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THE HERO RETURNS

His legions of fans swooned during his love scenes in *A Walk on the Moon* and clung to his every word in films such as *A Perfect Murder* and *28 Days*. Now, with Viggo Mortensen's starring role in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, it's time for everyone else to take notice.

BY TOM ROSTON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NORMAN JEAN ROY

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Poor Viggo.

It sucks to lose your wallet, but to do it the day before you and your 13-year-old son are going to fly from Spokane, Washington, to your home in Los Angeles is really bad. And to do it while you're with a journalist who's profiling you, looking for the symbolic nature of your every gesture, is beyond the pale. Is Viggo Mortensen bucking at responsibility? Is he rejecting his recent pecuniary stability thanks to his starring role in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy? Or is he just out of sorts with his new, much-vaunted place in the world? What does it tell you?

"It tells me that maybe I should quit my fucking job," Mortensen grumbles as he empties his bags for the third time, thrusting his arms into the side pockets, hoping the missing item will mercifully appear. He rifles through the piles of Native American books and costumes in his trailer, on the set of *Hidalgo*, here in the northwestern plains of Montana. The movie, a big-budget Disney epic to be released this summer, centers on Mortensen's Frank Hopkins, a 19th-century Pony Express messenger. Hopkins, who is half-Lakota, races his mustang, *Hidalgo*, against the Arabic steed of a Middle Eastern sheikh in a quixotic search for redemption. After more than 15 mostly obscure years in the business, the 44-year-old actor has his first solo lead in a major Hollywood movie.

"Maybe I should just do this one and be done with it," Mortensen says with frazzled exhaustion. And he's not bluffing. After all, he does have another life (or two, or three): Mortensen has published five books of his paintings, photography, and poetry, and has had five gallery exhibits in Los Angeles and New York City. He has also released several CDs of

experimental music.

"Certain people don't have a lazy bone in their body," says his good friend, producer Don Phillips. "Viggo is that kind of person who has to be continually on the move. He may sometimes bitch and moan about it, but he loves being busy."

Currently running on a perilous diet of about five hours of sleep, he's juggling the journalist; the dropping off of his truck at his brother's place 300 miles away in Idaho; his son; and his starring in *Hidalgo*, for which he has to fly to Morocco in three days to continue production.

"I'm just like everyone else here—discombobulated," he says to a concerned crew member who offers him gas money for the drive home. Mortensen has pretty much resigned himself to the probability that the wallet was mistakenly thrown out by an overeager production assistant cleaning up his trailer. Of course, it could have been stolen, but he prefers not to think that way. Without ID, he won't be able to fly, so he'll have to drive the 1,300 or so miles to L.A. in order to make it back in time to "get all this shit done" (including the photo shoot for this magazine) before he flies to northern Africa.

But despite the low-grade grumbling, Mortensen doesn't seem angry. Or entirely surprised. With a self-deprecating shake of his head, he packs the last of the bags in his Dodge truck. "Oh, man, I'm fried. Refried. And fried again," he says, with a tired smile. "But I'm already thinking this'll make a pretty funny part of your interview."



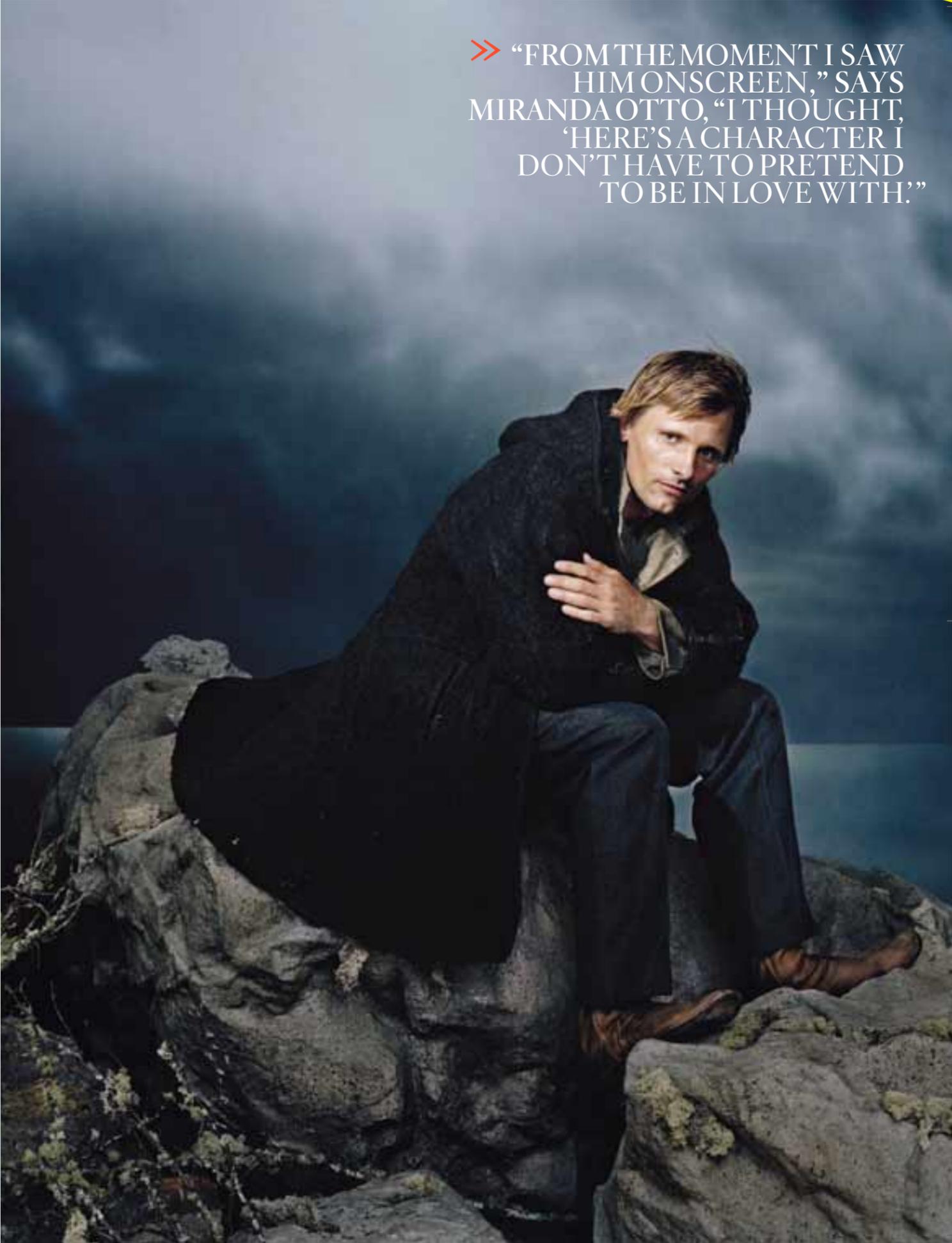
THIS IS OUR ARAGORN; ISILDUR'S heir, Lord of the Dúnedain, son of Arathorn, the last of the Númenóreans. The one who would be king. Also known as Strider, he is a ranger, a skilled swordsman, and a world traveler. In director Peter Jackson's adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's classic *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn is the valiant human who helps lead the nine-member fellowship—a motley crew of hobbits (Elijah Wood, Sean Astin, Dominic Monaghan, and Billy Boyd), the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen), an elf named Legolas (Orlando Bloom), the dwarf Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), and another human, Boromir (Sean Bean)—in its quest to destroy the Ring, a source of evil that, in the hands of the dark lord Sauron, would unleash a reign of terror that would befall all of Middle-earth.

The *Rings* trilogy opened last Christmas with *The Fellowship of the Ring*, introducing Tolkien's tale to those few who had not read the book and launching the fellowship on its way toward Sauron's lair in Mordor. The film ended with Boromir's betraying the fellowship and being killed by the evil wizard Saruman's orc henchman, and with the fellowship in disarray. Considering Jackson's faithfulness to Tolkien's text so far, this December's *The Two Towers* will no doubt follow the fellowship as it splinters into three groups, each of which faces various obstacles along the way toward Sauron's Dark Tower of Barad-dûr and Saruman's Tower of Orthanc in Isengard. We'll have to wait until next December's *The Return of the King* for the odyssey to culminate, and the king—that is, Aragorn—to ascend his throne.

The Fellowship pulled in 13 Oscar nominations and more than

STYLING: DANNY FINNA & DAVID YOUNG/ANNA/CULTURE/AGENCY.COM; GROOMING: MAITAI; SABBAN/SMASHBOX BEAUTY; PROP STYLING: PETER GARAGUANO; PRODUCER: JOANNE DAVIDSON; DIGITAL RETOUCHING: PEACH DIGITAL; PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACKET: COMME DES GARÇONS/AMERICAN RAG; LOS ANGELES: SHIRT: DOLCE & GABBANA; LOS ANGELES: THIS SPREAD: BLACK COAT: WARNER BROTHERS COSTUMES; GRAY COAT: ROBERTO CAVALLI

>> "FROM THE MOMENT I SAW HIM ONSCREEN," SAYS MIRANDA OTTO, "I THOUGHT, 'HERE'S A CHARACTER I DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND TO BE IN LOVE WITH.'"



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\$860 million at the global box office. With the two other films on the way (all three were shot in one unprecedented span over 15 months in 1999–2000) and potentially billions in total profits, the *Lord of the Rings* juggernaut, and all those connected to it, will be riding *The Fellowship*'s elfin coattails deep into the year 2004.

Mortensen's sudden Hollywood heat, especially as a hunk for the post-adolescent set, is one of *Rings*' many success stories (which include New Line's brilliant business gamble, Jackson's joining the A-list of directors, and various special-effects landmarks). Which is not to say that he wasn't an accomplished actor before. Over the years, Mortensen has quietly created an impressive body of work: as a loose cannon in Sean Penn's directorial debut, *The Indian Runner*; as a sadistic drill sergeant opposite Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane*; and as the forbidden fruit to both Gwyneth Paltrow and Diane Lane in, respectively, *A Perfect Murder* and *A Walk on the Moon*.

"Sure, we thought he was going to make it after *The Indian Runner*," Phillips says. "Viggo's turned down quite a few things that might have made a difference in his life because he just didn't connect with them creatively. Viggo is his own man. He's not dictated by the Hollywood horseshit machine. We thought he was going to make it after *G.I. Jane*. We thought he was going to make it after this, that, whatever. And now he's in the biggest movie of, well, maybe of all time."

But "biggest" movie and Hollywood "hunk" are conventional notions of achievement that Mortensen couldn't care less about. "For Viggo, I think it's the experience of doing the work and achieving his high standards that are his measure of success," Diane Lane says. "It's nice being able to morph and disappear and morph again and reappear. He's like Hollywood's secret weapon. The only problem for Viggo might be that it's not a secret anymore."



THE TRUTH IS, IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO be this way. In the summer of 1999, while Mortensen and his son, Henry, were taking a 15,000-mile road trip, visiting relatives and friends across the United States, the Irish actor Stuart Townsend was preparing for his role as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. But, already weeks into preproduction in New Zealand, Peter Jackson was realizing that the 26-year-old Townsend just wasn't the right man for the job.

"Every time I talked to Peter about it, he would say, 'Well, I want him a little bit older,'" says *Rings* makeup artist Jose Perez, who tried adding more and more gray to Townsend's beard, but to no avail. "We were forcing it. And Stuart and I knew very well that what they wanted was an older man."

On the morning of the third day of shooting, it was announced that Townsend would be leaving the production. "A couple of us were crying," Elijah Wood recalls. "If you can imagine, you spend two months with someone that you assume you'll be spending the next year and a half with. We had formed a tight bond with this guy. Whether it was right or wrong, it was traumatizing."

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Mortensen was painting and focusing on Henry's getting back to school when he got a call from his agent. She was offering him the role of Aragorn—the caveat being that he'd have to fly to New Zealand the next day. Not

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having read *The Lord of the Rings*, Mortensen turned to his son.

"Henry asked, 'What character?' And I had to look at what I had written down and I said, 'Strider?'" Mortensen recalls. "And he goes, 'That's great. He's cool.'"

Aragorn's first scene was going to be shot within a week, but Jackson was not confident that he was going to get his man. "We were told it was highly unlikely since Viggo had a reputation for taking a 'long time' to commit," says Jackson, who recalls shooting the scene in which the hobbits are talking to the Bree barkeeper and are just moments away from seeing Aragorn sitting in the corner. "And we had no Aragorn," he says. But in the middle of shooting, Jackson was rushed off the set to field a call from Mortensen.

"He asked me a series of very intense questions about Aragorn's character. I stumbled my way through the answers," Jackson says. "As the questioning continued, I started to realize he wasn't going to do it. He was somber, very serious, rather dour. Then, without warning, Viggo suddenly said, 'Well, I guess I'll see you in a couple of days!'"

Mortensen says he made the leap on the strength of his son's enthusiasm and the belief that "I would regret not doing it."

Within 24 hours he was on a plane, thumbing through a copy of the trilogy. It didn't take long to see that the book "was so densely packed with allusions to so many archetypes and mythological elements," says Mortensen, who has long held a passionate interest in the power of myth. "Whether it's out of a 12th-century French poem, something Native American, or certain

TOP: PIERRE VINET

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MY NAME IS: **Gollum**



We just got a glimpse of him in *The Fellowship*, but this slithering, sputtering creature promises to be a standout star in *The Two Towers*. In the hands of Peter Jackson, the one-time hobbit who has been warped by the Ring is entirely computer-generated. "No one's seen a CG, emoting character who has an arc," Elijah Wood says. Read: Forget about Jar-Jar.

PIERRE VINET

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WHEREVER VIGGO, THEY GO: From left, in *The Two Towers*, Mortensen, as Aragorn, fights the evil Saruman's army; Legolas (Bloom, left), Aragorn, and Gimli (Rhys-Davies) are confronted by the return of Gandalf (McKellen); Elijah Wood returns as the hobbit Frodo.

turned to his son. I had to look at what I was doing. Mortensen recalls.

within a week, but I had to get his man. "We had a reputation for being a hero who recalls shooting a tree barkeeper and sitting in the corner. Middle of shooting, in Mortensen.

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TOP: PIERRE VINET

Muslim tales, it doesn't matter. There are certain things, like the hero's journey, that all those stories have in common."

And as he continued to read, he developed a deeper affinity for Aragorn. "I found that he, too, had misgivings and was hiding something," Mortensen says. "You use what you can as an actor. And the fact that he was someone seemingly as brave and honorable and self-sacrificing as he was, but, at times, also so plagued by doubt and insecurity about what others—and he himself—might expect of him, I thought, 'Well, yeah, I can relate to that.'"



DRIVING WEST ON MONTANA'S Two-lane Route 2, Mortensen smokes an occasional American Spirit cigarette while his son sits quietly in the backseat, staring ahead. A silver Middle Eastern evil-eye talisman that the two made dangles from the rearview mirror, along with a feather and a couple of Sioux medicine wheels. Mortensen futzes with them, trying to get them to hang in a certain way, until Henry asks him to stop.

Q: I heard stories about your fishing trips into the backwoods of New Zealand.

VM: Henry, should I not tell him about the rabbit?

HM: It's really gross.

Well, I wanted to... And it made a...? Yeah, movie."

gorn—quickly he would sleep in snacks by the water and camp in the forest while his costars slept in more refined quarters. He carried his sword everywhere—whether it was in his car or into restaurants. "He is the most committed, most devoted, the most... He transforms his entire life into the character," says Sean Astin. "I've

PIERRE VINET

never seen an actor go there the way this guy does."

And he made the leap quickly: With just four days to practice sword fighting and horse riding, endure costume fittings, and learn his lines, Mortensen suddenly found himself shooting the challenging *Fellowship* battle scene on Weathertop, in which Aragorn battles the evil Ringwraiths, who are intent upon stealing the Ring.

"I'm still shocked that that was the first thing he did," says Wood, who had an early dinner with Mortensen during which he found him hard to talk with. "But when he started working, there was no question. This was Aragorn, this was the man who was meant to play this role. We had an immense amount of respect for him for being able to jump in so quickly."

Mortensen's facility with the sword became immediately apparent. "The people who were teaching him said that he was insanely talented," says Miranda Otto, who plays the Lady Éowyn, who falls for Aragorn. "There's one scene [at the end of] the first film where a knife is thrown at Aragorn, who clocks it with his sword. One of the stunt guys who was meant to be his double said, 'I've been practicing that and I've never been able to [hit the knife] once, and Viggo hits it on the first take. I hate him.'"

Mortensen's humble attitude and willingness to do his own stunts earned him the nickname "No-Ego Viggo" among the crew. "He was always taking out stuntmen and buying them beer because he hit them one too many times," says Orlando Bloom. "He just goes for it. Viggo's energy is endless. He knows no limit."

Perhaps the most grueling stretch in the production was the three-month shoot of the siege of Helm's Deep, a fortified retreat wedged next to a mountain that features prominently in *The Two Towers*. In the sequence, Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas join the people of Rohan in fighting off the marauding forces of Saruman. The months of night shooting, without break, eventually took their toll on Mortensen.

"He had no knuckles," laughs makeup man Perez. "He'd been virtually slaughtered by everyone because he would not let anyone do his rehearsals. All his knuckles were completely bruised and cut and God knows what else. Every time that he had a scene, I said, 'Okay, now where did they hit you?'"

In one take, Mortensen was battling an Uruk-hai, a powerful and ferocious strain of orc, when a blade that was jutting from an extra's armor slashed into his face. "I thought, Oh my God, he's lost his face," recalls Perez, who then saw that the blade had somehow missed Mortensen's flesh but split his tooth—literally in half. "I said, 'You lost half a tooth.' And he looked at me and said, 'Look for it. You can stick it on with super glue.' And I said, 'No, come on, don't be silly, you can't.'" Mortensen finally

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of him in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, sputtering creation, a standout star in *The Hobbit* hands of Peter Jackson. The Ring is entirely computer-generated. No one's seen a CG character who has an arc," Elijah Wood says. Forget about Jar-Jar.

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relented and went to a dentist's office, still in full battle armor.

But Mortensen's commitment extended beyond matters of the flesh. "He brought to Aragorn this huge internal life that you don't see as much in the book," says Otto. "He became more and more Aragorn, and less and less Viggo."

Mortensen's desire to make Aragorn more than a "cardboard cutout" hero can be heard in his nuanced explanation of his character's orphan mentality or the pitfalls of his heritage as a Númenórean (a unique breed of human). Mortensen says that he wishes *Fellowship* "would have been longer," and that he especially misses several cut scenes in which Aragorn's relationship with the elves is further illuminated. (He's happy that there's a special expanded edition of *The Fellowship* on DVD, a version that adds another 30 minutes to the 178-minute movie.)

Mortensen's dedication found its way regularly to Jackson's fax machine. "Viggo commits himself to a project with the same intensity as the filmmakers—which is rare for an actor," the director says. "After the end of a long day's shooting, when all the other cast would be either in bed or in the bar, [partner and coscreenwriter Fran Walsh] and I would be home grappling with the script for next week's shooting. At midnight, a nine-page handwritten memo would come rattling through the fax from Viggo, outlining his thoughts about that day's work and the next few days to come. He would suggest passages from the

the [interviewer] asked, 'Well, what about Boromir or Aragorn?' They said, 'Well, those guys are these fighting machine—noble warrior types, and they're idealized,'" Mortensen says. "And I thought, 'Totally wrong. Not the way Sean Bean did it. Not the way I did it. And not the way Tolkien wrote it.'"

Mortensen eventually admits that it was Jackson who made the statement. "I was surprised," he says. And then, hopefully: "It may have been taken out of context."



he sparsely traveled road is lined with fir and spruce trees as it winds its way through Montana's Kootenai National Forest. Mortensen looks out for mule deer and occasionally makes sure that Henry is comfortable in the back. Sometimes, Mortensen talks so softly, he's almost inaudible. His frequent pauses aren't an opportunity for response, but a mental breather before he mumbles on. When he is done with a thought, he seems relieved that his turn to speak has passed. Despite being dead tired, when he sees a lake that is sprinkled with dozens of ripples from feeding fish, Mortensen is eager to stop and throw a line in, but it's getting dark. He glances down at the tape recorder between us and releases an exaggerated groan of self-pity.

VM: Henry, I keep asking Tom what's the interview about, and he says he doesn't know.

Q: Come on. It's about you and The Lord of the Rings.

VM: Henry, can you help me? Let's just take care of the bastard. All Tom wants to talk about is Oscars and magazine covers and... what else does he...

Q: Fame. Fame.

VM: Yeah. Oh, that. Oh, that.

Q: Why not talk about your attitude toward Hollywood?

VM: Henry, he comes all the way out here, and he wants to talk about those things. My goodness. All I can say is, my goodness.

Mortensen spent some of his earlier years out here, in Idaho, but that was just one of many stops along the way. His Danish-born father, Viggo Sr., who worked a variety of jobs ("on farms and in small businesses," Mortensen says), and his American mother were living in New York City when Viggo Jr. was born, in 1958. The Mortensens moved often, living in Argentina, Venezuela, and Denmark before Mortensen was a teen. "He was just restless," Mortensen says of his father. "He always has been."

After his parents divorced when he was 11, Mortensen and his two younger brothers moved with their mother to upstate New York, where he went to high school. Mortensen studied government and Spanish literature (he's fluent in Spanish and Danish) at St. Lawrence University before moving to Denmark, where he sold flowers while focusing on writing poetry and short stories.

In the early 1980s, Mortensen followed a girlfriend to New York and became increasingly interested in movies and theater; "not just liking them but wondering how it was done," he says. He was particularly inspired by the performances of Ingrid Bergman in *Joan of Arc* and Meryl Streep in *The Deer Hunter*. He found a listing for the Warren Robertson repertory theater, and went in for what he thought was an audition for a play. Instead, he found himself signed up for an acting class. (Continued on page 88)

FILMOGRAPHY

<p>1 1985 WITNESS 1987 SALVATION! 1988 FRESH HORSES 1988 PRISON 1990 LEATHERFACE: TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE III 1990 THE REFLECTING SKIN 1990 TRIPWIRE 1990 YOUNG GUNS II 1991 THE INDIAN RUNNER I 1993 BOILING POINT 1993 CARLITO'S WAY 1993 THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HARRY 1993 RUBY CAIRO 1993 THE YOUNG AMERICANS 1994 AMERICAN YAKUZA 1994 THE CREW 1994 DESERT LUNCH 1994 FLOUNDERING 1995 BLACK VELVET 1995 PANTSUIT 1995 CRIMSON TIDE</p>	<p>1995 GIMLET 1995 THE PASSION OF DARKLY NOON 1995 THE PROPHECY 1996 ALBINO ALLIGATOR 1996 DAYLIGHT 1996 THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY 1997 G.I. JANE 1997 MY BROTHER'S GUN 1998 A PERFECT MURDER 2 1998 PSYCHO 1999 A WALK ON THE MOON 3 2000 28 DAYS 2001 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING 2002 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS 2003 HIDALGO 2003 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING</p>
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book we should look at. This wasn't an exception—over 15 months, it became the rule. In the small hours, it was actually comforting to know there was somebody else out there grappling with the same nightmare that we were."

Mortensen's strong identification with Aragorn even puts him at odds with his director on at least one point. The actor circuitously tells of hearing of an interview about *The Lord of the Rings*. "They were talking about how the audience's point of view was with the hobbits because they were the most human. And then

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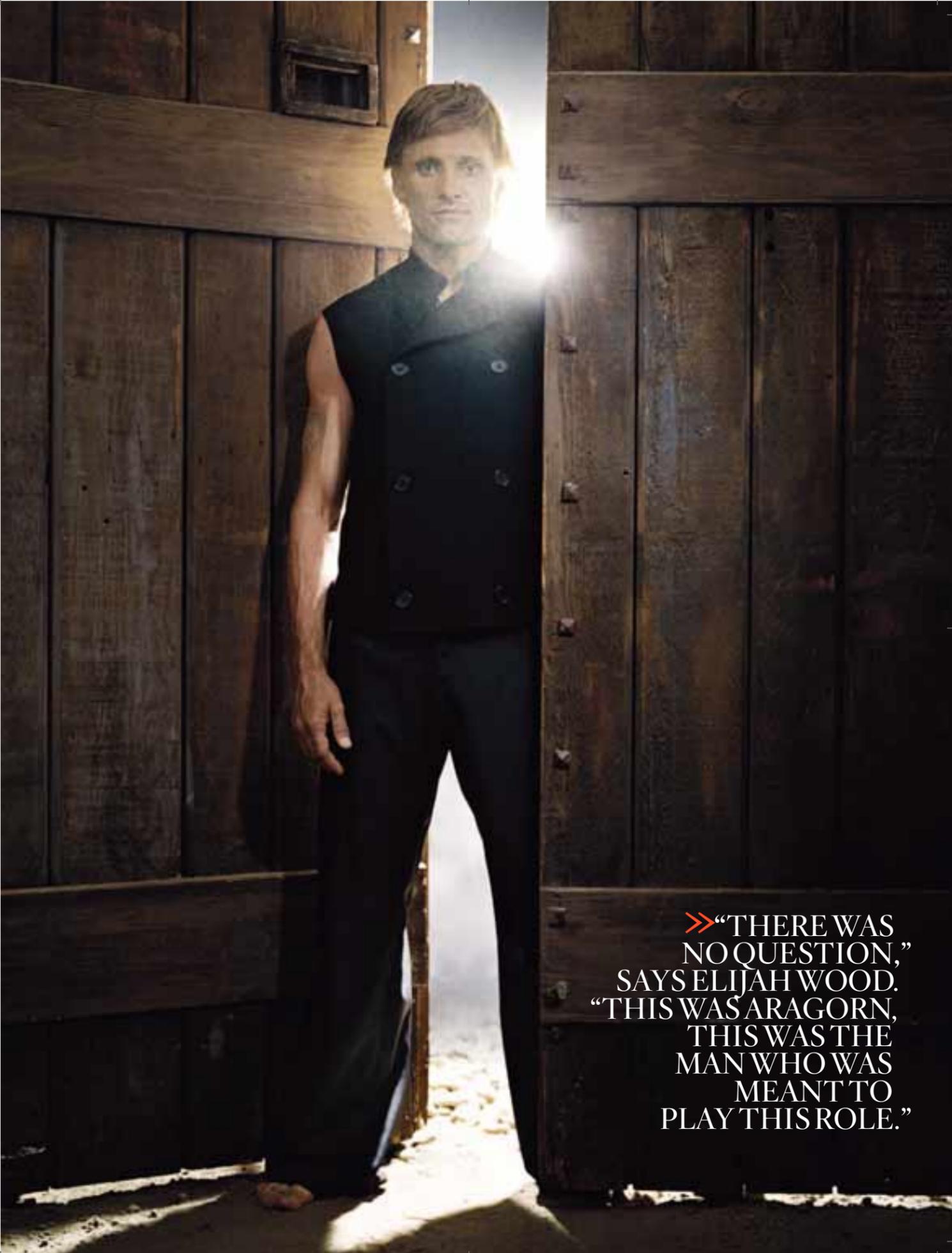
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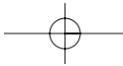
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>>“THERE WAS
NO QUESTION,”
SAYS ELIJAH WOOD.
“THIS WAS ARAGORN,
THIS WAS THE
MAN WHO WAS
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PLAY THIS ROLE.”



The Hero Returns

(Continued from page 54)

Robertson encouraged him, and so while working odd jobs such as waiting tables and bartending, Mortensen committed himself to the workshop.

"Right out of the gate, I was auditioning for leads in studio movies. It would get down to the last two people," says Mortensen, who recalls the whirlwind of being flown first-class to England for the lead in 1984's *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes*. "The next thing I know, I'm training with monkeys."

He didn't get the part. In fact, he didn't get many. And when he got cast for such films as Jonathan Demme's *Swing Shift* or Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, his scenes were deleted. "I would stop telling my family when I'd be in a movie," he says. But Mortensen soldiered on, landing his debut as an Amish farmer in *Witness*, as well as a part in the 1987 cult satire *Salvation!* He soon fell for his costar, L.A. punk band X's lead singer Excene Cervenka. They married that year. (In the early '90s, the two divorced. Their current relationship is "pretty good," he says. "She knows that I love Henry, as I know that she loves him. Beyond that, I respect her as an artist, and I think she respects me as one.") As for his current love life, "I don't think it's pertinent," he says.)

Mortensen's career began to heat up after he won the Drama-Logue Critics Award for his Los Angeles stage performance in *Bent* in 1987. Four years later, he got his first big break, when he delivered a vivid performance as a malcontent in Sean Penn's *The Indian Runner*, a Vietnam-era story of two Nebraska brothers.

"I remember Sean saying to me on about the sixth week of shooting," *Indian* producer Phillips recalls, "'Don, Viggo's going to be a humongous star.'"

Although Penn was directing, and David Morse, playing the other brother, was ostensibly the star, Mortensen's performance is what stands out. "I'll never forget when we were out one night and there was the poster [which highlights Mortensen's character] on Sunset Boulevard," Phillips says. "We pulled over to the side of the road and Viggo said, 'Don, it frightens me.'"

In the ensuing years, as Mortensen took parts in B-level duds such as *Boiling Point* and *American Yakuza*, and in more

credible films such as *Crimson Tide* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, he maintained an ambivalence about the industry, especially the compromising nature of being a cog in the moviemaking machine. "What are you going to do?" asks Mortensen, who says he's less frustrated now. "It comes down to the fact that you supply the blue, and they supply the other colors and mix them with your blue, and maybe there's some blue left in the painting, and maybe there isn't. Maybe there wasn't supposed to be any there in the first place. So have some fun and make a good blue and walk away. I try to do that. Sometimes I succeed."

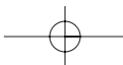
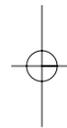
The metaphor is more than a little apt. Throughout his career, Mortensen has passionately expressed himself through other mediums, especially painting, photography, and poetry. On the set of *Hidalgo*, while the crew was heading for cover during a passing rain shower, Mortensen seized the moment to grab the Hasselblad camera he's had for 20 years and photograph a pack of dripping wet horses against a fence. In fact, he's always taking pictures (especially of his son). Driving down a road, you can expect Mortensen to slam on the brakes and jump outside to photograph whatever engages him.

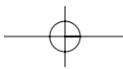
"He doesn't walk by something interesting and ignore it," Miranda Otto says. "Let's face it, acting can be a very uncreative process. I can see why he wants to do other things where you don't have to collaborate with anyone else. It's more pure."

Though Mortensen concedes that "the final work is not done by you" in making a movie, he equates the mediums: "I think it's all the same thing. How I feel doing one or the other, and trying to stay open to what might happen, you know, that happens in photography, poetry, painting, and acting."

Dennis Hopper, whom Mortensen met working on *The Indian Runner*, is a friend and kindred spirit: The two paint, photograph, and "just go out and look at things" together. "Most actors seem to think that their art stops with memorizing other people's words," says Hopper, who gets frustrated by how others view actors who work in other mediums. "They always think, 'Oh, he's acting.'"

Hopper believes Mortensen's passion for the arts is genuine: "Rainer Maria Rilke said something like, 'If you ask





yourself in the most silent hour of your night, if it were denied you to create, would you truly die?" Hopper says. "I know that Viggo has asked himself that question and his answer was 'Yes.'"

Fuck you, you motherfucking pansy-ass queers!" Clearly, Mortensen's fame hasn't extended to the town of Libby, Montana, where we have stopped to buy sandwiches from the local Subway. While souped-up Ford trucks cruise by, a little white Nissan stops at the traffic light, and a young woman screams with half her body outside the sunroof. "Fucking queers," she yells at us while teenage guffaws emanate from the packed car. "Fuck you!"

Standing closest to them, Mortensen continues to talk on his cell phone and barely registers the verbal assault. From inside the truck, Henry giggles as I walk toward a garbage can. "Fucking queer," Mortensen deadpans with a grin, looking at me.

Mortensen's strongest fan base is in the over-20, female demographic. His physical appeal—the soulful eyes, high cheekbones, cleft chin, and general ruggedness—is obviously apparent. He was named one of *People's* most beautiful people of 2002, but, again, he taps into something that extends beyond the physical.

"From the moment that I saw him onscreen," says Otto, "I thought, 'Shit, he looks incredible. Here's a character I don't have to pretend to be in love with.'"

Diane Lane also sees the appeal: "I think he has a quality of self-knowing that challenges everyone that he meets—perhaps unwittingly. But the electrical charge of that challenge of 'How well do you know yourself? 'Cause I know myself real well.' You know, that's kind of the unspoken Viggo experience. He's also fascinated by other people. And when you combine those elements, it's very charismatic. It can definitely be interpreted as sexy."

It's next to impossible to have a serious conversation on the subject with Mortensen. Consider the following:

Q: What do you think makes you sexy?

VM: I don't really know how to deal with

that question. I'm sure that there's just as many people who think I'm a grizzled hack.

Q: I guess Brad Pitt's the pretty boy type of hunk and you're the, you know...

VM: ... the grizzled hack version? Do you think we should play brothers or something?

Q: You should.

VM: Or lovers?

Q: Maybe lovers. Yeah.

VM: You think people would pay to see that?

Unlike most celebrities, who usually have some functionary rubber-stamp responses to fan mail, Mortensen not only reads what he receives—he "answers every single one," he says. "But at the end of this month, I'm not going to do it anymore. I appreciate it, but I can't spend several hours every day doing this." His book signings and

"Right out of the gate, I was auditioning for leads in studio movies," says Mortensen, who was considered for 1984's *Greystoke*. "It would get down to the last two people. The next thing I know, I'm training with monkeys."

gallery exhibits are turning into mob scenes, sometimes numbering into the several hundreds, as was the case with an art opening in Santa Monica last year. "It was packed with women from 20 to 45 years old. Just to see Viggo," Phillips says. "Not necessarily to see his art." Mortensen deflects the attention. "That was due to *Lord of the Rings*," he demurs.

Actually, Mortensen's humility and generosity turned his *Rings* costars into some of his biggest fans. They tell of the time when a snowstorm shut down production. The cast was being transported to safety when Mortensen seized a four-wheel drive vehicle and drove back to the set in order to save the hobbits' four-foot-tall scale doubles from getting snowbound. There are also the many gifts, usually beautifully framed original photographs, which he gave to his many

friends on the set.

Mortensen seems to have won over all of his *Rings* peers, but none more than Bloom. "He was just so giving and gracious," says the 25-year-old actor, who recalls Mortensen letting him upstage him in at least one scene. "For a young actor starting out in the film industry, he was the most fantastic education I could have had."

Bloom tells a story that occurred when the *Rings* crew returned to New Zealand in the summer of 2002 for sound dubbing and pickups for *The Two Towers*. "I flew over just to visit Viggo," says Bloom, who had heard that Mortensen was organizing a reunion dinner. He, Mortensen and Henry, Ian McKellen, Liv Tyler (who plays Arwen), and members of the crew took a bus to the countryside. After dinner, Bloom and Henry went for a walk and noticed how beautifully the moon was shining on a nearby river.

"We ran back and said, 'Everyone's got to see this.'" Bloom recalls. "I was having a Viggo moment—running out, getting people to come and check out the moon."

Some decided to wade into the stream, but Mortensen suggested the more perilous task of crossing the river.

"I'm like, 'Fuck off,' and he says, 'Come on.' So we're barefoot, waist-high in water, walking on these little rocks to get to the other side and I'm doing it because I'm an idiot and I'm following his lead. Because he's an idiot. And because he's amazing," Bloom laughs. "I can't believe how much this is going to make me sound like I'm in love with the guy."

After making it to Idaho and spending the night, Mortensen and I take a drive into the forest outside his brother's place to clear the air a bit. Luckily, the airline is going to let him use a faxed copy of his passport, so he and Henry will be able to fly out of Spokane. That's one less thing to worry about. But he wants me to know that he hasn't been able to articulate some ideas in the fog of the past two days.

In addition to deconstructing his love for Adam Sandler's *Happy Gilmore* (which we had spent 20 minutes discussing the night before) and espousing

the virtues of indie about the first day in Montana, when a ening the spirits of

"They looked suddenly it was, point being: "You thing in your life says. "There are f are usually scream ments, and fight process making of

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the virtues of individualism, he wants to talk about the first day of shooting *Hidalgo* in Montana, when a torrential rain was dampening the spirits of the crew.

"They looked so fuckin' miserable that suddenly it was hilarious," he says. The point being: "You can try to control everything in your life or you can just let go," he says. "There are filmmakers who resist, and are usually screaming and fighting the elements, and fighting nature. And in the process making other people's lives hell."

Mortensen believes there is order in the chaos. "You know, there are freakish and unexpected events that make up our lives. You have to be open to suffering a little," Mortensen says. "There's the philosopher, Schopenhauer, right? He talked about how out of the randomness, there is the apparent intention in the fate of an individual that can be glimpsed later on. When you're an old guy, you can look back, and maybe this rambling life has some through-line. Others can see it better sometimes. But when you glimpse it yourself, you see it more clearly than anyone."

The glimpse is essential. It is why he photographs, paints, runs himself ragged—and why he is an actor. "You try to communicate to others and to yourself, whether it be through a photograph, an e-mail, or an idea. Or if I just want to show you a pond. Just making the effort.

"There's a yearning to connect," Mortensen says. It's why he wrote a poem called "Matinee," in 1997. It reads:

After years of merging and allowing/
 yourself to be assimilated/Your hair and
 clothes/ have turned brown/Then, one after-
 noon you leave a theatre/After seeing the
 restored/Version of 'The Hero Returns'/And
 find yourself wanting/to be treated special.

"I remember specific moments like that," he says, "being a little kid, walking out of the theater, and feeling connected to the people who were on the screen."

The Hero Returns is not a real movie. It's more of an ideal—one that Mortensen hopes audiences will connect with when they enter theaters in December.

"In a story like *Lord of the Rings*, whether the Ring and Sauron are evil is incidental to me. Even if we were not to get the Ring anywhere near Mount Doom. Even if we all died. It doesn't really matter," Mortensen says. "It's the fact that everybody got together and decided to go on this trip. That's the thing. That's the miracle." ■

