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Remembrance

The Public And Private Sides Of Philip Seymour Hoffman

BY JOHN HORN © 2014, Los Angeles Times

Six years ago, Philip Seymour Hoffman was nominated for a supporting actor Academy Award for "Charlie Wilson's War." He attended the nominees luncheon, a swank gathering at the Beverly Hilton...

But Hoffman, a consummate actor known for an unkempt look off-screen, wore a suit so rumpled it looked like he had slept in it. And smack in the middle of his dress shirt was a giant stain — and that was before he took a bite to eat.

Fast-forward to last month's Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where Hoffman was promoting two of his new films, "A Most Wanted Man" and "God's Pocket." Since news of Hoffman's shocking death broke Sunday, a number of those who attended the festival commented on how disheveled the actor had looked at Sundance.

Given that the 46-year-old Hoffman died Sunday of an apparent heroin overdose, it's not surprising that people were trying to discern from his outward physical look what might have been happening in his private life. But that kind of morbid tea-leaf reading fails to recognize that the veteran actor was always much more interested in his craft than his appearance.

Although Hoffman excelled at playing characters whose emotional lives often were in disarray, he kept his personal turmoil largely guarded. He admitted past struggles with sobriety, but people who had recently worked with him said they had seen no indication that he had fallen off the wagon. And as far as looking out of shape, the burly Hoffman was never aiming to play a Marvel superhero.

His death remains under investigation. The New York City medical examiner was scheduled to perform an autopsy on Hoffman on Monday, but did not say when the findings would be released. According to media reports, the New York Police Department recovered scores of heroin bags, five of them used, from Hoffman's residence.

The release dates for the film adaptation of the John Le Carré spy thriller "A Most Wanted Man" and the crime drama "God's Pocket" have not been set. Hoffman also leaves behind the next



Actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, posing with his Oscar for Best Actor in the film "Capote" during the 2006 Academy Awards, died Sunday at 46.

two "Hunger Games" movies, even though he hadn't yet completed all his scenes for the final "Hunger Games" sequel. Hoffman was set to star in the Showtime series "Happyish," having shot the pilot but no other episodes. The fate of the series remains uncertain.

Hoffman arrived at the Los Angeles Times' photo and interview studio at Sundance early on Jan. 19 to discuss the making of "A Most Wanted Man." Even though most of Park City was still asleep, Hoffman was punctual, arriving in a loose-fitting cardigan sweater with his hair uncombed. His boots were untied, seemingly less of a fashion statement than what was most comfortable. And he was eager to talk about his work on the film.

In many ways, "A Most Wanted Man" exemplified Hoffman's ability to disappear into a role even if he made no changes to his physical form — he wasn't inclined to the radical body transformations that won acclaim for such actors as Christian Bale in "American Hustle," Matthew McConaughey in "The Dallas Buyers Club" or Robert De Niro in "Raging Bull."

Instead, Hoffman's production diet was preparation and research, perfecting a German accent to play the chain-smoking, alcoholic Hamburg intelligence operative in "A Most Wanted

Man." His character, much like the actor, has given everything to his craft — a middle-age man passionate about his work to the point of physical and mental exhaustion.

Hoffman was willing to meet with Le Carre, even when the actor thought he had bungled a scene and a more cautious performer would have retreated to his trailer rather than face the legendary author.

"I remember the day he was on set and I was intimidated and I was scared," Hoffman said at Sundance. "And I remember it was a really tough day of shooting too. And I remember after the day he came to me. When I really thought I'd screwed the pooch. And I was really tired. And he came right up to me and he was so supportive immediately. Like he knew exactly where I was and he knew exactly what to say."

Anton Corbijn, the film's director, said this after his leading man was found dead: "He was not only the most gifted actor I ever worked with (and judging by the legacy he leaves behind I am certain I share this with most if not all directors who were fortunate enough to work with him), he had also become an incredibly inspiring and supportive friend."

In the hours after Hoffman's death, many of his collaborators described him as an unparalleled chameleon, but few explained his

immersive process, the results of which often surprised his casts and filmmakers.

Cameron Crowe, who wrote and directed the 2000 film "Almost Famous," recalled on his blog how he initially imagined one scene with Hoffman, who was playing the rock journalist Lester Bangs, unfolding in a very different way than what his actor delivered.

"My original take on this scene was a loud, late night pronouncement from Lester Bangs. A call to arms. In Phil's hands it became something different. A scene about quiet truths shared between two guys, both at the crossroads, both hurting, and both up too late. It became the soul of the movie," Crowe wrote.

"In between takes, Hoffman spoke to no one. He listened only to his headset, only to the words of Lester himself. (His Walkman was filled with rare Lester interviews.) When the scene was over, I realized that Hoffman had pulled off a magic trick. He'd leapt over the words and the script, and gone hunting for the soul and compassion of the private Lester, the one only a few of us had ever met. Suddenly the portrait was complete. The crew and I will always be grateful for that front row seat to his genius."

John Horn: john.horn@latimes.com

Play

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Gothier) is a drama critic who must deal with his homicidal family and colorful local policemen while he debates whether to marry the woman he loves (Sara German).

"It all takes place over one afternoon, one night and the next morning," Winter said. "In that time, 13 bodies are uncovered in the cellar, and pretty much a delightful time is had by all."

Despite the events that take place, the director said he wouldn't classify the play as a dark comedy.

"It's meant to be a broad spoof," he said. "For all the murder and mayhem, it's actually all good, clean fun."

Winter added that the stage version of "Arsenic and Old Lace" shares many similarities with the well-known 1944 film starring Cary Grant, but features several aspects that aren't seen in the adaptation.

"Sometimes, film takes real liberties with a script," he said. "The film really takes diversions from the script that I don't think are helpful to the fun of the story. The way it was originally written is better."

In addition to utilizing a script from many years ago, the play also is featuring plenty of familiar faces, said LCTC president Tara Gill.

"There's a lot of veterans from the theatre that haven't been here in a long time," she said. "That's what's awesome about having Terry direct for the theatre, because he's brought those people in again, and we're excited to have them back."

With the current LCTC season coming to a close, Gill said she couldn't think of a better way to end the year.

"We've had a fantastic season with great shows, great directors and great characters," she said. "We're excited for next season and ready to end this one with bam."

The LCTC will present "Arsenic and Old Lace" Feb. 13-16 and Feb. 20-23. All performances will take place at 7:30 p.m. except on Sundays, which will feature matinees at 2 p.m. Tickets for both Thursday performances are half-price, and each Friday performance will include the sale of wine.

For ticket information, call 605-665-4711 or visit www.lewisandclarktheatre.org/.

Winter encourages everyone to attend the show, as it has the ability to entertain anyone with its mixture of witty lines, physical humor and well-developed characters.

"Older audience members will see something that they haven't seen for a while, and younger audiences that haven't had the treat of 'Arsenic and Old Lace' will be surprised by how clever and fun it is," he said. "This is a comedy that deserves being seen."

CAST

Abby Brewster — Carol Williams; The Rev. Dr. Harper — Jay Roberts; Teddy Brewster — Jay Williams; Officer Brophy — Randy Fields; Officer Klein (Bodies 1&2) — Jarrod Anderson; Martha Brewster — Joan Neubauer; Elaine Harper — Sara German; Mortimer Brewster — Ben Gothier; Mr. Gibbs — Dennis Menke; Jonathan Brewster — Lee Lohff; Dr. Einstein — Peter Rossiter; Officer O'Hara — Bob Beard; Lieutenant Rooney — Terry Crandall; Mr. Witherspoon — Dr. James Nyberg; Director — Terry Winter; Assistant Director — Sylvia Selgestad

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