

INNER SPACEY

Kevin Spacey is famous for his portrayals of sinister villains, but, as he tells **Austin Mutti-Mewse** in a rare interview, his heart belongs to Katharine Hepburn and William Shakespeare

THE ELLUSIVE KEVIN SPACEY chooses a table in the shade. A trendy fishing hat and silver-rimmed sunglasses effectively disguise this very private Oscar-winning star. 'The less you know about me the easier it is to convince the audience that I'm a character, I'm the person on the screen.'

I meet Spacey in London during the summer heatwave. He is attractive and unpretentious, with a famously sinister grin and sparkling eyes. In February this year, he was appointed artistic director of the Old Vic Theatre Company and now divides his time between London and New York, where he lives with his dog, Legacy, in Greenwich Village. He loves London, where he drives around in a Mini-Cooper.

Spacey's awards and honours include an Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role in *Usual Suspects*, and Best Actor in *American Beauty*. He has twice been named in Total Film's Ten Greatest Villains of All Time poll, and is listed in the roll-call of the 100 greatest actors ever. But, when I mention these accolades, he grimaces. 'My idea of credibility doesn't come in the shape of an Oscar,' he said. 'There are some things I won't agree to do and if that means I stop being an actor, well, I'll just have to find something else to do.'

So our conversation begins not with Kevin Spacey but with his grief at losing his friend and last link to Hollywood's golden era, Katharine Hepburn. 'I loved Katharine so much'. He recalls conversations with her, and his favourite Hepburn films – *The Philadelphia Story* (1939), *Adam's Rib* (1949), and *Pat and Mike* (1952) – shaking his head and mimicking her unmistakable drawl. He is enthusiastic about Cate Blanchett playing the young Hepburn in Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* (currently in production), and raises a glass of sparkling water to both K/Cates. Knowing what a fan he is of the Hepburn/Tracey films, I bring up the rumour that his name is a made-up combination of Spencer and Tracey. He grins. 'Nice idea, but Spacey is actually my mother's maiden name'.

Spacey is well-known for his war on ageism in the cinema. He is currently producing and directing *Unde Frank*, a film whose hero is an organ player who finds himself unemployed with



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the arrival of the talkies. Spacey picks up on Frank's life 70 years later, when he is surviving by playing the organ in his corner of Los Angeles.

'Uncle Frank is an amalgamation of people I used to see when taken by my uncle to the actors' retirement home in Woodland Hills,' Spacey explains. 'I used to see Stepin Fetchit, who played the black butler in countless Hollywood movies of the Thirties. Norma Shearer clutched my hand and asked if I was her long-departed husband, the movie mogul Irving Thalberg.' Spacey racks his brain and a

torrent of long-forgotten names tumble forth: Billie Dove, Caryll Lincoln, Whit Bissel, Muriel Evans, Viola Dana and Anita Garvin. He recalls encounters with Virginia Bruce, the pale-eyed B-movie blonde of the Thirties and Forties. 'She'd sit at the entrance to the actors' home chinking her pearls, asking passers-by if she could bum a fag. The man I saw running naked in the grounds of the home with two nurses chasing him was Johnny 'Tarzan' Weismuller.'

I ask him more about his childhood. 'I had a ma and pa, both working parents. I am the youngest in the family, a practical joker and a movie fan,' he says.

Kevin moved frequently with his family before finding his way to Chatsworth High School in the San Fernando Valley, where he managed to channel his dramatic tendencies into a successful amateur acting career. 'I'd entertain classmates with impersonations of Jimmy Stewart, Kate and Johnny Carson.' His first professional stage appearance was as a messenger in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* in 1981. An energetic and versatile performer, Spacey worked steadily throughout the Eighties on stage and screen. In 1991, he won a Tony award for playing Uncle Louie in Neil Simon's Broadway hit *Lost in Yonkers*. He returned to Broadway eight years later for a revival of Eugene O'Neill's *The Ice Man Cometh*, a part he also played in London in 1998.

Spacey won his first Oscar for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for the role of Roger 'Verbal' Kint in *Usual Suspects* (1995). 'While my mom was being asked about how proud she was of my craft, I was being asked if I'd repeat the role for a sequel. That got my goat: I said at the time, *Usual Suspects* was a great movie, not an episode of *Dallas*, and, hey, I'm no Patrick Duffy.'

Usual Suspects was followed by superlative screen roles as John Doe in *Se7en* (1995) and as Jack Vincennes in *L.A. Confidential* (1997).



Whit Bissel, one of the long-forgotten actors who inspired Kevin Spacey's new film, *Uncle Frank*

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happy to have chosen wisely with the cast, at least.'

The year 1999 saw Spacey triumph in the suburban satire *American Beauty*, playing Lester Burnham, the middle-aged corporate cog on the brink of psychological meltdown, for which he won an Oscar. 'I read the script and nearly fell out of bed. I thought I'd better meet Sam Mendes quick before someone else read it. I was lucky I knew exactly how to play Lester Burnham.'

His date for the 68th Academy Awards was his mother Kathleen. 'It meant a lot to me that mom was there,' he says. 'I think I thanked her for driving me to acting classes and for being my mom. She was so thrilled and told journalists that she always knew I'd be an actor. Why is it that at those kinda evenings even the toughest guy on the block gets sloppy?'

Spacey's appointment as artistic director of the Old Vic reflects his status as an international stage and screen actor. His first season will be autumn 2004. He intends to bring the best of British and American talent to the stage of the Old Vic as well as appearing himself. It is hoped that as many productions as possible will then transfer to New York. Meanwhile, he is continuing to work on producing and directing films and, of course, as an actor.

It is no wonder he is scornful of today's easily-earned fame. He nods as I talk about the explosion of celebrity. 'Bette Davis once said that she'd battled for seven years to get her name above the title; now, Big Brother contestants are hailed in the press as stars, and that sucks. The more famous one becomes, the higher the house in the Hollywood hills gets and the higher the fences,' says Spacey. 'The more actors become dependent on agents, publicists and other "professional" links to the outside world, the more delusional they become. I don't want to become that person. There are plenty of movie stars in Tinseltown but few actors.' ■

'Now that was my era,' he smiles. 'Hey! I'm beginning to sound like an antique, or some kinda movie nut.'

Spacey was now part of the establishment ('Oh, I'll never be that.') He turned his hand to directing with the low-budget *Albino Alligator* (1997), a claustrophobic crime drama. In the light of its lukewarm reception and in spite of fine casting with Faye Dunaway, Matt Dillon and Gary Sinise, Spacey decided to leave the directing chair for the moment: 'Directing was something I wanted to try and I'm glad it happened. I was