

William Houston: Finding new pastures in an agrarian role

Gillian Purves

William Houston is used to receiving rave critical acclaim for his stage performances, with a long list of classical roles behind him, including an almost two-year stint as Prince Hal and King Henry with the Royal Shakespeare Company. In recent years he has been working on making the leap to the big screen with notable appearances in *Puffball*, which is screening at KVIFF as part of the Tribute to Nicolas Roeg, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* and, most recently, *Fifty Dead Men Walking*.

The *Festival Daily* caught up with Houston in Karlovy Vary this week to talk farming, fighting and finding a balance. The world of *Puffball* is in stark contrast to the arena his classical high-blooded characters normally inhabit, but the film ironically took him back to his rural roots in Northern Ireland. "What I loved about doing *Puffball* was that it's thoroughly now, thoroughly modern. I'm playing a farmer in the film," he explains. "He's a very earthy character, very Pan-like, his name's Tucker, which rhymes with something." Despite taking on the role of a man who drives a tractor and de-horns cattle on a daily basis, Houston found it less of a physical challenge than his traditional parts as "playing royals means taking that 'poker up the spine' stance, which is very physically demanding."



Photo: Milan Malíček

Shakespearean actor and *Puffball* star William Houston.

Although not an issue in *Puffball* Houston has identified one other bright side of film – "the swords can be plastic and light. In theater they've got to be real. You can easily take a finger off."

Houston is keenly aware of the vast difference in skills required for the stage and the screen.

"You have a thousand people in front of you in Stratford at the Royal Shakespeare Theater and to be heard is everything. But when you're dealing with film it's a visual medium – you can tell a story by raising an eyebrow. But I've realized that one of the great things about theater

is that you never see your own performance. One of the shocking things about films is having to watch yourself. You can't take it back. With *Puffball* I know there are scenes I'm wary of my mother and my grandmother watching. It's very earthy."

Moving from England to Ireland with his family in the 1970s at the height of the Troubles may have contributed to the ability Houston has to switch between accents, which helped when he found himself filming *Puffball* at the exact same time as he was playing a Spanish Ambassador in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. "I was night-shooting *Elizabeth* in London and then popping back over to Ireland and shooting during the day. So I was an Irish farmer and a Spanish Ambassador at the same time and I was terrified I'd get them wrong and be an Irish Ambassador and a Spanish farmer."

For the legendary Nicolas Roeg he has nothing but admiration. "Working with him was eye-widening," he says. "He trusts his instincts and casts with his guts." Houston is as willing to teach as he is to learn, coaching young actors whenever possible. "As I'm getting older now I realize it's not so much about learning new things, it's about remembering old things. And what's so great about working with young people is that they're in touch with the now, they are aware of the power of now. It's a wonderful way to stay in touch and to remember."

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Torene Svitil

Los Angeles, USA
(Oscar Awards Coordinator)



What brings you to KVIFF?

I work for the Academy of Motion Pictures, which gives out the Oscars, and I'm here to give a workshop on the rules for the foreign-language, short films, and documentary categories. I think it will be of interest to filmmakers as well as people who work with film production and distribution.

What will it involve?

I'm going to explain a little bit about the Oscars and how they work, as well as why these particular categories are not like the regular Oscar categories. We're going to go through all the relevant rules and then take questions.

What do you make of KVIFF?

This is actually my first film festival. The Academy likes to send members to film festivals, not staff. I really enjoyed the opening ceremony, which was fun and had a lot of humour. It's so unlike the Oscars, which are very serious. For me it's been a lot of fun. I've seen some interesting films and met some great people.

The Oscar Competition Workshop takes place today at 2pm in the Chopin Lounge of the Grandhotel Pupp. It will be moderated by Steven Gaydos, Executive Editor of Variety Magazine. Besides Torene Svitil, foreign-language film publicist Tatiana Detlofsen will also be on hand to answer questions.

ON THE TOWN

Pub Watch

Sport Casino Karlovy Vary

T. G. Masaryka 11
Open Non-Stop

With bright neon lights and rows of slot-machines, this all-night bar would not normally appear in pub reviews. During the fest, however, it comes into its own. For anyone who has had their fill of the manic loud music and bright young things of the Captain Morgan Tent, this hostelry is an oasis of calm amidst the festival madness. It may have as much atmosphere as the moon, but it's the perfect place to briefly get away from it all. You can get a comparatively cheap half liter of Gambrius beer here for 23 CZK and shooters for 40-50 CZK.

Bodam Rybí Restaurace

T. G. Masaryka 10
☎ 353 222 473

Kitchen open from 10am to 9pm
Located beside the park across the bridge from the Thermal, the Bodam Rybí Restaurace (Bodam Fish Restaurant) offers – as the name suggests – an extensive selection of fish dishes, ranging from traditional carp fried in beer with horseradish (79 CZK) to coquilles St. Jacques with asparagus (299 CZK). There is also some reasonably priced classic Czech fare such as a smoked loin of pork with cabbage and potato dumplings (159 CZK). Bodam's shaded outdoor seating makes it a nice place for

Food and Drink

some *al fresco* dining if the weather's good, but its weird "neo-communist" interior with fish tanks is also quite an experience.

Pizzeria Paradiso

Zahradní 41
☎ 603 316 029

Fest opening hours: 10am to 4am
The more popular and versatile place next door, Venezia, is probably where you intended to score an outside table with a "glorious" view of the Thermal hotel. But, with Venezia as popular as it is, you may well end up at this handily placed eatery instead. Its range of bog-standard pizza and pasta dishes is more expensive than most Czech

establishments (115-260 CZK), but Paradiso's location is probably worth it for hungry festival-goers who are pressed for time. It also offers a rather expensive selection of steaks, pork medallions and chicken dishes for 350-500 CZK. People with deep pockets might even be tempted by the fresh fish they have displayed on ice. These cost around 1200 CZK, but some of the more exotic seafood dishes can set you back as much as 9900 CZK.

Charleston

Bulharská 1
Tel.: 353 230 797

Kitchen open from 10am to 11pm
Located down a quiet side street, Charleston is a port in the

KVIFF storm – an elegantly decorated bar-cum-restaurant with an English-pub atmosphere. The food on offer here has a British feel that matches the décor. You can get a pretty good "English steak" for 389 CZK or pork tournedos for 179 CZK. For those who feel a little more adventurous, there is also a palatable selection of wild boar and venison dishes (300-330 CZK). There are a number of beers on tap including Czech Krušovice (44 CZK) and Heineken (79 CZK). Charleston's friendly, English-speaking staff is also one of this establishment's biggest selling points.

Side Events

Besides laying on an extensive showcase of film, it's now customary for KVIFF to host several complementary exhibitions as part of its rich accompanying program. One thing you shouldn't miss this year is an **exhibition of paintings and drawings** by veteran German actor and festival guest **Armin Mueller-Stahl**. A selection of his distinctive works are currently on display in Karlovy Vary's Art Gallery (www.galeriekvivy.cz) at Goetheova stezka 6. The Vodafone Fair Club (Lázně I) also has an interesting selection of celebrity photos by Tomáš Nosil, a photographer whose distinctive work often features in leading Czech culture and arts magazine *Instinkt*.

DAILIES



Photo: Laura McGinnis

KVIFFers resort to bum-soothers after hours in the cinema.



Photo: Lukáš Tábořský

Crystal Globe winner Juraj Jakubisko meets his public.



Photo: Cöllin O'Connor

Not quite Clark and Vivien...