

>>brief encounters

Dependable supporting actor Richard Jenkins stands out by blending in/By Harlan Jacobson



Vanishing Act

THE GREATEST OF THE GREAT ACTORS HAVE USUALLY BEEN CHARACTER actors at heart. Brando and Guinness rewrote the book on acting, wrenching it down to life size, bringing it into line with the shift from heroism to existentialism. De Niro, Hoffman, Hackman, Duvall, Giamatti, and Depp have all pierced the veil. You can make the case that a film's true *mise en scène* starts with the actors in the margins, from Peter Lorre, Thelma Ritter, Claude Rains, George Sanders, Akim Tamiroff, Hattie McDaniel, Franklin Pangborn, and William Demarest back in the day to Steve Buscemi, Chris Cooper, Frances McDormand, Kathy Bates, Timothy Spall, John C. Reilly, Christopher Walken, and Catherine Keener today.

At 61, Richard Jenkins has been the omnipresent man who wasn't there, racking up more than three score and 10 credits over 30 years in TV and film for the likes of the Brothers Coen and Farrelly, David O. Russell, Woody Allen, George Miller, Mike Nichols, and Lawrence Kasdan. He's played dads, cops, and salarymen, into whose quiet lives he's disappeared in plain sight. Though he's had several high-profile parts over the years, things went to another level with *Six Feet Under*, the 2001–05 HBO show in which Jenkins's ghostly patriarch loomed large over the Fisher family. Next up is the Will Ferrell comedy *Step Brothers*, due out this summer, and the Coens' *Burn After Reading* in September.

Now in *The Visitor*, directed by Tom McCarthy (*The Station Agent*), Jenkins finally gets to carry a film. He plays Walter Vale, a widower and economics professor who returns to his New York City apartment to find a pair of illegal immigrants squatting there. The premise is in service to a larger question: what does it take to jar a man awake?

Midway through our interview during the *Visitor* publicity campaign, there's a knock at the door and McCarthy enters. "C'mon," he chides Jenkins, "I need you to wrap it up."

"That's my writer-director and friend," Jenkins says drolly. "But he's not doing the interview. You can talk to me as long as you like."

You grew up in Illinois.

DeKalb. Northern Illinois University is there now—it's where four kids were shot. I went to college at Illinois Wesleyan in Bloomington, where I majored in theater.

What did your father do?

My father was a dentist.

Your mom?

She was originally from Kentucky. Her father was a night watchman at the Del Monte canning factory, and her mother was a cook at the hospital—all very blue-collar. A lot of her relatives became farmers.

Siblings?

I'm an only child.

When you told your family you wanted to be an actor, did that sit well with them?

It did, actually. I don't know if they were relieved I'd found something I wanted to do. I never heard, "Maybe you should rethink this."

It's a long and lonely road to become an actor from the middle of Illinois.

There were some scary times. I knew so little about it. The worlds of theater and film were so far removed from me. Even after college we'd travel to New York and see shows and go to every movie. I kept wondering how you get into this. Where do you go?

I went to Indiana University for one year after college and ended up getting a job as an apprentice at Trinity Rep in Providence—it was a lifesaver for me. If I hadn't gotten that job, I don't know what I would've done. I got married right after college, so my wife and I packed our little car and drove out to Rhode Island.

Did you have a career fallback position?

Never had one. I never found anything else I could do. I never had any other talents. It frightened me sometimes—about 1975 when my daughter was born, I was paying the bills but thinking, what am I going to do about paying for college? So I went to California for a year, but that didn't work out. It was a grim nine months.

What was it about acting that you loved so much?

The connection with the people watching. When it worked, it made me more articulate than I could be myself. People understood you. There was a common language between the actor and the audience. I always loved that, and thought it was the way I communicated best.

You really disappear into your characters.

That's why they hire you. They do a movie around a star, not around the supporting players. You have to find your way in there. It's what I've always liked about it.

Why?

Because I've never thought I was all that interesting. And yet at the same time, there's so much of you in every part you play...

Are there particular parts you loved, that really spoke to you?

Yeah! I loved *Flirting with Disaster*—I really had fun with that. And *North Country*. When you're a supporting actor, sometimes your part doesn't go anywhere. It starts one way and ends there. But in those films I ended up in a totally different place from where I began. I had a lot of fun doing the one scene in *There's Something About Mary*—it was just a ball to do. I like the journey—when one changes in a film.

***The Visitor* certainly is about change, and it reflects a change in status for you.**

The script was spare and trusted your intelligence. The politics weren't an issue with me. I understand that people talk about the immigration issue in the film. But I knew as much about immigration as Walter did. You hear people talk about it on TV, but my head would swim.

I'm like Walter—my wife always tells me never to say that—I am reluctant to do new things. I have to be nudged forward. He's given up on the whole deal, but I understand that feeling of just going through the day.

What's disciplined about you?

I'm committed to my work, and I hope I'm committed to my family. I don't think of that as discipline, I think of it as consistent.

Is acting like being an athlete?

It's the opposite of the work ethic. When it begins to really work, it's the absence of effort. When you just fly by the seat of your pants—which seems undisciplined, but it's actually the opposite. And it doesn't get easier. The more you know, the harder it is to be good. The freer you are, the better you are.

Who inspires you?

It was Marlon Brando for me. I can't see *On the Waterfront* enough, and I didn't see it till I was 22 or 23. I thought, oh, there's more to this than what I'm doing. Look at Viggo Mortensen in *Eastern Promises*—an amazing performance.

When you look at someone else doing it, what are you looking for?

I'm looking at the freedom, the immediacy. You can just tell when it's not planned, when it just happens right before the camera. It's what Brando did all the time. He really defined how to be a human being within the script—to be that person, as opposed to explaining that person. It's so much more complex and profound when you see this guy live that life in front of you than it is for somebody to tell you what they're feeling or doing.

Which parts pushed your career?

Flirting with Disaster and *Six Feet Under*. Well, *The Witches of Eastwick* was the first studio movie I had a nice part in, which made things a little easier. It's never what you think it's gonna be. You get told, "This one is going to [do it for

you]." It doesn't work that way. You keep working and working, chugging along, and then you look back and think, Maybe that's when it changed a little bit.

Did you jump up and down when you got *Hannah and Her Sisters*?

Well, I did, actually [*laughs*]. It was very cool. It was one day, two or three takes, and that's it. [Woody Allen] said, "I'm happy." You always like that.

Is doing drama different from doing comedy?

Not really. You approach it the same. The script dictates where you go and what you do. After *The Visitor* I did a Will Ferrell movie [*Step Brothers*]—stranger things happen to me in that one [*bursts out laughing*]. I fall in love with Mary Steenburgen, we move in together with our two sons (John C. Reilly and Ferrell), and mayhem ensues. In fact, we were at the table one night [for a scene], and I didn't yell at Will but kind of raised my voice. And these guys are 40 but act like they're 12—and he started to cry. So with a guy like that, the comedy works because he's committed to it.

Nathaniel Fisher, your role in *Six Feet Under*, was the linchpin of the family, who commits the supremely fatherly act of vanishing. But his ghost remains the gold standard of truth for each of the kids.

I was only supposed to do the pilot, which we all loved but we didn't know how it would be received. Then Alan [Ball] asked me back. He said, "You never really stop thinking about your father when he dies." So I came back whenever I could to do an episode. But I never knew who [Nathaniel] really was, because every time I came back it was somebody else's image of him—not mine.

How are you different as an actor at 60 than you were at 40?

I'd say I have more confidence. But I don't. I'm starting to understand more what it takes to give a good performance. I'm a slow learner. It takes me a while to believe what I know to be true. It was really easy for Marlon Brando. It's harder for a lot of us. If I did Walter Vale 10 years ago, I don't think I would've been as free as I am now. **So at 70 are you going to be running naked through the streets?**

Probably, but I won't remember any of my performances. So what difference will it make? □