

the hopped-up psychopath in *Blue Velvet*. Lynch just assumed that Hopper was still, you know, Hopper. Still clutching the gun under his pillow.

The public doesn't know what to think either. This is the former juvenile actor from the '50s who was blackballed from movies, then made a comeback and a fortune directing and co-starring in *Easy Rider*, right after which he went to Peru to make *The Last Movie*, with peyote stoking the fires and everyone there to record the joyride. *Life's* 1970 cover story began, "Furor trails him like a pet anaconda. At 34, he is known in Hollywood as a sullen renegade who talks revolution, settles arguments with karate, goes to bed with groups and has taken trips on everything you can swallow or shoot."

From there it only gets more colorful. Hopper hastily writes a letter to *Variety*, protesting that the only thing he ever shot up in his life was vitamin B-12. *The Last Movie* flops, and for years he works only sporadically, and only once again as a director, taking over in mid-shoot *Out of the Blue*, a 1980 father-daughter drama. When we see him in a couple of Francis Coppola movies, *Apocalypse Now* and *Rumble Fish*, he looks like a human train wreck.

The popular image of Hopper conceals another person, however, a person with some very serious views on art. *Easy Rider*, for instance, may now be laughed off as a period piece, but it really does detail its era, and does so with gothic perfection. The hilarious stoned rap about spaceships was not an improvisation by Jack Nicholson, but a scene written by Dennis Hopper.

And how many know that the typecast wreckage seen in *Apocalypse Now* flew from that movie's Philippines set to the German set of Wim Wenders's *The American Friend* to play, just a day later, someone entirely different?

Suddenly, in 1986 and '87, he is the hardest working man in show business, with seven releases in little more than ten months, including December's *Hoosiers* and February's triple feature: *Black Widow*, *Straight to Hell*, and *River's Edge*. Of course, it all started last fall with *Blue Velvet*. As Frank Booth, inhaling on a gas mask as he sexually mauls Isabella Rossellini, Hopper was so damn vile and violent that just by the force of his voice and the threat of his suddenness he made the moviegoer sink down into his seat.

A few actors asked for the terrible role, including, most improbably, singer Bobby Vinton, who had a hit with "Blue Velvet" in 1962. But it was Dennis Hopper who brought Frank Booth to skin-crawling life. "He had been on earlier lists," admits director David Lynch, "but because of his reputation, I

never really thought about him. But when I heard that he had cleaned up his act, I got real excited. His manager said, 'Look, please talk to the producers who have worked with him recently, they'll tell you he's fantastic. Then Dennis called up and said, 'I've got to play this part, David, because I am Frank.' He has so much power, and he has a quality like Jack Nicholson has—that is, you can't stop watching the guy."

TO DO WHAT HE'S been doing, the actor has to cut a deal with his vanity. In *River's Edge* he is a biker who talks romantically of the woman he killed, sells dope to kids, keeps house with an inflatable doll. In *Hoosiers* he is a former small-town basketball star who has become a town drunk. In all three movies, he gets little opportunity to say "Hey, it's only me here, Mr. Wonderful, the guy you know and love."

We shall draw the curtain of charity over his role in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2*. But in this summer's James Toback picture, *The Pick-Up Artist*, Hopper plays Molly Ringwald's father, an alcoholic gambler. There's something hypnotic, something entrancing about seeing this old dude try on these motley suits of clothes and stomp around the 50-foot screen.

Director Toback thinks Hopper's chief asset is that he sees the humor in everything: "He's one of the few people who has gone through those programs and has cleaned out his system internally and externally, and yet he is not at all a proselytizer or a voice of doom. Which is frequently the case with former degenerates who have reformed."

Another twist in the plot for Hopper in jobs like *River's Edge* and *The Pick-Up Artist* is that young actors regard him as an *éminence grise*, a hipster pathfinder. "He's a good spirit to hang around on the set," Toback says.

Hopper's gamble on rough roles has already paid off. The National Society of Film Critics and the Los Angeles Film Critics thought well enough of his uncorked portrayals to award him their citations as Best Supporting Actor of 1986 for *Blue Velvet* and *Hoosiers*. And the Golden Globe voters have nominated him as well. While there is also plentiful talk about an Oscar nomination, it is likely that the Academy will be split between the two very different pictures. Whatever happens, it is already clear that the renegade has been tenderly clasped to Hollywood's bosom—for maybe the very first time in his long life.

It was even announced at the turn of the year that, after far too long a waiting period, he was to return to the director's chair. The movie, a police-vs.-gangs drama for Orion called *Colors*,

stars Robert Duvall, Sean Penn and Maria Conchita Alonso and is scheduled to start shooting in February, a full Hollywood production with an all union crew. And Hopper is to be ushered, finally, into the Director's Guild. The outsider is coming in from the cold.

"He's probably in a very good frame of mind to direct now," offers Toback. "There's a point beyond which it becomes clear that every act might be your last. I think that he already feels that he's living on borrowed time. There were X-number of occasions when he could just as well have died as lived. All of a sudden you get a chance to direct a movie again, and it's a gift."

I'M DOING THESE ROLES sober," reports a very sober Dennis Hopper. "I used to joke and say I was going to write a book on *The Six Drugs and How to Use Them in Acting*. I would drink if that would help me with a scene, I would take cocaine."

His eyes are clear and level. "I have no problem," he hastens to add, "reaching the emotional depths without any artificial help. I fell back on my training: Strasberg, emotional memory."

Hopper's health is reassuring. I first met him four years ago on the set of *Osterman Weekend*. A strong dramatic current ran through that set because it marked the return of Sam Peckinpah after many years battling heart ailments, movie woes and the bottle. Hopper had known him since 1958 when Peckinpah directed the young actor for the TV show, *The Rifleman*. In his dressing room he was pale and thin, with his shoulders hunched up sorrowfully. Reflecting on Peckinpah, Hopper offered the doleful warning that although a director may be surrounded by people, he is still isolated and lonely, an artist-hermit. The actor went on preparing for his scene with a beer and a joint. He was a devoutly thoughtful fellow, ready to analyze anything, but his condition did seem shaky.

You can see the same hunched-shoulder posture in *Hoosiers*, but in person Hopper is more solid. He carries a little more weight now, and it agrees with him. An executive-strength forehead looms over a craggy brow and a noble nose. He has a strong chin and a delicate mouth, and the years and the graying hair have rewarded his face with a fine prairie dignity.

His house is a Frank Gehry-designed cube set down in the seedier fringes of the Los Angeles beach town, Venice. Inside the cube is an angular blend of styles. Industrial-looking planes of gray walls and glass are set off by a bare lumber staircase. Film magazines and scripts are piled up on ancient wood tables, and everywhere you look