable fact that people die!" But while I love watching Hoffman go big, he's far more interesting and more uniquely himself when we see his characters attempt to keep a lid on all the simmering chaos that threatens to spill out of them. "He could get overly emotional," Greco said. "He always wanted to cry. We got very caught up in that when he was young, because he thought that's what made him, and I'm like, 'That's your sentimentalizing of acting.' He did not want to sentimentalize acting, but you had to push him."

Lee Strasberg often emphasized how valuable suppression is to an actor. As Martin Landau, both a student and a teacher of the Method, explained, Strasberg wanted actors to "find the emotion, and find a way to allow it out, and then hold it back the way a character would, and if stuff leaks out, that's what's supposed to happen." *The Savages* is filled with moments of revelation like this. When Jon is watching his sister bring their father out of the airport to his car, Hoffman's gaze is first filled with loathing and impatience, before suddenly giving way to longing and grief that cannot be fully expressed. It doesn't end in tears but with the effort to hold them back, which is always more interesting. When his sister asks him if the medication she's found in his house is "for depression," he responds that it's "for cholesterol," but the way he sits up as he says it speaks volumes about how annoyed he is.

My favorite example—one that's lodged in my mental dictionary under the entry *Hoffmanesque*—comes quite early in the film, during yet another late-night phone

call, one between Jon and Kasia about their breakup. Instead of giving us this entire conversation, or zooming in on Jon so we can see Hoffman's emotional pyrotechnics, Jenkins smartly shoots the scene from a distance. It begins with muffled voices in the night, the camera tight on Wendy's face as she wakes up in the motel room she is sharing with her brother. The indistinct murmurs coalesce as Jon says, "See you . . . don't know if that's something you and I could do . . . better if we don't talk." When the camera reveals Jon, it does so over Wendy's shoulder, as she turns to quietly eavesdrop on him. We see him in deep focus in the background of the frame, glimpsed through an open door, sitting on a toilet, as if he lived in the saddest Dutch-master painting ever made.

Jon's given circumstances (the need to avoid waking his sister, and the persistent stress of dealing with his father's illness) pressurize the objective (his desire to get Kasia to stop calling him), and this in turn finds expression in his voice, which is not the low, sardonic mumble that was Hoffman's signature but a pleading, high-pitched, broken thing. It's the voice of someone who is trying and failing to find solid ground. If great acting captures something true about the human condition, it is moments like these that prove Hoffman was among the art's best exponents.

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