

He saved the universe in *Star Wars* and just a few minutes ago—on this Burbank Studios' western street where the climactic scene of a movie called *The Frisco Kid* is being shot—he'd rescued a Polish rabbi from a dastardly Wild West villain. Yet Harrison Ford now sits slumped and slightly grimacing in his Harrison Ford canvas chair, acting a little surprised and disgruntled that another damn journalist wants another damn interview.

Such recorded-for-the-world tete-a-tetes, the actor tells the writer and the picture's publicist, generally consist of the same old questions and the same old answers; what's more, they often result in his being misquoted or quoted out of context. To avoid part of the former problem, Ford reveals, he sometimes . . . hm . . . makes things up.

"I told one writer that my parents were Rumanian midgets. He took me seriously and it got printed. It didn't go over well with my mother."

The actor pauses to watch a group of extras stampede toward an alley between "The Palace Hotel" and "Mom's Restaurant," where chili and coffee are being served, then he adds a more pointed, personal objection to articles about him. "Just because you're in a movie, everything you say is quotable—and that's insane. People must be disabused of the notion that someone like me is worthy of so much interest."

Right then, as if on cue, a man approaches and introduces his 11-year-old son, who wants an autograph. The boy gazes up at Ford with wide, glistening eyes and stammers that he's seen *Star Wars* a dozen times. Ford is dressed up in 1870ish San Francisco-dude clothes but the kid probably doesn't notice them at all. He just sees Han Solo. Harrison surely realizes this, but it's fine with him.

"Then I should get your autograph." He rises from his star-chair and has the kid sit in it. He goes on his knees for a second and asks, "Can I shine your shoes or anything?" He's kidding around, but seems truly grateful to this representative of those millions who've made his name a household (or playground) word (but which name?). He's doing a partial parody on the old humble-star act that doesn't even escape the boy. Harrison Ford plays the role well, and with conviction.

A few days later, in Musso & Frank's on Hollywood Boulevard, he's playing the part of an unenthusiastic interviewee even more convincingly. Seated with the journalist and the publicist at a table in the middle of the noisy bistro, he frowns into the menu, looking all the more menacing with a few days growth of beard, chooses the Special of the Day, slaps the menu down and grumbles, "All right, let's get this over with."

However, Ford turns out to be not quite so sullen as this opening remark augurs. Fortified by a few sips from his Bloody Mary, he becomes polite and friendly enough for the next forty minutes. Just not very . . . forthcoming. Worse, and completely at odds with his intense persona on screen, he talks in a slow, methodical monotone that, after fifteen minutes or so, might put even a speeding *Star Wars* fan to sleep.

Would his next project, a sequel to *Star Wars* which may be titled *The Empire Strikes Back*, put him in danger of being forever type-cast as Han Solo in most moviegoers' minds?

"Not with all the work I've been doing in between." Indeed, since *Star Wars*, Ford has appeared in *Heroes*, *Force 10 from Navarone*, *Hanover Street* and *The Frisco Kid*. Plus a small part in *Apocalypse Now*, which he spent three days shooting. "I mean, that's why I've been working so hard lately, to establish myself as an entity separate from that which *Star Wars* has generated. I think that's critical, or I will not be exercising the potential of the situation. I figure I was real lucky to be in a real successful film and I spent 15 years before that, struggling. Now I'm able to go to work and I couldn't be happier. So I go to work and I pick the best shots I've got."

"But suddenly you're obliged to make the kind of career decisions you've never had to make before. Where before you could say, 'This is good,' or 'This is something I'm not gonna make,' and now you . . . oh, forget it. I can't explain it. All of a sudden you've got to be a success, that's what I mean."

Does he have any thoughts about why *Star Wars* was so popular?

"If I did, I'd be smart enough to keep my mouth shut . . . I think people went to it 'cause it's an entertainment and the good guys win and the bad guys lose. It's your standard mythology in an exciting technological context—to reduce it to its most boring terms."

Why was his role in *Heroes* that picture's only intriguing quality?

"I don't ever know why a part works or doesn't work in any given case. But . . . it was because that character only had a lifespan of about 20 minutes. In a character moving by that quickly, an actor isn't obligated to have all the answers, the way he is if he has a larger part to play. You just have to go for what works, and not feel that you have to make a full characterization."

Ford's food comes, a splat of noodles and yellowish sauce on a white plate. He regards it disdainfully. "Not *exact*-ly what I thought it was gonna be. This is Special?" He coats the offering with a layer of pepper and bravely digs in. The conversation resumes, and *The Frisco Kid* is brought up. The Robert Aldrich-directed film is the story of a rabbi who emigrates from Poland to America's Wild West. Gene Wilder plays the rabbi, whose comedic misadventures include involvement with a bank robber, played by Ford.

"It's as realistic a presentation of a Jew in the Old West as you'll ever see," claims Ford between bites. "But at the same time it's not just a history lesson. It's fun. It doesn't trade on sex and violence—though it does have a *little* sex and violence, for those of you who like sex and violence. I know there are some people who will like me saying that. And Wilder and Aldrich are great to work with. Wilder's a very funny man."

Is Ford a movie buff?

"No. Can't say I am. Never have been. Find it to be an embarrassment at times, not to know what's going on around me. Sometimes it's useful to be that way, but sometimes it's a definite disadvantage."

There was a silent movie actor also named Harrison Ford who was fairly well known in the early Twenties. Had that caused any particular problems or confusion?

"Yeah," he drawled. Ford's speech is slowing down even more, but at least he is still talking. There is a fear in the journalist's mind that that mouth might come to a complete standstill at any time. "I didn't realize there was one until I went to sign up for the Screen Actors Guild. They told me I couldn't be Harrison Ford."

Right then Ford *does* stop speaking, takes a bite of his Special, chews, looks around the room.

"Uh, what," prompts the journalist, "did you do about that?"

Another bite. Another look around the room. "Oh. I had to create a middle initial." And what was that? "J." Oh.

Son of an Irish Catholic father and a German Jewish mother, Ford, without the middle "J," was born in Chicago on July 13, 1942. He had one brother, Terence, and led a "rather uneventful" childhood. He studied philosophy and English at Ripon College, in central Wisconsin. He began acting professionally in summer stock at Williams Bay, a resort community on the shores of Lake Geneva.

In 1964 he moved to Laguna Beach, California, and appeared at the Playhouse there in a production of *John Brown's Body*. This resulted in his being signed to Columbia Pictures' new talent program. His film debut was as a bellhop in *Dead Heat on a Merry-Go-Round*, followed by bit parts

in *Luv* and *Getting Straight*. Subsequently, he appeared in several TV series, including *Gunsmoke*, *Ironsides* and *The Virginian*. But the big break looked like it was never going to come. After a role in *Zabriskie Point*, Ford decided to concentrate on carpentry until his acting prospects improved. The big break came years later, when director George Lucas was looking for unknown actors to play in *American Graffiti*. His casting director, Fred Roos, knew of Ford and gave him the part of the "cowboy" streetracer who challenged Paul LeMat. Francis Ford Coppola then cast him as Robert Duvall's assistant in *The Conversation*. *Star Wars* soon followed.

Though Ford hasn't been afforded the kind of praise someone like Robert DeNiro gets, he reportedly devotes much the same sort of preparation and concentration to his roles. One who admires his dedication is *The Frisco Kid*'s producer, Mace Neufeld.

"For our picture he's become about as close to being a real cowboy as anyone can. The wranglers [the crew/actors who teach other actors how to ride and act like cowboys] are a tight bunch, hard to get close to or please, but they've totally accepted Harrison."

Back in Musso & Frank's, Ford was asked to tell a little about *Hanover Street*, which he'd done just before *The Frisco Kid*. "It's a World War II love story. Lots of violins . . ." Violence? "A little violence, but mostly violins. It was a very complex acting job . . ." How come? "I would like to . . . just forget I said that. Strike it. Pretend I never

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HARRISON FORD: A Man of Few Words

