Cultural Daily

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Peter O'Toole and Sam Peckinpah at the Formosa Café

Garner Simmons · Thursday, July 26th, 2012

Less than a month shy of his 80th birthday, Peter O'Toole recently announced: "It's time for me to chuck in the sponge. To retire from stage and screen. The heart for it has gone out of me; it won't come back." But what a heart it was.

It was only a few years ago that O'Toole, still majestic at 74, gracefully prowled the red carpet at the Academy Awards resplendent in his brocade dinner jacket and black bow tie. Just watching him conjured up a coterie of truly memorable characters. From historical drama to high comedy, his has been a career filled with powerful performances. So it seemed hardly a surprise to find him striding into Hollywood's Kodak Theater for the Oscars, a Best Actor nominee once more for his role in the film *Venus.* As Maurice, the aging, simultaneously grand yet vulnerable British former leading man, O'Toole portrayed a man caught up in a passionate though platonic love affair with a young woman a fraction of his age. Indeed, the strength of his performance comes from the fact that it is all but impossible to separate O'Toole from the character he creates. A dancer lost in his last *pas de deux.*

Seeing him reminded me of another winter's day many years ago when I was still new to Los Angeles and working on a biography of the aging *enfant terrible* of American cinema, the late director Sam Peckinpah.

The year was 1976 and Peckinpah had offices at what was then the Samuel Goldwyn Studios (known today as The Lot) on Santa Monica Boulevard where he was preparing a new film called *Cross of Iron* that he would shoot for a German producer in Yugoslavia. Each day we would meet in Sam's offices to talk about his films and his personal life, two subjects that were, at times, one and the same. On this particular day, we had just screened Peckinpah's private print of what is perhaps his most controversial film, *The Straw Dogs* with Dustin Hoffman. As we were returning to his office to discuss it further, the phone rang. After a brief exchange Sam hung up. "Come on," he said. "There's someone I want you to meet."

Leaving the studio by the side gate, we crossed the street and entered the Formosa Café, the venerable bar and restaurant built in the 1930s and frequented by virtually every star to work at the studio since. It was early afternoon and the place was all but deserted. Peckinpah led the way as we moved into the back room.

There at one of the tables sat Peter O'Toole in a stone-washed denim jacket and short-brimmed cap. A pastel cravat, tied with a casual knot, remained half-hidden beneath the upturned collar of his pale blue work shirt. He was nursing a Jameson and water (a world class drinker, a talent he shared with Peckinpah, water was his one concession to having had an operation the year before

that removed a portion of his lower intestinal tract). Seeing us, he raised his glass.

"Samuel," he said, "welcome to my lair." His startling blue eyes caught the light. One of the most handsome leading men of his or any age, he had begun his film career as *Lawrence of Arabia,* a role which had once caused the playwright Noel Coward to remark: "If he were any more beautiful, they'd have had to call it Florence of Arabia."

"Tooly O'Pete," Peckinpah grinned. "Where the hell have you been?"

Rising as we approached the table, O'Toole embraced Peckinpah like a brother. We shook hands and sat down as the waitress approached to take our order.

One of the most accomplished actors of his generation, O'Toole according to legend had once been capable of reciting from memory all of Shakespeare, plays and sonnets alike. He had first met Peckinpah in England in the sixties where they were introduced by Richard Harris, who had starred opposite Charlton Heston in Peckinpah's flawed epic Western *Major Dundee.* O'Toole and Harris had been friends since their days at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London in the early fifties. It was a class that included Albert Finney and Alan Bates. In retrospect, they were perhaps the most remarkable clutch of actors RADA has ever produced.

Having shared many such afternoons, O'Toole and Peckinpah reminisced about their friendship, of drinking and carousing and years of living large. The subject of *Straw Dogs* came up more than once. Shot in Cornwall near Land's End on the southwestern tip of England, it had caused a tidal wave of rage among British's critics who had accused Peckinpah of inflicting the British sensibility with a peculiarly American brand of violence. O'Toole emphatically disagreed. The film was brilliant as was Dustin Hoffman's performance. Having recently spoken to David Warner, who had appeared in the film uncredited as a favor to Peckinpah at the time, O'Toole was pleased to learn that Warner had again been cast in his upcoming film.

"And James Mason," Sam added with a thin smile. "We're going to do World War Two from the German side with the Russians as the enemy. Nothing like it's ever been done."

"Mason and Warner and no part for me," O'Toole noted with indignity. "You really are a bastard. When are you ever going to cast me?"

Peckinpah held up his hand. "We'll talk when I get back. There's a script… I adapted it myself from a novel by James Gould Cozzens. Two characters. Robinson Crusoe by way of Luis Buñuel. You're going to love it. I'll send it over."

Looking skeptical, O'Toole frowned. *"Oft expectation fails, and most oft there where most it promises."*

Sam shot him with a sideways glance. "Screw Shakespeare," he said dryly.

"A sentiment I'm sure the Bard, himself, would have appreciated," O'Toole replied, pleased that Peckinpah had picked up on the reference. For emphasis, Sam expanded his suggestion to include O'Toole.

Unflappable, O'Toole smiled. "That's all right," he replied, "because I've got a picture coming up in which I'm going to play *you.*"

Peckinpah stared at him for a long moment. "The hell you have," he said at last. "How can you lie with a straight face like that? God, I hate actors."

"Speak for yourself," O'Toole deadpanned.

"You are so full of it," Sam shot back.

O'Toole winked with a sly grin. "Just wait."

The picture, of course, was Richard Rush's *The Stuntman.* Filmed in 1977 and released in the UK the following year, it would not make it to American screens until 1980. In it, O'Toole plays a diabolical film director – clearly patterned after Sam Peckinpah at his most tormenting. When he finally saw it several years later, Sam hated it. Which, of course, meant he loved it. It was a performance that would again garner O'Toole an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor.

Glancing over our shoulders, O'Toole spotted two young girls hovering near the entrance to the back room. He smiled. Flustered, they looked away. Then a moment later, they slipped into chairs across the room, occasionally casting glances then quickly looking away the moment O'Toole would return them.

The talk returned to film. At that time, O'Toole had already received five Oscar nominations without winning. Always the renegade, Peckinpah had only been nominated once: with Walon Green for co-writing *The Wild Bunch.* Astonishingly, considering the power of his work, he had never been nominated for directing.

O'Toole raised his glass. *"I grow old… I grow old… I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach. I hear the mermaids singing each to each…"* He paused for effect and fixed Sam's eyes with his own. *"I do not think they will sing to me… or thee."*

"Show off," Peckinpah growled. Raising his glass, he touched O'Toole's and we drank a toast to misappreciation.

As we finished our drinks and paid the check, Sam spotted the two girls still self-consciously sneaking glances from across the room. Enjoying what he perceived as recognition, he nudged O'Toole and nodded towards them.

Gallantly stepping forward, O'Toole smiled. "Good afternoon, ladies. Is there something we can do for you?" Hesitant, they managed to hold out a couple of pieces of paper and asked for his autograph. Charming as always, O'Toole obliged with a flourish. Sam watched with envy as O'Toole handed back the autographs with a slight bow.

As O'Toole turned back, Sam shook his head in mock disgust. "I can't take you anywhere. Just once you'd think they'd ask me for mine."

Saying our goodbyes, we stepped out into the dying light and went our separate ways.

Sadly O'Toole's prophecy was to prove too true. Sam Peckinpah would die less than a decade later at the age of 59, ignored by the Academy to the end. And although they would honor O'Toole with an Oscar for his entire body of work in 2003, on the night when *Venus* might have smiled on him at last, he would be overshadowed once again, this time by Forest Whitaker's outsized portrait of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland.* But then it is not the awards but the quality of the man and the work he leaves behind that matters most. And in that Peter O'Toole and Sam Peckinpah share a common fate. For they have touched our lives profoundly. And we are not likely to see their kind again.

Images: Top, Peter O'Toole (left), here with actor Adam Roarke, plays demonic director Eli Cross, modeled on Sam Peckinpah; below, Peckinpah directing Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid.

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