Tommy Lee Jones Is Not Acting

IN BOTH LIFE AND THE ROLES HE'S PLAYED, HE'S BEEN DESCRIBED AS DIFFICULT, ORNERY, CURT, AND CONTENTIOUS. AND WHILE MEETING TO DISCUSS HIS LATEST—AND SOME SAY GREATEST—MOVIE, THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA, THE TEXAS FILM LEGEND MORE THAN LIVES UP TO HIS BILLING.

by **SKIP HOLLANDSWORTH** **FEBRUARY 2006**

I WAS TOLD TO MEET HIM at Scholz Garten, in Austin, the popular restaurant and drinking spot near the University of Texas campus. When I walked in, he was sitting at the table closest to the front door, twiddling a Miller Lite. He was in his cowboy clothes: scuffed boots, Wranglers, a white shirt with snap buttons, and a well-worn white felt cowboy hat tilted back slightly on his head.

He did not stand as he shook my hand. He did not smile. He just stared at me. "Have a seat," Tommy Lee Jones finally said.

His eyes were dark and deeply set, circled by a tangled web of crow's-feet. For at least the first minute, his eyelids didn't seem to blink. Nor did his famous coal-black eyebrows move up or down. "Well," he said, "what do you want to ask me?" He had agreed to meet me to talk about his new movie, The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada, which opens nationwide this month. He is not only the star of the movie but also its director—the first feature film he has ever directed. Financed for a reported $15 million—a pittance compared with big-budget studio productions like King Kong but more than 2005 critical darling Brokeback Mountain—the film was hardly known in the United States until early last year. Those who did know about it probably assumed it was the sort of vanity project that actors occasionally attempt, an independent "art film" that no doubt would go straight to video.

But when Three Burials premiered in May at the Cannes International Film Festival, Jones was awarded the festival's prize for best actor, and when the movie was given a limited, one-week release in New York and Los Angeles in December, U.S. film critics hailed him as well. Peter Travers, of Rolling Stone, announced that Jones "fills every frame of his [directing] debut with the ferocity and feeling of his best screen performances." The Los Angeles Times' Kevin Thomas declared that Jones had reached "the pinnacle of his career." Several critics put Three Burials on their list of the best movies of 2005, and Entertainment Weekly went so far as to proclaim that Jones could receive Academy Award nominations for best actor and best director and that the film itself had a dark-horse chance at being nominated for best picture.

For any actor, no matter how long he's been in the movie business, such acclaim must be a heady experience, and so I asked Jones the kind of question that reporters ask someone at the top of his game: "How does all this success feel?"

"Haven't thought about it," he said.

"Not at all?" I asked.

He continued to stare at me. “No, I haven’t thought about it,” he said. “Do you really think I sit around and ask myself questions like ‘How does success feel?’”

IF YOU THINK THAT ANSWER SEEMS a bit snappish, then you don’t know Tommy Lee Jones. For more than thirty years, he has been one of the most enigmatic of American movie stars—“the anti-star,” one friend has called him. He not only keeps his distance from Hollywood—he doesn’t have a home in Los Angeles and goes there only when he absolutely has to—but he works equally hard at remaining anonymous in his own home state. It is rare to find him signing an autograph, attending a party, or making a public appearance, except at one of his beloved polo matches. It is rarer still to find him talking to a journalist. When he does, he says little about himself, and he doesn’t hesitate to cut off an interview if he finds the questions too personal or particularly inane. Once, during a studio-organized press gathering to promote the sci-fi comedy Men in Black, he was asked if he believed in aliens. Jones got up and walked out of the room.

People in Hollywood circles still talk about the infamous 1993 meeting between Jones and Bernard Weinraub, who at the time was an influential New York Times correspondent covering the film industry. When Weinraub began the interview by asking Jones about his past movie roles in which he played villains and tough guys, Jones bluntly told him that he didn’t “play just villains” and that he found such questions to be “borderline stupid.” A stunned Weinraub switched gears and asked Jones about his days at Harvard, where he majored in English literature. Weinraub wanted to know what particular area of English most interested him.

“The kind we’re using now,” Jones said.

In stories written about him, he is regularly called “difficult,” “ornery,” “curt,” and “contentious.” Yet whenever he appears in a new movie, the journalists start requesting interviews. The reason, of course, is that at the age of 59, Tommy Lee Jones remains one of the most irresistible figures of the American screen. Whatever role he is asked to play—a cop, a killer, a military officer, a prison warden, a U.S. attorney—he acts with an almost scorching intensity, his voice relentlessly craggy and his body wound tight as a strand of barbed wire. Even today, movie lovers rent The Fugitive, which came out thirteen years ago, not because they want to see Harrison Ford jump off the dam but because they must watch Jones, as deputy U.S. marshal Sam Gerard, acidly snap, “I don’t care,” when Ford tells him he’s innocent. And if they happen to notice that the very bad Steven Seagal action movie Under Siege is playing on cable, they watch that too—not so they can chuckle over Seagal’s acting but because they want to study, just one more time, Jones’ strangely mesmerizing performance as a vicious psychopath who hijacks a battleship. “Four minutes ahead of schedule,” he says after shooting a Navy commander and pistol-whipping a sailor. “Damn, I’m good!”

Jones had let me know that he was going to be at Scholz’s to have lunch with his son, Austin, a handsome, quiet young man in his early twenties who lives near the restaurant and spends his time writing short stories and playing bass guitar in a local band. (Jones also has a fourteen-year-old daughter, Victoria.) From there, he and his film company’s vice president Wes Oliver would be making the two-hour drive to his Hill Country ranch just outside San Saba, and he was going to let me sit in the backseat and ask him questions.

I did not have to be told that I was being given a rare opportunity to meet the eighth-generation Texan whom The Fugitive ’s director, Andrew Davis, once called “the Southwestern Bogart.” But I had been warned that I wouldn’t get close to getting to know him. “You shouldn’t take it personally,” said his good friend Richard Jones (no relation), a San Antonio actor who has been in five movies with Tommy Lee. “You just need to remember that Tommy’s got a lot of cowboy in him. He’s got a cowboy’s skepticism about people he doesn’t know. He doesn’t feel any need to open up to them just because they are asking him questions.”

In fact, as we headed off to San Saba in Jones’s Ford Expedition, he made it clear to me that he was not going to be talking about his personal life. When I asked him a rather harmless question about how he’d raised his children, he turned around in his seat, gave me that unblinking stare, and said, “What the hell does that have to do with The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada ?” He gave me the stare another time when I asked him a question about his third wife, Dawn, whom he married in 2001. “I’m not discussing that,” he said impatiently, cutting me off.

Sitting with me in the back was Jones’s cow dog, Johnny Mack Brown, named after an actor who starred in westerns in the thirties and forties. He began resting his head on my shoulder.

“Back, dog!” said Jones.

Johnny Mack Brown immediately pulled his head away.

Unlike most movie stars hoping to promote their new films, Jones feels no obligation to play by the normal rules. Just outside Austin, for example, Wes pulled into a convenience store parking lot, and Jones got out of the Expedition, walked inside, and grabbed a twelve-pack of Miller Lite from the back refrigerator. Most public-relations-conscious movie stars would never amble into some convenience store and buy a bunch of beer, especially if they knew a journalist was next to them taking notes. At the least, they’d make their assistant do everything for them.

But Jones clearly didn’t care what I thought. He headed toward the woman at the cash register and handed her some money. She glanced at his famously rutted face and those hooded black eyes.

“Oh,” the cashier said.

Jones stood there, unsmiling, waiting for his change.

“Oh,” the cashier said again, passing over the money. “Are you . . . ?”

Instead of offering a nice illustration of a movie star generously reaching out to a fan, Jones said nothing, headed out the door, and walked back across the parking lot. He did not even turn his head when the cashier came outside, a pen and paper in hand, and shouted, “Hey, Mr. Jones!” He got back in the car, and while Wes drove us west on Texas Highway 71, Jones stared straight ahead, answering only those questions that appealed to him, and popped open one can of Miller Lite after another.

“I have to admit, I’ve never been around anyone like him,” I later said to one of Jones’s close friends, Bill Wittliff, the Austin-based film producer and screenplay writer who cast Jones as the taciturn, hard-edged Woodrow Call in the famous 1989 miniseries Lonesome Dove.

Wittliff chuckled. “But isn’t that precisely why he’s so appealing? Yes, Tommy Lee’s personality can be very hard, very rough. He has an intensity that’s all his own. But it’s an intensity that very few actors can come close to matching. You watch other actors on-screen, and you know they are having to invent their intensity. Tommy Lee does not. That’s just who he is. Believe me, you only need to be around him a couple of minutes to realize he’s not acting.”

IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, Jones has bewildered just about everyone who has met him. Born in San Saba in 1946, he was an only child, the son of Clyde Jones, a former ranch hand turned oil-field roughneck, and his wife, Marie, who had been raised on ranches north of Abilene. For several years, Clyde regularly moved the family from one West Texas oil town to another, eventually ending up in Midland, where the young Tommy Lee developed a reputation as a tough, hardscrabble kid who loved to play football. He seemed destined to live a blue-collar life like his father; he even spent one summer in his early teenage years working on a garbage truck.

But he also displayed enormous academic promise, and in the early sixties, at the same time his father was offered a higher-paying job to work for a major petroleum company in the oil fields of Libya, Tommy Lee, who wanted to stay in Texas, received a scholarship to attend St. Mark’s, the elite all-boys prep school in Dallas. There, he played on the football and soccer teams. After watching a group of boys rehearsing Mister Roberts in the school’s theater department, he began to try out for plays, at one point getting the role of Sir Thomas More in A Man for All Seasons.

“I’m not sure there had ever been a student at St. Mark’s like Tommy,” said William Clarkson, who was also a St. Mark’s student in those years (from Corsicana) and who shared a bedroom with Jones and two other boys at a teacher’s home not far from the school. “He was a moody, brooding, extraordinarily volatile teenager. He could laugh uncontrollably, but you also thought it was a kind of dangerous laugh. And if you said something he didn’t appreciate, there would be this almost scary sudden shift in personality in the way he related to you.

“And yet,” added Clarkson, who is now an Episcopal priest and the president of the respected Westminster Schools in Atlanta, “there were moments when you would see this genuine sensitivity in him, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. I remember he would lay in his bed

and write poetry about a girlfriend he had back then—this poignant, mooning, painful adolescent poetry. Sometimes he'd force us to sit there while he read the poetry out loud. Of course, we didn't dare laugh at him about it. We were scared what he'd do to us if he saw us laughing. I'm not kidding. He could scare the hell out of us."

After graduating from St. Mark's, Jones was accepted at Harvard, where he roomed with Al Gore and was an offensive guard on Harvard's football team, playing in the famous Harvard-Yale game of 1968 that ended in a 29—29 tie. He wrote his senior thesis on Flannery O'Connor, the Southern short-story writer, and in his spare time he performed Shakespeare, Brecht, and Pinter in university plays.

Compared with Harvard's other theater students, one of whom was the pencil-thin John Lithgow, Jones was stunningly good-looking, raw, rugged, and masculine—a real Texan in Cambridge. He decided to continue acting after he received his English degree. He spent a few years doing theater in New York and then was hired to play Dr. Mark Toland on the soap opera One Life to Live. He wasn't the typical leading man, but there was no question he was headed for stardom. Directors loved his dark, dangerous face and that hint of malevolence he could put in his voice. They also loved the way he revealed a character's softness, never displaying an iota of sentimentality. In his first major movie role, he played a menacing sociopath in Jackson County Jail. He then played a violent Vietnam veteran in Rolling Thunder, a daredevil race car driver in The Betsy, and a homicidal police detective in The Eyes of Laura Mars. (Strangely, he passed on playing the villainous bull rider in Urban Cowboy.) He got rave reviews for his portrayal of Loretta Lynn's cocky young hillbilly husband in 1980's Coal Miner's Daughter. He won an Emmy Award for his performance as Gary Gilmore in The Executioner's Song and was nominated for the role of Woodrow Call in Lonesome Dove. He received an Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of imperious New Orleans homosexual businessman Clay Shaw in Oliver Stone's JFK, and, of course, he won the Oscar in 1993 for best supporting actor in The Fugitive.

However, just like the St. Mark's boys, the Hollywood crowd was often unnerved by his volatility. He was apparently a big drinker ("His drinking scared me," his first wife, the actress Kate Lardner, wrote in her autobiography), and he did not hesitate to confront anyone on movie sets who rubbed him the wrong way. During the filming of one movie, he reportedly got in a scuffle with a screenwriter, and on the set of Batman Forever, he is said to have been so disgusted with co-star Jim Carrey's goofy personality that he refused to sit at the same table with him during lunch breaks. At the end of the filming, the movie's director, Joel Schumacher, called Jones "a bully," an astonishing public put-down from one A-list Hollywood figure to another.

Another A-list Hollywood director, Barry Sonnenfeld, once told Newsweek that after watching Jones do one of his typically combative interviews on television, he turned to his wife and said, "Thank God, as long as I live, I will never, ever have to work with that jerk." But then he found himself signing on as director for the comedy Men in Black, with Jones and Will Smith in the lead roles. Not only did Jones complain about where his marks were, he also fired off a blistering six-page critique of the script (he reportedly claimed that he had written better stories in grade school). During one shoot, at three o'clock in the morning, he walked up to Sonnenfeld and growled, "You know, if you were smart, you wouldn't say any of this," crossing out a chunk of dialogue.

After filming was over, one of the film's producers said Jones "is like the original cactus." Yet no one suggested his hiring had been a mistake. Despite the tension, Men in Black became a monster hit, earning more than $200 million at the box office in 1997, in large part because of Jones's hilariously gruff performance as the world-weary, seen-it-all secret agent.

PREDICTABLY, JONES CARED little about discussing his career with me. When I asked what had been the most difficult role for him to master, he said in his dismissive manner, "I don't know." When I asked him what had been his favorite role, he said, just as dismissively, "The one that paid me the most money."

But he did tell me that the year that Men in Black was released, he learned that a boy named Ezequiel Hernandez Jr., who lived not far from a ranch Jones owned in far West Texas, near the Texas-Mexico border, had been shot to death by a camouflaged Marine who had been sent to that part of the state to look for drug smugglers (see "Soldiers of Misfortune," August 1997). It was said to be the first killing of an American citizen on American soil by a U.S. soldier since the shootings at Kent State University, in 1970. The Marine claimed he had shot the boy in self-defense, and he was not prosecuted. "Anyone knows that if the kid had been

killed in Dallas and his name was Bobby Johnson and his skin was white, it would have been a different story," Jones said.

For the first time, there wasn't the usual tone of disgust in his voice at having to answer humdrum questions from a reporter, but a genuine anger. "I decided it was time to make a movie about a part of the world that many people haven't experienced or don't understand," he said. "I wanted to give people a glimpse of a world that has its own character, its own quality, its own struggles and disappointments, its own harshness, as well as its own beauty. I wanted to portray the social and cultural contrasts between the land that's south of the Rio Grande River and the land that's north of it, and in the process, I wanted to show how things are different on each side of the river and how they are surprisingly the same."

He paused. "I wanted to make a movie about my home country," he said, "my home people."

On his own, Jones hired the noted Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga. The two of them came up with a story in which Jones would play Pete Perkins, a weathered, laconic foreman of a ranch in West Texas who learns that his illegal-immigrant ranch hand, Melquiades Estrada (played by Fort Worth actor Julio César Cedillo), has been shot dead and quickly buried by surly young Border Patrol agent Mike Norton (Barry Pepper). When Perkins later learns that the local sheriff (Dwight Yoakam) has reburied Estrada in a pauper's grave and is refusing to investigate the killing, dismissing the Mexican cowboy as "nothing but a wetback," Perkins suddenly, almost impulsively, decides to take justice into his own hands. Perkins kidnaps the Border Patrol agent and forces him at gunpoint to dig up Estrada. Then he straps the dead Estrada to one horse, straps the Border patrol agent to another horse, and heads for Mexico on a harrowing and at times crazed journey to bury Estrada for a third time, in the little town where Estrada had said he had been born. Jones and Arriaga titled the movie, appropriately enough, The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada.

With co-producer Michael Fitzgerald, Jones received financing from EuropaCorp, a French-based film company. Although he had directed only one film before—a television movie based on the Elmer Kelton novel The Good Old Boys, about a Texas cowboy at the turn of the century—Jones was so passionate about this film that EuropaCorp promised him and Fitzgerald complete creative control. It was almost certainly not going to be a blockbuster. One third of the dialogue was in Spanish, and the majority of the plot was revealed in a sometimes baffling, nonsequential fashion. There were no spectacular chase scenes in the script, no deafening shoot-outs, no high-tech special effects. Yet the film was clearly as important to Jones as anything he had ever done in his career. Between 2001 and 2005, while he worked as an actor in big-studio movies—including, ironically enough, one of the worst films ever set in Texas, Man of the House, in which he played a Texas Ranger protecting a group of University of Texas cheerleaders who have witnessed a murder—he quietly developed Three Burials, making sure every detail was just right. "He was the stubborn perfectionist, tweaking the script over and over, changing a comma in one sentence, rewriting the dialogue until the rhythm was just right," Fitzgerald said. "He scouted all the locations for the film and helped pick the entire cast and crew. Obviously, as opposed to his past work—work that was always in the service of someone else's idea—this work was especially important to him, for this was a story with which he had a very deep connection. And the results, I think, are quite felicitous."

Indeed, it is hard to think of any other movie that so realistically captures contemporary West Texas—that landscape of sprawling, historic ranches and run-down trailer parks, of breathtakingly stark mountain ranges and forlorn, heat-baked towns. Jones filmed much of the movie on that far West Texas ranch that he owned at the time. He filmed other scenes at a drab cafe in Van Horn, not far from the ranch. He also filmed at the vaulted Santa Elena Canyon, in Big Bend National Park, in the desert sand dunes in Monahans, and at an oil-field supply yard between Midland and Odessa.

What's more, he made sure to populate the movie with the kinds of characters that seem to exist only in West Texas: men and women who live on the margins, burdened with small, thwarted hopes. Throughout the movie are gritty ranch hands, nasty-edged lawmen, vacant-eyed laborers, and scared, tormented Mexicans crossing the Rio Grande. There is an adulterous middle-aged waitress at the Van Horn cafe whose pained face says everything about her life. There is a blind man, immersed in despair, who spends his time listening to a Spanish-language radio station. And at one point, for really no reason at all, Jones includes an image of a heavyset lady standing outside her mobile home, surrounded by a chain-link fence. "A lot of people might not see particular beauty in a featureless mobile home and a chain-link fence," Jones told me. "But I do."

Without question, the most interesting character in the movie is Jones's Pete Perkins, a grizzled, stubborn, lonely old cowboy whose belly sticks out over his belt. Perkins works cattle on a ranch owned by a nameless, never-seen man who lives in a Texas city. Every now and then, Perkins drives from his tiny ranch house into Van Horn to drink coffee in the cafe. When he speaks to people there, his sentences are short and the words monosyllabic, and he rarely smiles. Only when he learns of Estrada's death does his life start to change.

Yet despite Perkins's quixotic quest to honor Estrada's wish to be buried in Mexico, he is not an easy man to like. He is appallingly brutal: At one point in the movie he pistol-whips Norton, the Border Patrol agent ("Get back over there where you was at!" he snarls in perfect West Texas vernacular), and he later lassoes Norton and drags him across the Rio Grande, nearly drowning him. At other times, he seems emotionally disturbed. One night, during the journey into Mexico, he props up the dead Estrada in a sitting position by a campfire to keep him warm, and on another night, he combs Estrada's hair, continuing even as the hair comes out in tufts. And then, unexpectedly, as the movie is drawing to a close, Perkins reveals a deeply hidden vulnerability. In one of the best scenes in the movie, Perkins stands outside a run-down bar in Mexico and calls the waitress—who he's having an affair with—at the Van Horn cafe, asking her if she will leave her husband for him. When she says no, his disconsolate, lost look is unforgettable.

"Yes, Pete's a little peculiar," Jones told me, his voice going soft. "He might look like a simple man, but he's not. He's real. He's full of conflicting emotions. He goes from one emotion to another very quickly. Sometimes those emotions are hard to understand. Sometimes they're not. And sometimes those emotions cannot be controlled."

"In other words, he's a little like you," I said.

Apparently he did not hear me, or he decided my statement was not worthy of a response. He continued facing forward, staring directly out the windshield, and he did not say a single word.

WE REACHED SAN SABA, and I realized my journey with Jones was coming to an end. In a last-ditch attempt to connect with him, I threw out some random questions. I asked him what he was reading. "James Lee Burke's new novel and Hemingway's Islands in the Stream," he said. I told him I'd heard he was writing a screenplay and I wanted to know what it was about. "Haven't finished writing it," he said. I asked him if there was a particular kind of role he was looking to play next. He sighed and said, "A particular kind of role? I'm sorry, my mind doesn't work that way. I don't call my agent and say, 'Find me a role in which I can be a detective and wear a wide-brimmed fedora and two-toned shoes.'"

I could tell he was sick and tired of talking to me. Then, we turned off the highway and headed down a dirt road, finally arriving at the ranch. Jones got on the CB radio and said to a ranch hand, "Fleming Springs One calling Fleming Springs Two. Bubba, do you copy?" The gate, which did not have a sign, opened electronically, and we made a wide turn past two immaculately manicured polo fields. Jones spends a small fortune each year on polo, funding two teams that consist of himself, his wife, Dawn, six professional polo players, and at least fifty horses. The teams spend nearly half the year based in Palm Beach, Florida, where Jones has a horse farm and stables, and the other half of the year at the San Saba ranch. "We are at the top of our game," he said when I asked him about his love of the sport. "We can beat anybody, anytime, anywhere."

We continued on, driving past Jones's two-story limestone ranch house, which is nearly 150 years old. A couple of guest cottages were nearby, nestled next to a creek. Then we headed up a hill so Jones could check out a newly built saddle house for his cow horses. He got out of the Expedition, walked inside the house, studied the floors and walls, and said, "Damn good."

From our vantage point at the top of the hill, we could see white-tailed deer racing toward some brush. In the distance, cattle called to one another. The setting sun was simply spectacular, the purple light bouncing off the clouds and the rampart of surrounding hills. A light wind blew across our faces. Jones suddenly said, "In the summers, we'll work cattle, and then at about seven o'clock at night, we'll start playing polo. We'll play until about nine, and then when we're done, we put the meat on the fire and watch the dark come. It's a good life. Everyone is happy."

It was the first time that day that he had volunteered something about his life without my having to have first asked a question. I asked him if he ever let visitors come to the ranch on those summer evenings to watch the polo matches. "Oh, no," he said. "The gates are locked. We keep it shut down. Just friends and family, no outsiders. Just how I like it."

We looked at each other. It was clearly time for me to go. We got in the Expedition, drove back out of the ranch, and pulled up in front of a little San Saba motel where I would be spending the night. Trying to be funny, I said, as my parting line, “Well, was there any subject I missed that you wanted to talk about?”

Jones didn’t crack a smile. “I think we covered it,” he said. I tried to shake his hand, but he didn’t turn around in his seat. Wes put the Expedition into gear, and off they went into the night.