

If you haven't seen an Ed Harris film lately, you don't see many movies.

When Ed Harris arrived at the University of Oklahoma after a two-year stint playing football at Columbia University, he had no plans. In high school in Tenafly, New Jersey, Harris had been an all-state football player and enjoyed playing baseball. Although Ed was a pretty good student, his identity revolved around athletics.

Ironically, coming to OU meant abandoning a football career in New York—home of the theatrical mecca, Broadway—for the gridiron-crazy territory of Oklahoma, where he embarked upon an astonishingly successful acting career. “I learned a helluva lot at OU,” the three-time Oscar nominee says. “I still learn from what I learned there.”

On the big screen, Ed's acting is instantly recognized by film buffs for his workhorse appearances in a slew of lucrative and critically acclaimed motion pictures. He received Best Supporting Actor nominations for playing a controlling TV

# All the Right Moves

BY ROB COLLINS

producer in *The Truman Show* and the man from Mission Control in *Apollo 13*. He is well-known for significant roles in *The Right Stuff*, *The Rock* and *The Abyss*, and he has held his own with cinematic heavyweights such as Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Julia Roberts, Kevin Spacey, Sean Penn and Gary Oldman.



Returning to the campus where his love affair with acting began in 1971, Ed Harris held a February 2001 screening of *Pollock* and shared professional insights with OU students. A week later, the film's Oscar nominations were announced.

In the year 2001, Harris made headlines with a Best Actor nomination at the 73rd Annual Academy Awards. The highly respected thespian earned the nod for his portrayal of American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock in *Pollock*, a film that also marks his debut as director and producer.

*Pollock* is the most passionate and challenging work of Harris' career. As the 50-year-old actor revisited the OU campus to screen *Pollock* in February—one week before learning of his third Oscar nomination—he revealed personal

parallels between himself and the volatile artist.

For *Pollock*, who died in 1956 while driving drunk, art became his sole expression, his primary source of self-esteem. "When Pollock was painting, he wasn't really aware of what he was doing," Harris says. "Clearly, he was so involved and immersed in it. It's like the best that you can hope for when you're acting, to really get to an unconscious place."

When he first began to study acting at OU, Harris admits that he had nothing but his work. After dropping out of

Columbia following his sophomore year in the spring of 1971, Harris decided to attend college where his father, Bob Harris, was working as OU's director of deferred gifts.

"Ed came to OU because we were living in Norman," says Bob Harris, who is a 1947 OU petroleum engineering graduate.

Ed's transition from college football player to aspiring actor did not happen overnight. Bob Harris, who now lives in Evanston, Illinois, with his wife, Margaret, credits two individuals for getting his

son interested in acting. The first influence was the late Charles Suggs of OU's School of Drama. Ed, who painted Norman houses during the summer break from Columbia, remembers seeing Suggs direct the Southwest Repertory Theatre. Ed even recalls pondering the possibility of acting.

Later, while running wind sprints in preparation for a grueling football season, Ed came to a realization. "I just didn't have it in me," he says. "I didn't want to go through that anymore." Bob Harris credits Suggs with getting Ed involved with the Southwest Repertory Theatre, where he landed a couple of small parts.

"When Ed came to Norman, he dropped out of Columbia immediately," Bob Harris says. "He didn't like New York and didn't know what he wanted as a major. He really didn't know what he wanted to do." Walking on with the Sooners was not an option. "Ed wasn't big enough or fast enough, and he knew that. That's one of the reasons why he decided he needed to find something else. Sports couldn't be it."

In addition to Suggs—a man Ed calls "a wonderful guy and a really great man"—Bob Harris says the second person to solidify his son's acting future was Bob Greenwood, an assistant professor and chairman of OU's acting division. Even though Ed only studied acting at OU in 1971 and 1972—taking beginning and advanced acting classes, dance and voice—Greenwood left an indelible impression on the young actor.

"Ed walked into my office in the Rupel Jones Theatre building and said, 'I want to learn to act,' and I said, 'All right,'" recalls Greenwood, who now works with the theatre and dance company Sun.Ergos in Alberta, Canada. It was the beginning of summer term, and Greenwood was directing *The Tempest* and cast Ed in a walk-on part of *The Mariner*. "The next year, he took my classes, and we had an advanced class," Greenwood says. "Ed didn't like to learn the lines very well."

On one occasion, Greenwood gave Harris *Tamburlaine the Great* by Christopher Marlowe. "That was an absolute bitch of a part," Greenwood says in a devious tone. "Ed came in, and he staggered through this thing . . . He couldn't remember the damn thing." Harris became angry and stormed about, Greenwood says, but he finally learned the part and never came to class unprepared again.

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His performance as the controlling TV producer in *The Truman Show* garnered a Golden Globe Award for actor Ed Harris and brought him Oscar recognition with one of his two Best Supporting Actor nominations; his first was for the 1995 role of flight director Gene Kranz in *Apollo 13*.

Harris also credits Pat Rucker, who was getting his master's degree and performing at OU from 1968 to 1972, as an inspiration for his acting career. In a 1999 interview on "Live with Regis and Kathie Lee," Ed cited Rucker's summer performances in *Tartuffe* by Moliere and *Man of La Mancha* as inspirational. Rucker, now a professor of theatre and dance at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, remembers sharing the stage with Harris when Ed was cast as a cabana

boy in *The Night of the Iguana*. "Ed was only in a bit part," Rucker says. "He was a young kid at that time. He was athletic—kind of a small guy—but very well built."

Ed had a temper to accompany his fit frame. Greenwood recalls giving Harris *King Lear* one day. "Ed got so mad, because I kept after him." The acting coach claims Harris became so enraged that he put his fist through a plaster wall backdrop, which served as the sky in the

*"I looked at him and said, 'You know, Ed, that's wonderful. Now, put it on the stage where it belongs.'"*

back of the theatre. "I looked at him and said, 'You know, Ed, that's wonderful,'" Greenwood recalls. "Now, put it on the stage where it belongs."

If Harris learned so much at OU, why did he decide to leave? "(Greenwood) got fired," Harris says. "He was the only acting coach I'd ever had, and I really thought he was good. I didn't feel like studying there."

"Ed really credits Bob with getting him interested in theatre, making him understand that acting was a serious business profession," Bob Harris says. "Ed was very disturbed by that (firing)."

Greenwood, who had trained at the Yale School of Drama, admits his acting classes were emotionally charged. Rucker recalls Ed's acting teacher as "very volatile and very imaginative and someone outspoken who didn't survive the political atmosphere of OU at that time."

For a year, Harris pumped gas at a Phillips 66 station at Main Street and Flood Avenue in Norman. One day, Bob Harris returned home to find a *Camelot* score on the piano. The music belonged to Ed, who was interested in auditioning for the Greenwood-directed production at the Jewel Box Theatre in Oklahoma City.

By all accounts, Ed's appearance as King Arthur in *Camelot* was a breakthrough moment—a standing ovation. Bob Harris recalls his close friend, OU Professor Thomas Carey, coaching Ed's singing for the role.

"That's when I first started to teach Ed how to sing," Carey says. "Once I got there for the performance, I got goose pimples, it was so good. He was absolutely brilliant in that. He was a driven person. When Ed took it on, he was going to do it. He was like a sponge. He remembered everything I told him."

In Ed's own words, his performance as King Arthur was "an epiphany." Something had taken place that he could not explain. "The applause from the *Camelot* performance was just like football, being cheered for a touchdown," his father recalls.

As Ed was performing, he was working night security at Willow Cliff Apartments while his director served as manager for the Oklahoma City condominiums. Greenwood remembers Ed telling him he was interested in working in film. "I told Ed, 'You get into your car and go to Hollywood,'" Greenwood says. "And that's what he did." Moving to California in 1973, Harris did not graduate from OU but entered the California Institute of the Arts, earning a bachelor of fine arts degree.

Throughout his career, Harris displayed the bravery of testing his range, whether he was playing a King Arthur-esque motorcyclist trying to recreate Camelot on wheels in the 1981 flick *Knightriders* or a desperate real-estate salesman in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* more than a decade later. In the mid-1980s he met and married actress Amy Madigan while working with her in *Places in the Heart*. Their daughter Lily was born in 1993.

By the time Harris was starring in the 1989 film *The Abyss*—a special effects-laden sci-fi adventure directed by James Cameron of *Titanic* fame—the actor already was interested in Jackson Pollock.

In 1986, Ed's father had sent him a Pollock biography.

"I kind of resembled him, and my dad thought, 'Maybe there's a movie in there,'" says Harris, who spent the 1990s researching and working on a script. Soon Harris discovered the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith. That book would be the basis for the *Pollock* screenplay penned by Barbara Turner and Susan J. Emshwiller.

The biggest challenge was making an 89-page screenplay from an 800-page biography and eventually distilling the information down into a two-hour film. For Harris, the journey was more intuitive than intellectual. The plainspoken actor, who practiced painting in an art studio built on his property in California, did not learn about Pollock as a mythical art figure.

"To me, it was just this human being I was reading about who happened to paint," he says. "So I didn't feel daunted by that. Later, I felt like I probably should have been."

Rather than providing an art history lesson or psychoanalyzing the tortured artist, the down-to-earth Harris intended *Pollock* to be a straightforward, non-judgmental look at the individual. On the screen, Ed portrays the drip painter as a force of nature. Sometimes his raw genius is erupting in pure expression; other moments he is a bully or a shivering drunk.

Role preparation is a revelatory process for Harris. The actor, who spoke to OU students on his Norman visit, fills his mind, body and soul with as much information as possible and then forgets about it.

"I try to have it become a part of me, so it becomes unconscious," he says. "The artistic process is not one of control and not one of imposing yourself on it. All the technique and everything that you learn and the research is wonderful, but at the moment of creation—the moment that you're letting your voice fly or walking out on stage—that's the time that you reveal something, you surrender some-

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In *Enemy at the Gates*, Ed Harris, above, and Jude Law are World War II sharpshooters, one German, the other Russian, caught in a duel to the death during the siege of Stalingrad. The 2001 release was Harris 35th movie appearance and his 31st in a major role.



Among Ed Harris' appearances in OU School of Drama productions was that of The Mariner, far left, in the 1971 version of *The Tempest*. Also in that cast was Rich Taylor, third from left, now vice president of Walt Disney World Entertainment.

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Ed Harris' tour de force, *Pollock*, a 2000 release, underscored the reasons *Entertainment Weekly* had named him one of the 25 greatest actors of the 1990s. The movie was Harris' directing and producing debut, while his portrayal of the tortured American artist Jackson Pollack earned him an Academy Award nomination as Best Actor.

thing, you hope something changes and opens your eyes to an experience you've never experienced before."

Harris had not planned to direct *Pollock* until a year before shooting began, but a sense of ownership overcame

him. "During all that time—all the research, reading, people and painting—it became a very, very personal thing to me," he says.

Investing a substantial amount of personal funds to make the project happen,

Harris worked passionately on both sides of the camera. As producer, he had to secure a crew, oversee the financial end of the production and handle marketing and distribution details. After Sony Pictures Classics came on board, *Pollock* opened for one week at the close of 2000 for Oscar consideration and played film festivals in Venice, Toronto, New York and California.

Harris did not win an Oscar for his portrayal in *Pollock*. The little gold guy went to *Gladiator* star Russell Crowe, the Australian actor scheduled to be Ed's co-star in the forthcoming Ron Howard film *A Beautiful Mind*. On the bright side, Marcia Gay Harden, the actress portraying Pollock's compelling wife, artist Lee Krasner, pulled off Oscar night's biggest upset. Her Brooklyn-accented performance as the influential partner to Pollock won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. As Krasner, Harden commanded attention in the role of a lifetime. At voting time, *Pollock* was by far the lowest grosser of any film in her category.

While accepting the Oscar, Harden thanked Harris for inviting her to share his passion. "You are a brave director and an even braver actor," Harden told Harris from the Shrine Auditorium stage. "And I love you." Harris, watching from the audience with Madigan at his side, blew the actress a poignant kiss.

Harris will continue to dominate the big screen. The extremely busy actor, who appeared in *Enemy at the Gates* around Oscar time, has upcoming roles in the thriller *Prime Gig* with Vince Vaughn, the drama *Buffalo Soldiers* with Oscar-nominee Joaquin Phoenix and a part in *The Hours*, a film directed by Stephen Daldry of *Billy Elliot* fame.

"I'm also doing some things I'd rather not do so we can make some money," says Harris, whose preparation to play a writer dying of AIDS in *The Hours* made the actor appear gaunt during his Norman visit. "Not that they're stupid movies, but I'd rather be at home with my family." 

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