

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Philip Seymour Hoffman: Our Offscreen Actors' Moment

Amelia Martin · Wednesday, February 5th, 2014

It was 2007, one of the hottest Augusts on record in New York City. We were in the tenth week of an eight week production, which nearly all crew members (including teamsters and grips in the biz for over 30 years) considered to be the most difficult and uncomfortable film in which they had ever been involved.

Our director, a writer by trade, had wandered off, mumbling to himself with his producers and ADs ineffectively following him trying to unravel our next shot for the day.

We were deep in the hills of the Cypress Hills Cemetery somewhere in Brooklyn. We had already filmed four funerals and a fake toothpaste commercial. It was over a hundred degrees. Phil and I sat on the curb, too hot to run after the crew making their way to the mausoleum (holding many bodies from our industry, including that of Mae West) where we were set to film a wedding and one more funeral.

Literally, the entire crew had left, equipment and all, before Phil and I realized it was just us sitting silent in the graveyard. It was not uncommon for me and him to find ourselves sitting in a corner, awaiting direction. I was standing in for his co-star, Samantha Morton as well as most of the other women in the film. We had grown used to depending on one another for knowing glances (and the occasional hug of encouragement) through many of the absolutely absurd arguments and disagreements that came up as we all struggled to navigate a script so complicated that even its writer (Yes, Charlie Kaufman was, for the first time, attempting to direct his own writing) often couldn't figure out the proper place in the timeline.

Leaning in the grass, I watched Phil flick his smoke and turn to me. I asked him, "You think they considered what they were asking you to do artistically today? I mean, five funerals and wedding? How are you doing this?"

His barrel chested laugh came out weakly for him, but still big and jolly in spite of the fatigue in his eyes. His eyebrows lifted in a shrug as his lips pursed, then turning into that impish grin so many of us love.

He paused for a moment and looked me straight in the eyes. "You aren't just a stand-in, are you? Like, this isn't your career."

I was shocked at his response and suddenly very self conscious, knowing what he was saying. "No," I responded. "Not at all."

“Yeah. You’re a real actress. I can tell.”

I found myself responding with a similar eyebrow and knowing pursed lip. He continued, “I can see it. Hang in there kid. If you can stand to stick around, eventually they have to give you a chance.”

“Eventually.” I sighed.

I watched him inhale sadly and exhale with so much weight I almost cried for him. “It takes a long time.” he said. “And even then...”

And, in that moment, staring at the toll of success echoing in Phil’s giant head, I promised myself I’d stick around. Eventually, someone else would look at me and see whatever it was he saw.

Yesterday, nearly seven years later, waiting tables on my brunch shift on Super Bowl Sunday in New York City, my co-worker gasped at the bar while looking at her phone; “The Huffington Post just said Philip Seymour Hoffman was found dead in his apartment.”

Air sucked into my chest quickly trying to fill the immediate hole I felt. All I could think was; he lost. All that weight he carried and shared so beautifully finally pushed him all the way down.

The value of my time with him on the set of *Synecdoche, New York* instantly skyrocketed into a whole new level of bittersweet importance. To share personal pain – to show it with the force of honesty is nothing if not noble. Would that this tremendously noble man had a more fitting departure... Would that the world we live in provide more gentle spaces for those who struggle with the challenges of depression and addiction.

Would that eventually be sooner.

Image: Philip Seymour Hoffman in ‘Synecdoche, New York,’ directed by Charlie Kaufman.

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