

# 'Come to the desert, it'll be nice, we'll have time to talk...'

Three days on the trail of Harvey Keitel led to the middle of nowhere, where the madness really began to take hold...

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**I**t is past midnight in downtown Los Angeles and chaos reigns in a sealed-off car park. From somewhere deep within the ersatz village of caravans, wagons, winnebagos, bright lights and the vast acreage of cable making up a film set that will be long-gone by daybreak, Harvey Keitel is sending out all the wrong signals. The effects are swift and global. Journalists from all the major European nations are coming to terms, in some cases via a translator,

with the notion that Harvey will not be speaking to them. Not now, not soon, not ever. But he will be speaking to me, he has decided.

Harvey's people – who in reality, it transpires, are no better placed to second-guess him than Pan's People, or anyone else for that matter – have woken me up to tell me this. We all draw strength briefly from this crumb of possibility that falls, finally, from the great man's table. But I've heard it all before. I heard it all day yesterday, twice today and I will hear it all over again tomorrow

night on a deserted desert road 200 miles from here at a place not shown on any map and where in ways more mundane than miraculous, all our dreams come true.

That Harvey Keitel is one of the great movie actors of our time is beyond dispute. To men of a certain age and inclination he is the living embodiment of a kind of passionate psychosis that connects some of the finest cinema, both cult and mainstream, of the past four decades. From *Taxi Driver* to Tarantino and far beyond, Harvey takes no shit, →

→ he turns up, he gets things done, albeit on his own terms. As he says in *Reservoir Dogs*, if anyone gives you any trouble, “take the butt of your gun and smash their nose in.”

Whether firing weapons, staring them down or rolling around naked in a state of advanced psychiatric decline, Keitel has come to represent a force of degenerate nature, a Clint Eastwood for the underclass. And this is just the “cool” end of his 90-plus films.

He has played something approaching a romantic lead in *The Piano*, presaged his affinity for .45 automatics with flintlocks in *The Duellists* and betrayed Jesus in Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. He has also been in *Sister Act* as well as obscure and awful movies like *Monkey Trouble*. But hey, it’s a living. We all have our cross to bear. Harvey, maybe, more than most.

As something of a closed set himself, the suspicion with Keitel is that some of the dark pragmatism of his work extends out into the man himself. He is just too good at it for things to be otherwise.

Consider for a minute what for some is one of his defining scenes. In Abel Ferrara’s *Bad Lieutenant*, at the tail end of a 45-minute crack and heroin binge that makes up the first half of the movie, Keitel’s character flags down two young girls in a car and masturbates through the driver’s window.

Few actors would even do this, fewer still could do it so well. Not only will he reach for the parts other actors dare not, but his instinct and desire for working with first time directors has proved as insightful as it has abiding. Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, Ridley Scott and Jane Campion have all benefited from Keitel’s presence in their earliest works. As a force for good in cinema his role is

indisputable. As a person, much less is certain.

Born on May 13, 1939 to Jewish parents in Brooklyn, New York, Harvey Keitel’s path to fame was neither straight nor narrow. At 17 he joined the Marines and passed through the notoriously brutal basic training facility at Paris Island, an experience that, as we shall see, informs his thinking to this day.

When he emerged – just before the Vietnam war went into overdrive – he went to work as a court stenographer. “It seemed to appeal to me because I didn’t have to talk,” he has said since. “I could just be quiet and type. But that only lasted a short time, a couple of years before I felt the need to speak.”

He moved to Manhattan and in 1965 was acting off Broadway in an early play of Sam Shepard’s. At the same time he answered an advert for actors to appear in a student film, the student in question being Martin Scorsese. From such apparently fated beginnings sprang a career that has only recently come into clear focus. After the early successes of *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Duellists* and lesser-known classics like Paul Schrader’s *Blue Collar*, Keitel’s decent roles dried up. He was never not working for long, but compared to his contemporaries like De Niro, Harvey spent the Eighties to the left of the limelight.

To the quiet loners of cult cinema

**Keitel has come to represent a force of degenerate nature, a Clint Eastwood for the underclass**

devotion Harvey was always a hero, but it wasn’t until the early Nineties and *Reservoir Dogs*, *Bad Lieutenant* and *Thelma & Louise* that he re-established himself on a wider stage. Quite why his career took such a dip remains obscure.

Coppola replaced him with Martin Sheen on *Apocalypse Now* for reasons that have never fully emerged.

Again, when he was riding high in the mid-Nineties he was released from filming *Eyes Wide Shut* for Stanley Kubrick under circumstances that have fuelled spectacular rumours. The official reason is that he tired of Kubrick keeping him waiting. The urban myth version of events is that his method acting inclinations caused him to ejaculate into Nicole Kidman’s hair during a scene. Either way there is much to discuss, you feel – should Keitel ever feel like discussing it.

**B**ack in Los Angeles, assurances that he will talk flow like Iraqi propaganda. “He is, even now, preparing to speak to you,” they tell me. “He knows you are here.” “He likes the magazine.” After 48 hours of waiting, I couldn’t care less. Dozing fitfully in the back of a car, I tell myself that Keitel is a man of sufficient stature that in spite of the full-on Hollywood run-around it will all be worth it in the end.

Others who have travelled even further are going home with nothing. And even this is perhaps not his own fault. Someone, somewhere along the line has mistaken Harvey Keitel for someone who gives a lot of interviews, and now we must reap the whirlwind to see what can be salvaged. But there is a limit.

Awoken for the second time to be told that *he* is tired now, and maybe, after all, we should see how he →

→ feels tomorrow, I feel that limit has been reached. From now on, I say, I will only accept excuses from the man himself. I do not imagine for a moment that such brinkmanship will bear fruit, much less work its way up through the vines of entourage to Harvey Keitel, but moments later I am stood at the door of his trailer on the promise of an explanation.

As first dates go I'm sure we've both had better. Walking up the steps into the trailer I trip and fall to the floor. I look up to see Harvey Keitel, old but potent in a sharp black suit with shoulder-length grey hair, twirling his handlebar moustache like a Chaplin villain and stroking a pointed, Van Dyke beard.

"Get up," he says. As I now know, this is him in one of his more playful moods. Looking around me I see that there are four or five other people here as well. Harvey's people, film people and me.

"In England you fall over in front of the Queen they send you to The Tower, right?" says Harvey.

Maybe, I say, struggling to assess the situation.

"Siddown," he says and I do. Everyone else is standing. Spatially speaking, the battle is already lost.

"Things have run on a little," he explains in his accent that betrays, beneath an audible air of self-improvement and professional speaking, traces of its Brooklyn and Eastern European roots.

"I don't think we'll get much done tonight. Come out to the desert (*the next location*) tomorrow, it'll be nice, we'll have time to talk."

It sounds appealing yet sinister. I am suddenly haunted by a line from *Casino* – "There's a lot of holes in the desert."

I dunno, I say. It sounds great. I just want to get this done.

"I don't want you to lose any →

## Put the Keitel on

### 1 *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973)

The film that put Keitel – along with co-star De Niro and director Scorsese – on the cinematic map. The definitive New York movie of its day, Keitel plays Charlie, a small-time hood on the fringes of the Mob who's concerned about his work, his girlfriend and his reckless best friend. (Available on DVD/VHS)

### 2 *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976)

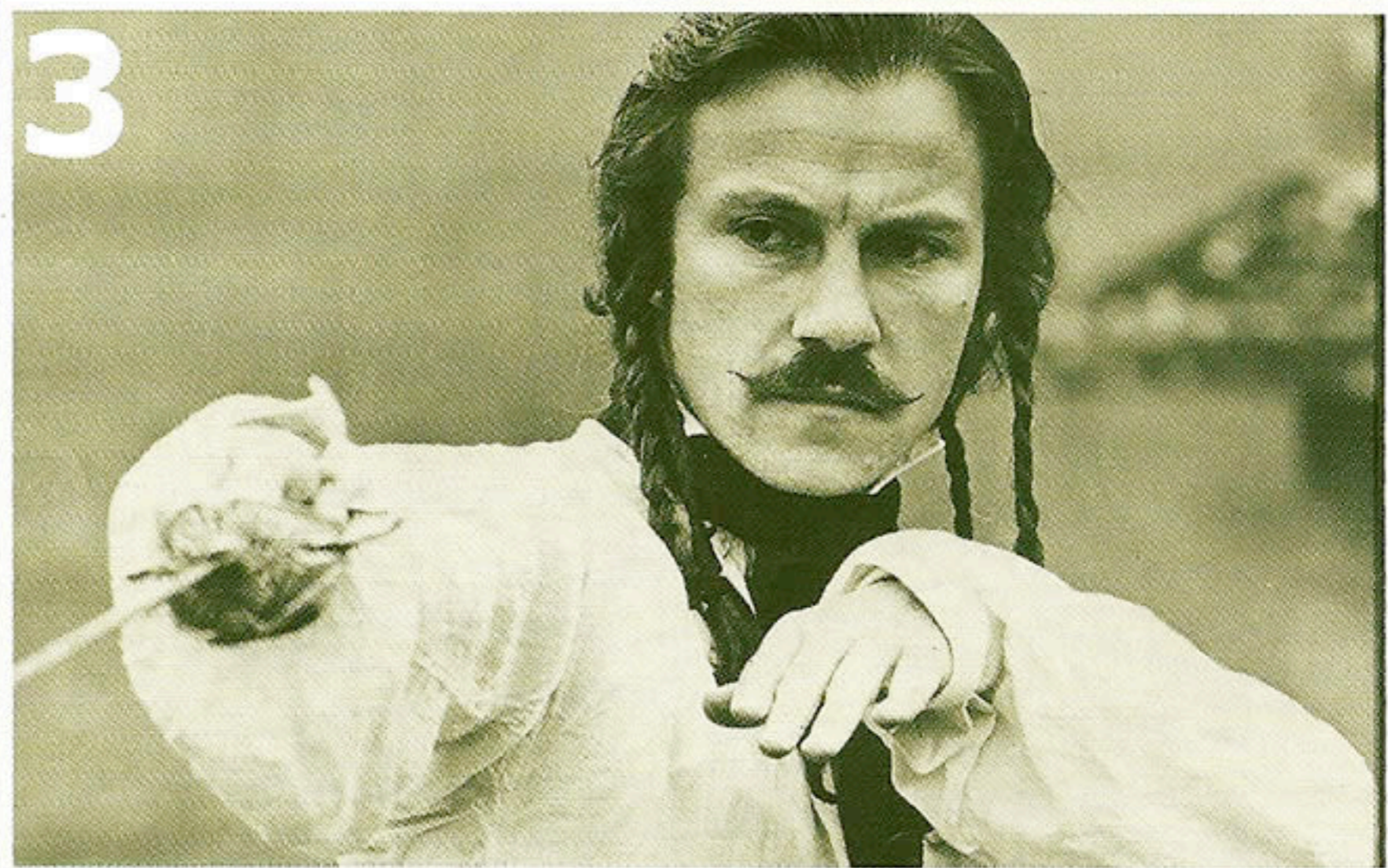
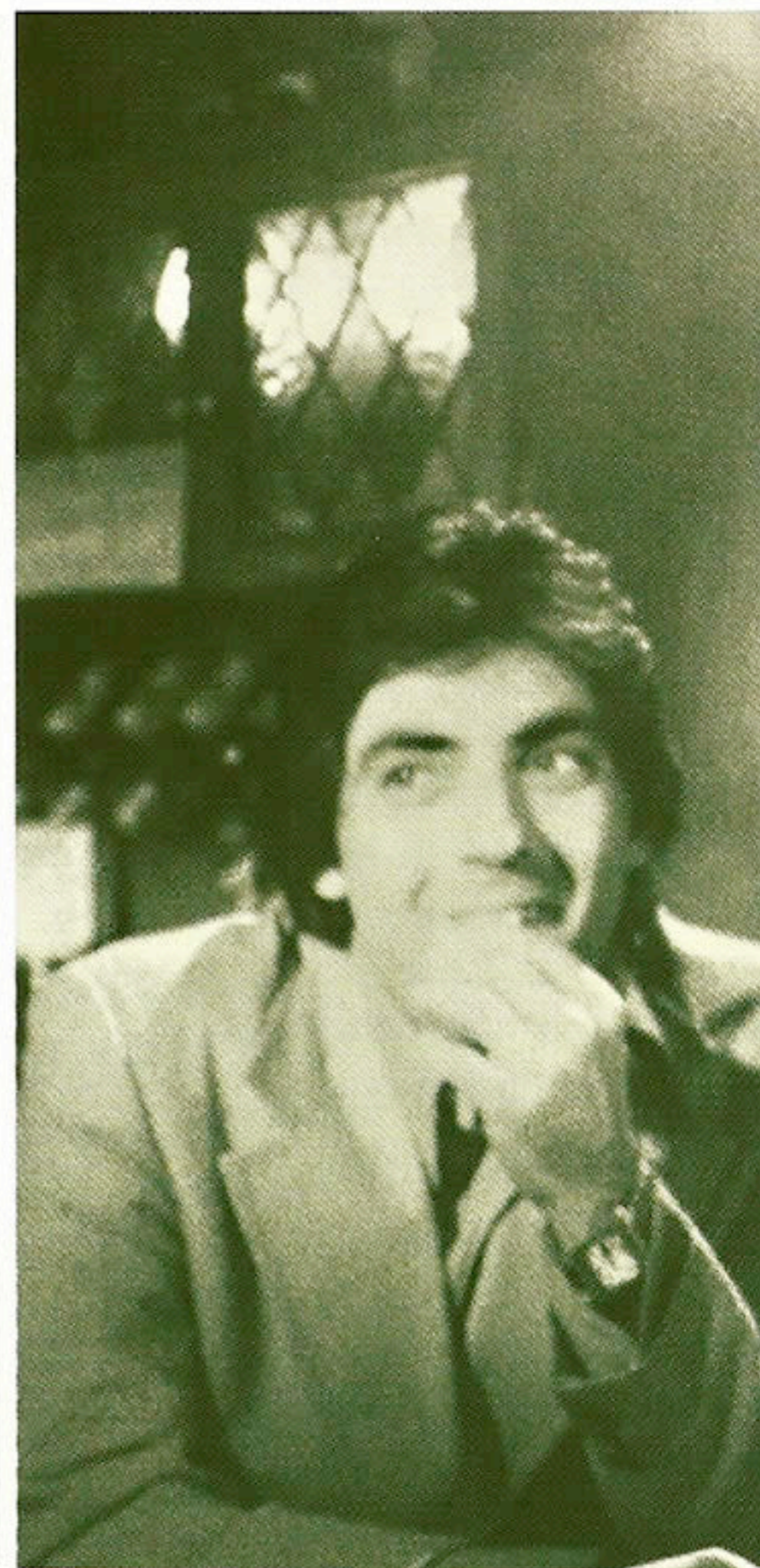
HK plays "Sport" Matthew, pimp to child prostitute Jodie Foster and the first to feel the wrath of De Niro's epic Travis Bickle. Keitel's character thrives on the degenerate tide that characterises Scorsese's New York and he plays his part with an abundance of cool, given that he was almost 40 at the time. (DVD/VHS)

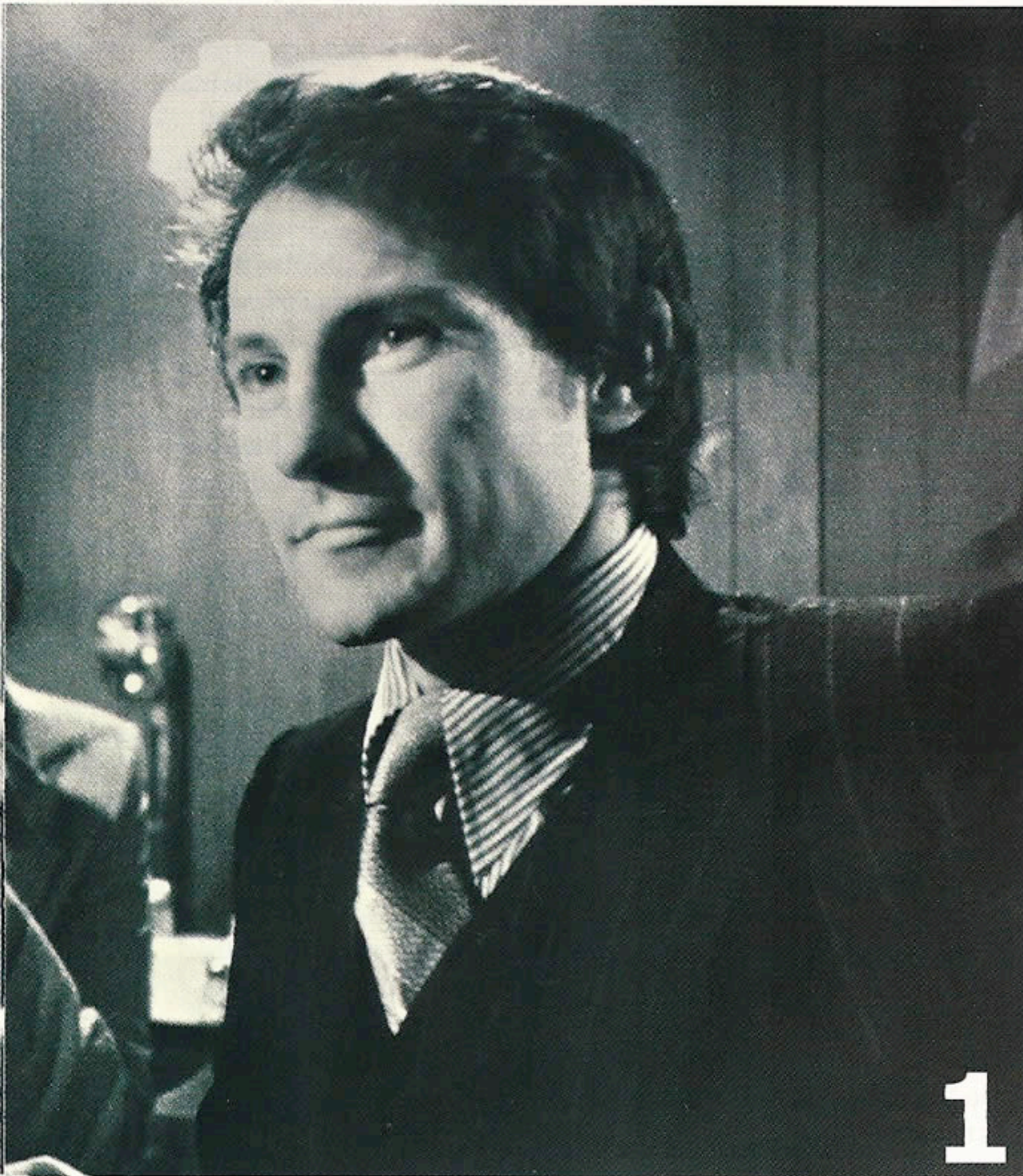
### 3 *The Duellists* (Ridley Scott, 1977)

HK, alongside Keith Carradine, is one of a pair of endlessly feuding French officers in Scott's Napoleonic western showdown. Not the greatest film, but HK's presence makes it worthwhile. (DVD/VHS)

### 4 *Blue Collar* (Paul Schrader, 1978)

Three factory workers (HK, Richard Pryor and Yaphet Kotto) decide they've had





in pursuit of redemption by any means necessary. This is very much Keitel's film, as he demonstrates corruption and moral decay in detail seldom seen before or since. (DVD)

**7 The Piano (Jane Campion, 1993)**

Hardly an everyday part as HK plays George Baines, a moody Scots settler gone native in New Zealand, complete with Maori facial tattoos, whose purchase of Holly Hunter's beloved piano engenders an unlikely romance. He can't quite do the accent, though. (DVD/VHS)

**8 Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994)**

"We'll need hot water and some towels – not white." A memorable cameo here as Mr Winston Wolfe, the "cleaner" who aids over-zealous hit men Travolta and Jackson after they find themselves driving a car full of blood and brains. (DVD/VHS)



enough of being turned over by The Man and decide to rob the boss. *Taxi Driver* writer Schrader's first film as director is a forgotten masterpiece that also features the greatest cocaine comedown scene of all time. (Currently unavailable)

**5 Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992)**

HK is Mr White, the senior journeyman villain in Tarantino's gang of doomed stick-up artists. Without doubt the movie that re-established Harvey as a force to be reckoned with, he absorbs more blood and bullets than ever before. (DVD/VHS)

**6 Bad Lieutenant (Abel Ferrara, 1992)**

A naked apotheosis from HK as he literally and figuratively bares all in Ferrara's brutal tale of a degenerate New York cop

**9 Cop Land (James Mangold, 1997)**

Keitel at his quietly malevolent best as Ray Donlan, the cop at the head of a cover-up, running rings round dim-witted local sheriff Sylvester Stallone. It takes De Niro to wake Sly up to the truth, and by then HK's in no mood for compromise. (DVD)

**10 Holy Smoke (Jane Campion, 1999)**

"She had only one thing on her mind... and so did he." Tough to know quite what anyone was thinking in this movie. Kate Winslet is an Australian religious fanatic and it falls to our man Harvey, as cult exit specialist PJ Walters, to de-programme her, a process which ends up with him running around in a dress. (DVD/VHS)

→ sleep over it," he says.

Well, it's a bit late for that, I find myself responding. But if you're confident...

"Am I confident? You're asking me if I'm confident?" He strokes his beard and walks in circles while he talks. "Am I confident?"

Yeah, are you confident?

"Am I confident."

I feel like I'm in one of his films, and not playing a character that lives to the end. Yes, are you confident?

"Ask me again," he walks back to where he was when the exchange began.

"Ask me again, and I'll answer you like an Italian would."

Now?

"Now."

Are you confident?

He shrugs his shoulders in a comically overstated Italian-American way and goes, "Mmm... yeah." And everybody laughs.

**A**t midnight the next day I set out for the desert. Two hours out from Los Angeles and I am there. As you might expect it is completely dark and freezing. Harvey's call time is 2.30am and he may or may not consent to an interview anytime thereafter. For

## If I had wanted to sit in cars drinking coffee I'd have joined the police – but there are worse places to be

the record I have not slept properly, in a bed at night, for four days and my mind is tugging ever more forcefully at its tender moorings as the hours roll by. By way of clarification it should probably be explained what kind of film they are making out here.

Given the rigmarole you'd think there was an epic in production but this is, in essence, an advertisement for cars. For some years now BMW have apportioned a sizeable budget to promoting their vehicles via short films made by and starring directors and actors of some merit. In the past Gary Oldman, Clive Owen and James Brown have all appeared.

Now it is the turn of Harvey Keitel and noted German director Hermann Vaske. To unjustly surmise it, Hermann's film *Who Killed The Idea?* concerns a private

detective (Keitel) who drives a state-of-the-art BMW and gets hired to find out who murdered all the ideas. Abstract, imaginative and for all I know quite brilliant, the film requires that for tonight's shoot three huge trucks, each respectively emblazoned with a third of the design mantra "Form Follows Function" are present along with a minibus full of gospel singers. And somewhere too there is Harvey, thinking about giving an interview. A decision that, as it turns out, it takes another eleven-and-a-half hours to reach.

If I had wanted to sit in cars drinking coffee for 12 hours at a stretch I would have joined the police. But there are worse places to be stuck than this. When the sun rises, the desert plain is cast in a wondrous light that carries through the brush and Joshua trees out to the far distant, snow-capped peaks. That can keep you occupied for a few minutes. Trapped and with nothing to do, the mind lurches from elation to despair before eventually reaching a plateau by which point you are manifestly beyond caring.

By noon the next day I am in a state of quasi-demented freedom and taking a piss in the relevant trailer, not caring what happens next, when I notice for the first time a poster on the wall. It is an old advert for the company that makes these vehicles, one of which was evidently owned by The Duke himself that reads, "John Wayne won't settle for second best. Why should you?" Why indeed.

Suddenly I am infused with the desire to get this thing done. On closer inspection the picture of Wayne is taken from his last movie, *The Shootist*, during which he was dying of cancer. From the cracked and vague smile on his face he →

"Position 286... from now on you will need a partner"



↳ looks like he'd settle for just about anything. How to interpret such a thing? Should one even bother? There is (almost) no time to worry about it. Ninety minutes later the production is wrapped and we are finally in business.

**E**ntering Harvey's trailer for the second time I find him crouched on the floor, completely bald, shaven, and looking 30 years younger. It isn't him it turns out, it's a technician attending to some wiring repairs.

"Harvey's in the back," he says, "taking off his make-up. He'll be with you in a minute. He's real tired."

It's all relative. I sit down and wait. In time he emerges from an ante-room, bare-chested, in black sweat pants, drying his hair with a towel. Hermann Vaske (whose presence Harvey has insisted upon and, as it turns out, will deliver some much needed light relief) arrives and then a caterer enters.

"Anyone else want lunch?" he asks.

"Not for me," says Harvey, "if you want some lunch go for it."

I order a potato. Hermann wants a burger.

Thanks for doing this, I say for no discernible reason.

"You're welcome," says Harvey.

I explain that most of my questions are to do with his work and career, and that maybe they'll broaden out to accommodate his and Hermann's project. Harvey winces visibly.

"I don't know how much of that I'm gonna do, but just start and see where I wind up. So, er, you have liberty to ask what you want."

This, I feel, is like when someone very tough invites you to start a fight with them and tells you that the first punch is for free.

**'All too often we reward the cliché, the convention, we reward the irony, with awards! And money and fame, women and wine!'**



So start easy, I figure, get things moving along. What was the first film you can remember seeing?

A black look descends upon him, he looks down and the room falls silent for 20 seconds.

"I don't know if I'm prepared for this kind of interview... What's your name again, sorry? Michael. Uhh, err, because I just planned to talk about this project that Hermann wrote."

That's fine! I find myself saying. I just thought that would be a way to, you know, start a conversation about films. Then suddenly he responds.

"It would have to be some cartoon of some sort, that was the first thing I saw. The first film...

I can't remember."

But what was the first film that really impressed you?

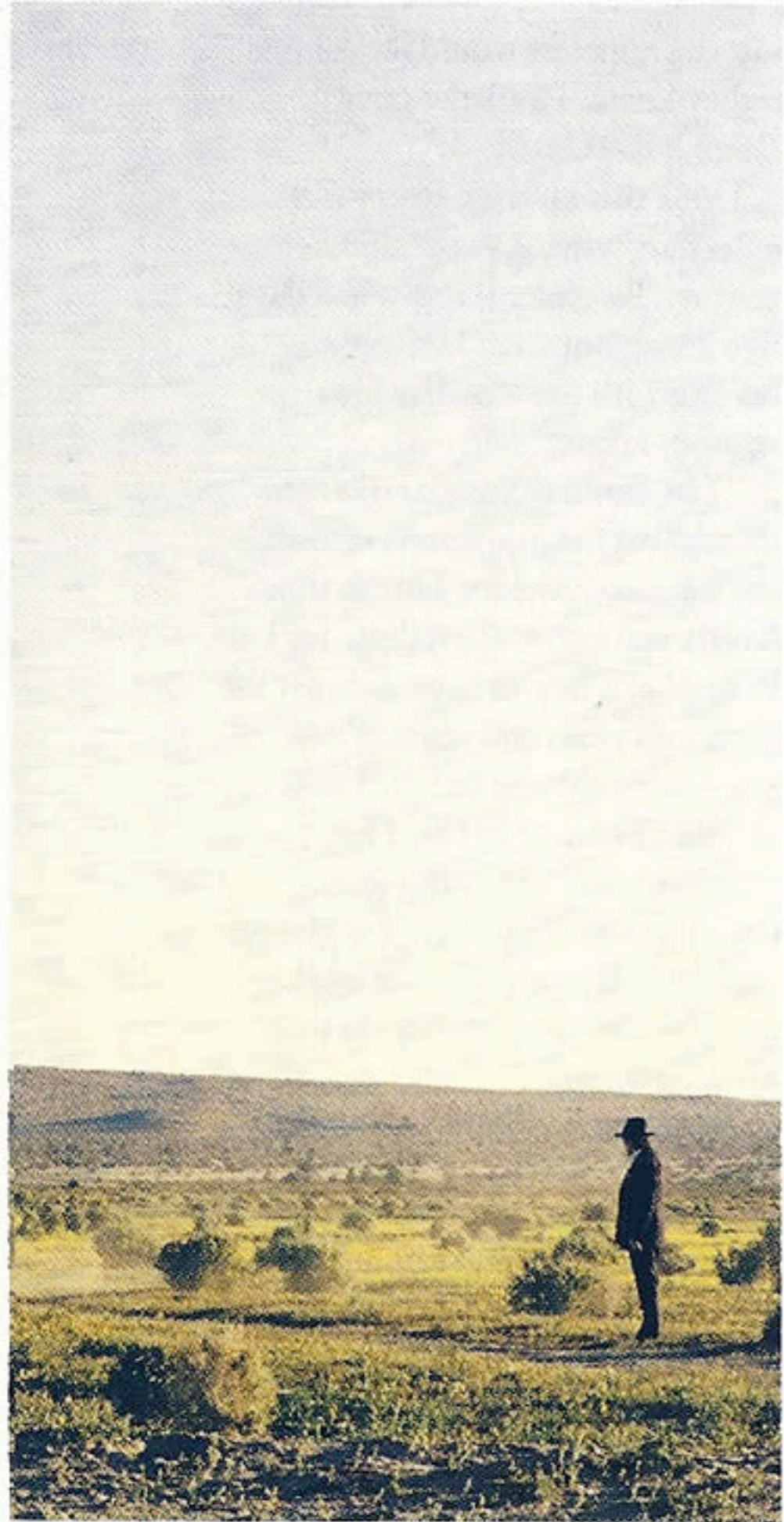
"I can't remember right now, I don't know what that might have been..."

There is a pause which at the time felt like a minute but is more like 20 seconds. A silence made somehow all the more pressing by the dull whirring of a chemical toilet in the next trailer.

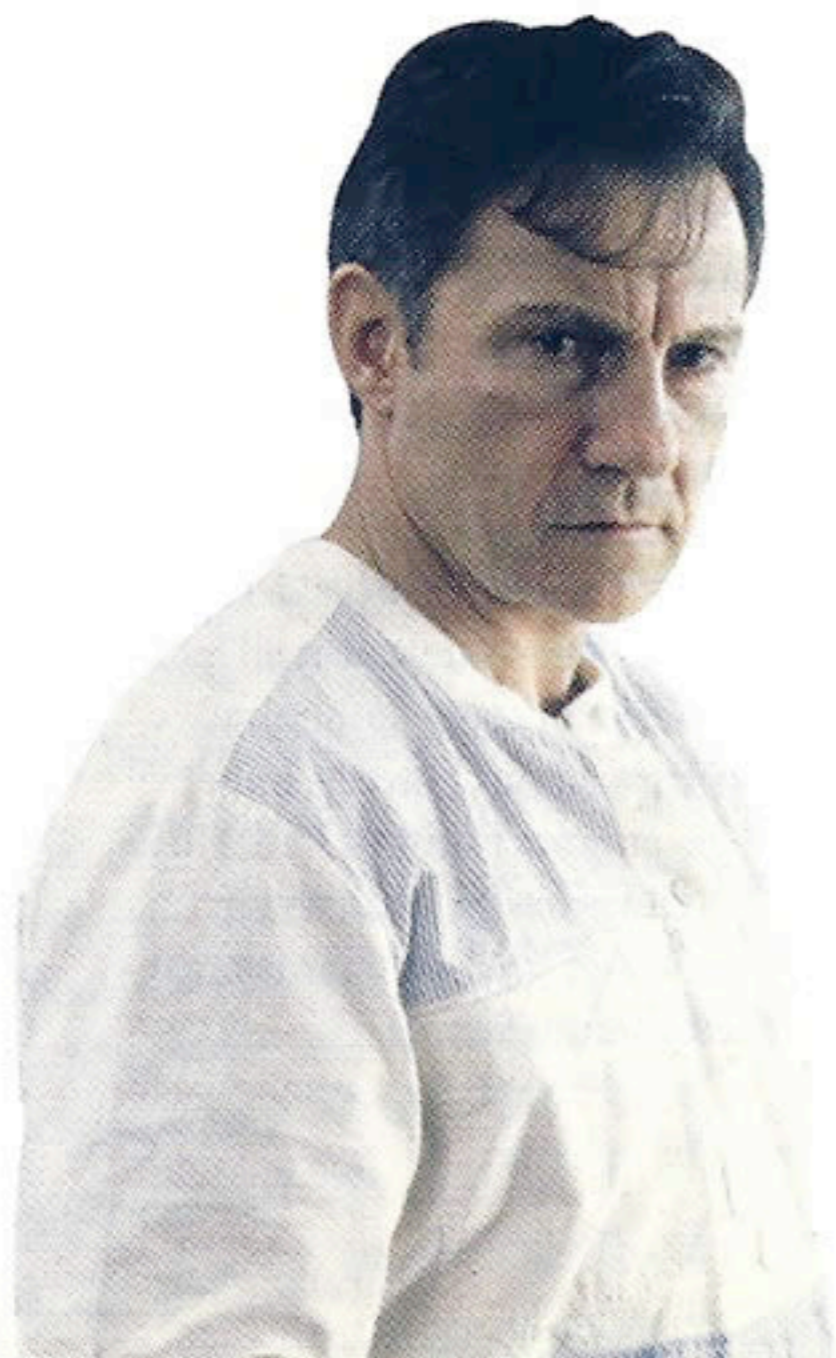
"There were these comic books," says Harvey, trying to be helpful. Then a caterer arrives.

"No hamburgers or roast beef, prime rib's your only option." Hermann orders a potato.

"There were these comic books, but they weren't comics," continues



Vanishing point: Keitel lets Holden nick Beemer for demented last-gasp getaway



Harvey. "They were called classics, or classic comics. And they were done in such a way that they seemed very real to me and true to life to me. And those were the comics I was attracted to. They weren't cartoon comics though, they were real life characters in different situations but they were very real and I could identify with them.

"Those were the first stories I remember, so-called comic books but they were called classic comics, but in kind of book form with real characters. If I'm repeating myself, it's only because I'm tired."

That's OK, I say, but I have no idea what he means. I can't think. My career flashes in front of me, I feel doomed and stupid.

It was clear from the start that we were never going to find out what happened on *Apocalypse Now*, much less get to the bottom of Nicole Kidman's hair. Each of Keitel's sentences is delivered with the forethought and finality of Shakespearean dialogue, yet this feels nothing like a conversation.

Look, I say, to bring it round to what you're actually doing here, if we discuss the idea of storytelling...

"Oh, you've waited a few days so if you wanna ask me some other questions that's OK."

But the page of questions becomes illegible, the silence feels doomed, the opportunity unattainable. What am I doing here? I can neither react nor respond. I wish I was back in the car. The pause continues.

"How long has **Jack** been around?"

A year yesterday, I tell him.

"Happy birthday."

Thanks. Then nothing. Then I think of John Wayne and we get underway.

You've said that making a movie could be a spiritual awakening. You

went so far as to compare it to doing basic training as a marine on Paris Island. Do you still feel like that?

"Theatre is a transforming experience, theatre began that way, a place where people would come and the trials and tribulations of the community would be acted out on stage, so that the problems of the community could be dealt with. Manifested and dealt with and they could evolve as a people. So yes, theatre is that. The art of the actor is that. The art of theatre is that."

Is there something that film or acting does that painting or music or other forms of art don't?

"Here's your potato," says the caterer. "Would you like something to drink as well?"

The chemical toilet groans again.

"I certainly wouldn't say, as involves the arts, one thing is better or more than another," Harvey continues. "I'm an actor, I'm not a painter or a musician or so on. But who could look at Van Gogh and say that is not what art is about? Or the music of Beethoven, the dancing of Nureyev, or Nijinsky?"

All those examples are based around the 19th or 20th century and you're making this film called *Who Killed The Idea?* Are you saying that ideas are dead?

"Not at all, we just saw some great works in theatre by Pedro Almodovar and Roman Polanski, two of the greatest films I've ever seen (*Talk To Her and The Pianist*). There was other wonderful work, not to diss them, but those two films are classics that were made last year. So no, I just give those examples because Van Gogh and some of the people I've named have so invaded my life, so to speak."

"When you ask are ideas an endangered species, well they are always an endangered species, you know?" says Hermann. "From ↗

→ the Michaelangelos and the Leonardos, the Italian Renaissance, from Handel or whatever until nowadays, there were many potential idea-killers around.”

Do ideas benefit from being threatened? I wonder. Sorry, I’ve dropped some potato on your sofa.

“It’s not my sofa,” says Harvey.

“Sometimes a threat can nurture an idea,” says Hermann.

“I wouldn’t worry about threat,” says Harvey, firmly. “Threat’s always gonna be there. I wouldn’t worry about a diminution of threat in our culture or in our world community.”

Are you saying that the thing to avoid is fear?

“The important thing is to make fear your friend, it’s not to avoid fear. Avoiding fear is a part of what motivates us to turn toward irony and cliché and convention and pass that off as being wonderful, as we do in our commercials and our so-called theatre and cinema all too often. So let me just stop there and collect the rest of my thoughts.”

After a reverential delay, Harvey continues.

“All too often we reward the cliché, we reward the convention, we reward the irony, with awards! And money, and fame, and women,

## ‘The important thing is to make fear your friend, avoiding fear motivates us to cliché and irony’

and wine,” he says.

“There are those who will take risks and sacrifice the convention, have a big house, have a beautiful car – not that everybody doesn’t want that – but some people will make sacrifices to descend into the work, to descend into that place necessary for it to evolve. It’s a mythological journey, there’s no getting round it, there’s no getting away from it.”

He sounds serious, accusational now. If this were a movie, a pistol-whipping would be imminent.

“If you wanna sit down and suck your thumb and claim that everything we do that is popular is art then you may as well keep on sucking your thumb, because you’re gonna lose your way,” he says.

“You must take your thumb out of your mouth and dig down, as Rumi said, to the bottom of the ocean, and there lies a secret medicine for those who have lost hope. He goes on to

say, the hopeless would be jealous if they knew. That’s the poet Rumi... R – U – M – I.”

I look this up later, Rumi was a Persian, writing in the third century. I wonder if Rumi had days like these. But soon Harvey is tearing with overt malice into another target.

“The damn thing that irks *me*, that makes me just wanna scream is the tobacco industry, I mean those *fuckers* you know, are telling our kids to smoke! They’ve been doing it for years and years and years. They know what they’re doing. They shouldn’t be sent to jail. They should be taken over our knees, their pants pulled down and given a smack on the ass for being bad boys, and girls. How dare they do that? How dare they?”

And then he adopts an English accent. “Well they do, dear.” We all laugh.

There’s a knock at the door. “I am sorry but you have to do another interview.”

“It’s OK,” says Harvey, “we were winding down. This guy has been waiting for two days, we have to give him a break here.”

“Look at the sixteenth shepherd,” says Hermann.

“At what!?” yells Harvey.

“The Cistine Chapel,” says Hermann.

I bet the Vatican were a nightmare client, I say. We all have a good laugh at that one. And then it really is over.

Even now I am unsure quite what we were on about, or what actually happened. But somehow it all feels worthwhile. We may not know much more about Harvey, but at least his enigma is intact, and with great actors that’s a good thing. Regardless of how long it may take to establish the fact. ■

“Can Grandad just show you his penis, then I can get him to bed?”

