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A Man of Many Parts

Viggo Mortensen Is an Actor, a Writer, a Painter, a Publisher, a . . . You Get the Picture

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Yes, he's cute, okay? You know, handsome, not so Aragorn-ish, perhaps, a little, okay, a *lot* less swashbuckling, a little grayer, a little shorter, but sexy in a boho kind of way. Cleans up nice. Okay? Satisfied?

We will not join the legions of otherwise respectable women -- and men -- who have embarrassed themselves drooling over Viggo Mortensen, the "Lord of the Rings" star, a man who has made a name for himself as the bohemian hunk.

Let us not discuss this again. We will say this, however: He is, at first glance, a walking contradiction; that is, a man wearing his contradictions. On the one hand, he is TV ready -- it is, after all, press junket time -- hip black denim suit, shorn and spiked hair, pancaked face, visible evidence of the ministrations of the makeup artist who hovers nearby.

And then there's the part of him that needs no pancake: his feet. He's shoeless, his tweedy socks peeking out from beneath the hip black denim suit. It is the thing that he does, the thing noted in countless media stories about his new western, "Hidalgo," which opens tomorrow. The socks give him a kind of hippie insouciance. Could be intentional, could be not, but mostly, he has said, he does it because he just doesn't like footwear. And so he pads about the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton, shoeless yet stylish, holding in his hand

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The advertisement features a row of eight Dell Inspiron 537s desktop towers in various colors: black, white, pink, blue, yellow, purple, orange, and red. To the left of the towers is an Intel Core i5 processor box with the text "Look for Intel Inside". Below the towers is the Dell logo with the slogan "YOURS IS HERE". In the bottom right corner, there is a purple button with the text "SHOP NOW" and a right-pointing arrow.

what looks to be -- no, it *couldn't* be -- a bong.

As it turns out, it's only *bong-ish*. It's actually a little earthenware pot, very home-on-the-range with its painted horses and silver straw, the better to partake of this special tea that packs an extra-caffeinated punch, a punch that is very much needed in Mortensen's multi-tasking life.

He is a man who doesn't get enough sleep. And now, as he does the whistle-stop thing through North America, he's getting even less. Because now, after 20 years of acting in more than 30 films as the intriguing sidebar, he is the headline in the new Disney film, in which he plays Frank T. Hopkins, a real-life cowboy who was purported to be half-Sioux and who claimed to have won the 3,000-mile "Ocean of Fire," a survival race across the Arabian Desert.

With "Hidalgo," this weekend's box office will tell if his cleft-chinned charm and acting chops are enough to open a movie.

Not that he seems too concerned with the attention. More often than not, his focus is elsewhere.

In between the publicity jaunts, and the premieres, there's the wind-down from the flurry that was the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, of which the final installment, "The Return of the King," swept the Oscars on Sunday with 11 wins (and which he did not attend). And then there's the time he spends jamming on keyboards and doing vocals with the Guns N' Roses guitarist Buckethead on their new experimental album, "Pandemoniumfromamerica," or writing poetry in Spanish and in English (he is a published poet). Or snapping pictures (recently exhibiting his work at the Fototeca in Cuba). Or painting pictures, or editing photos, essays, poetry and novels at the offices of his newest baby, Perceval Press, an independent publishing house that he founded with art curator Pilar Perez in 2002.

Acting isn't something that he does, like Willem Dafoe and his avant-garde theater collective, the Wooster Group, to fund his other artistic pursuits. (A little, but not much money went into start-up costs for Perceval Press, but now, he says, the company is self-sufficient.) Rather, he says, acting is just another medium for "self-expression."

"I like acting for the same reason I like photography and painting and writing and reading," says Mortensen, 45, parsing his thoughts in a softly lazy twang.

"It has to do with taking part of life and being present and . . . you know, noticing what's happening. Life goes by otherwise."

He approaches all his endeavors with a certain amusement, a hmm-I-think-I'll-try-that attitude. Take the time when he was filming "A Perfect Murder" with Gwyneth Paltrow and Michael Douglas. In the movie, Mortensen played a fashionably grubby artist with an even more fashionably grubby loft where the upper-crust Paltrow would repair for an assignation between fashionably grubby sheets.

Paintings were needed to decorate the grungy loft, to give it that appropriately artistic vibe of a painter's garret. The director told Mortensen that most likely they'd rent the paintings from an artist. Mortensen, who'd painted and drawn as a child, told him, you know, I'd like to try my hand at the paintings. And he did, and, well, now he shows paintings at art galleries in New York and Los Angeles.

On the set, Mortensen developed a reputation for being game for just about anything. While filming "LOTR," he broke a tooth and famously suggested that he glue it back into his mouth so filming could continue. He did most of his stunts in "Hidalgo," something that had Disney execs squirming during screenings of dailies, according to the film's director, Joe Johnston.

And then there was the filming of a scene in the deserts of Morocco, where, starving, dazed and close to hallucinating, Mortensen's Hopkins finds salvation in a rain of locusts.

"He wanted to eat a real locust," Johnston says. "The locust he eats is made out of sugar. He said, 'You know, I can eat a live one.' I said, 'Let's eat all the fake ones first. If we run out, you can eat a live one.'"

"I've always sensed that I'd be insulting him a little bit if I called him a movie star," Johnston says. "If he chose to be a movie star, he could've done it a long time ago. . . . He's in control. That's the bottom line. He's not waiting for someone to say, 'Hey, you've made it.' He'll decide when he's made it."

Making it, of course, is open to interpretation. Mortensen has been at the film business for a long time, since his 1985 debut in Peter Weir's "Witness." And along the way, he's played against some of the most glittery of Hollywood's glitterati: Besides Paltrow, there was Diane Lane in "A Walk on the Moon." Demi Moore in "G.I. Jane." Nicole Kidman in "The Portrait of a Lady." (And, of course, there were the less than glittery roles, such as "Young Guns II" and "Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III.") He slides in and out of the characters, inhabiting their skins with secrets and vague hints of danger.

There are countless heavy-breathing Web sites populated by slavish fans who extol his Renaissance man persona. And yet he is an actor who, unless you're a rabid "LOTR" fan or took note of the 2002 edition of People's "Fifty Most Beautiful People," you may have noticed and then not noticed -- not enough, that

is, to put a name to the face. (The name, by the way, is Danish.) "LOTR" marked a change in that perception, and "Hidalgo" could change that even more.

Or perhaps not.

He was born in Manhattan, the first child of a Danish businessman and an American woman. When he was 2, the family moved to Argentina, where they lived for nine years (with a brief stay in Venezuela) as his father worked on different agricultural management jobs. His parents split when he was 11, and his mother took Mortensen and his two younger brothers to Upstate New York. At the time, his youngest brother couldn't even speak English; the brothers conversed with each other only in Spanish. Gradually, English became the only language that they shared.

"I remember coming to the U.S. and not only having to learn the accent but the slang," Mortensen says, adding that being forced to adapt quickly helped him later on. "Out of habit you assume that you have something in common with people no matter how different they seem."

He graduated from St. Lawrence University with a degree in Spanish -- he's also fluent in Danish -- and government, and fell into acting because, he says, it seemed like something he might want to try. And along the way he got married to, and then divorced from, punk rocker Exene Cervenka, but not before fathering a son, Henry, who is now 16. It was Henry who urged him to do "Lord of the Rings."

On the set of "Hidalgo," which re-creates the 1890 massacre of Lakota Sioux by U.S. cavalry at Wounded Knee -- Frank Hopkins claimed to have witnessed it -- Mortensen had to learn Lakota. He was so moved by the film's depiction of the Ghost Dance that he took pictures, now the basis for "Miyelo," an art book of essays and haunting photos.

Later, he flew from Los Angeles to Rapid City, S.D., leaving a "LOTR" press tour in time to participate in the "Big Foot Ride," a solemn, two-week journey by horseback through snow and over icy mountain paths that's meant to commemorate the massacre and the burial site. He arrived in time to make the last few days of the ride.

"It was endearing and charming to watch this mega movie star there for his own personal reasons," says Lise Balk King, who covered the event for the Web site "Native Voice." To her, she says, it appeared that "he was struggling because he really wanted to be here and not make it 'Viggo Mortensen is here from "Lord of the Rings." ' "

Fans swarmed his horse, clamoring for autographs, wanting a minute of his time, a little conversation, King says. Mortensen stayed until he'd talked to the last person -- and ended up missing his plane.

Indeed, he is a talker, one who savors a good meandering discourse on politics and world events, about art and spirituality, about Cuba and Morocco and the big wide world that he loves to dive into. So he talks, yes, but he's not one to talk about himself, let alone his career. He'll riff on "Hidalgo," because that

is what he's here to do, and you get the sense that he feels a certain connection to the story, to the notion of the cowboy as a noble figure.

"If you look at the poster of this movie, you can say, 'Okay, I can see some white guy is going to go save the Indians, okay, save the horses, blah, blah, blah . . .' But when you see the movie, it's more complex than that. It's not hitting you over the head, it's not like a 'message' movie. It's not even 'Dances With Wolves.' It's an old-fashioned movie."

It's an old-fashioned movie that has already engendered a bit of controversy. On the Internet, there is an anti-"Hidalgo" campaign, sponsored by a group that calls itself the Long Riders, which disputes the facts of the story, including whether the "Ocean of Fire" even existed. Noted Native American scholar and activist Vine DeLoria Jr. has flat-out called Hopkins's story -- he was a published writer -- a complete fabrication most likely lifted from passages of "Black Elk Speaks."

"You can't find any references to Hopkins anywhere in the Western literature," DeLoria says.

"And his Indian stuff just doesn't hold up at all. So . . . where I come from, that means somebody's lying about something. . . .

"There's no basis for calling this thing historic other than Disney's insatiable need for money."

Mention DeLoria's criticisms to Mortensen and anger flashes through his normally mellow mantle. He's read all of DeLoria's books, he says, admires the man's scholarship, but with all due respect, the man hasn't seen the movie. There's an oral history that supports Hopkins's story, he argues. (The film's writer, John Fusco, took 12 years to research the story. And while filming the movie, Mortensen says, he met a 96-year-old Lakota woman who told him about meeting Hopkins when she was a young girl.)

"It's based on a real person and a real horse," Mortensen says. "But we take some liberties, for a good reason. Myth-making is a way of dreaming out loud or dreaming in public. . . .

"Somebody who starts complaining about 'Hidalgo,' 'That's not necessarily true,' you're missing the point. This is not a documentary."

Take a look at the Web site for Perceval Press -- so named for the knight from the legend of King Arthur -- and you'll find an entreaty to Viggo fans: "Please remember that we will not accept any letters, gifts, or scripts for Mr. Mortensen. All correspondence that pertains to Perceval Press business will be considered, all unrelated letters or packages will be either donated directly to charity or disposed of immediately."

Doing business with a movie star has its challenges.

Says Pilar Perez, who runs the publishing house's day-to-day operations: "He'd come into the office and

there would be huge piles of things for him. He doesn't have that kind of time anymore."

Their staff is small, basically composed of Perez, Mortensen, a graphic artist and an assistant for Perez. Whenever Mortensen is away filming a movie, Perez FedExes manuscripts and galley proofs for him to copy-edit. These days, the editing by remote has gotten a little easier, she says: "I finally talked him into getting e-mail. . . . He only uses it for Perceval Press. He's still a person that would write a letter before sending an e-mail."

The two first met when Perez was an art director at Los Angeles' Track 16 Gallery and Mortensen's photos were being exhibited there, along with his book, "Recent Forgeries," published by the gallery's Smart Art Press. At first she didn't know he was an actor, and then, she says, she didn't want to see any of his films. She preferred to work with him "strictly as an artist."

In 2002, they decided to help other artists by publishing avant-garde works that might not find a home in more traditional publishing venues. Together, they've published more than 20 books, among them "Trance," a collection of photos by Cuban photographer Jore Luis Alvarez Pupo, exploring Santeria rites; a sci-fi novel, "Land of the Lost Mammoths," by Mike Davis; "Nothing Ever Happens," by Japanese contemporary artist Yoshitomo Nara; and "Miyelo," the book of Mortensen photography from the "Hidalgo" set. Last year they published "Twilight of Empire: Responses to Occupation," a collection of essays and poems exploring the war in Iraq. (Mortensen has been outspoken in his opposition to the war, and wears a United Nations button.)

In it, Mortensen writes in the prose poem "From Babylon":

Lie down, lie down; sleep is the best thing for being awake. Do as we've always been told and done, no backward glances or second thoughts, leaving sad markers buried in the sand. Sleep now, dream of children with their heads still on, of grandmothers unburdening clotheslines at twilight. . . . Ignore boneless, nameless victims that venture out on bitter gravel to claim remains while we rest. . . ."

He'd like to keep Perceval Press small and contained. He likes it better that way. Manageable, you know? He'd rather do it himself. That's why he'd rather not have an assistant. People tell him he's a little extreme in that sense, but so be it.

"When you start to let people take the bag [that you're carrying] or say, 'Don't worry, don't worry, you don't have to call, I'll call,' you don't know what people are doing. . . ."

And you lose control. And Mortensen is determined not to let the movie machine consume all the other aspects of his hmm-I-think-I'll-try-that life.

For now there is an anthology on Cuban art to publish, more music to make, more pictures to take and a son to finish raising.

He'll do it all, and he'll do it himself.

Well, maybe the studio hires someone else to do his makeup, but you get the picture.

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