

There's not a trace of your typical Hollywood movie star about Kevin Costner. In fact, says **Gabrielle Donnelly**, he comes across far more like your friendly neighbour. Why, then, is he so frequently drawn to roles demanding heroic action?

# Hero of dreams

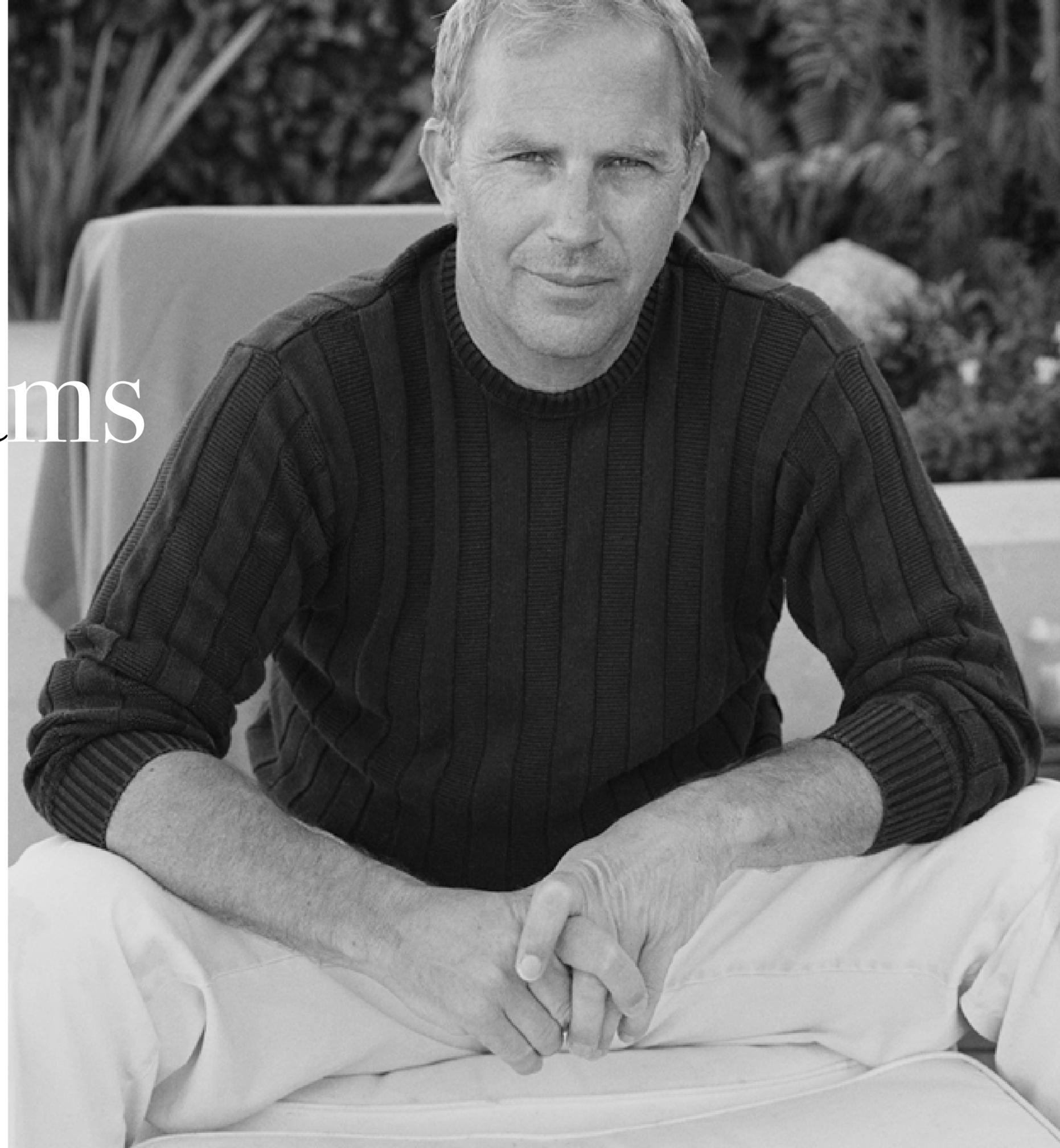
**K**EVIN COSTNER has always been fascinated by the concept of heroism.

'I don't think we're ever going to get tired of thinking about it,' he comments, when we meet for an interview in the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto, Canada. 'It's a question that we throw ourselves in the dark of the night – if I were in such and such a circumstance, would I be able to do that selfless thing? We'll always be thrilled by it, and we'll always wonder about it. That's why it's a staple of so many movies.'

It's certainly been a theme that has run through his own films. He first became famous in 1987 playing the quietly steely Eliot Ness in *The Untouchables*; in his career since then, the idea of the hero – what it is, what it means, what it costs – has resounded time and time again in his choices, whether he was playing cowboys or sportsmen, soldiers or bodyguards, or Robin Hood. It is also an essential part of his latest film, *The Guardian*, in which he plays a sea rescue swimmer for the Coast Guard – an outfit which, as Kevin points out, contains possibly the least recognised heroic figures of our day.

'There are only about 280 sea rescue swimmers in the entire country and they are all heroic, and completely unique, individuals. I think all of us have walked through an airport somewhere and seen a team of professionals pass by – basketball players, for instance – and it will be clear right away that they are all basketball players because they just have that look. But rescue swimmers are something else – you'd never even recognize them. They are the elite swimmers of the Coast Guard, the ones who will go out to save lives in all weathers. So it's not just, "We'll come and save your life if it's a sunny day," but, "We'll actually come out into the ocean, into harm's way, and put our own lives at risk to try to save you."

'They don't look like Olympic swimmers, because it's not just about swimming. They come in all shapes and sizes, and the one single thing that they have in common is this one particular mindset – that they are able to kiss their wives and children good-bye each morning knowing that because of their job they might die a cold, slow death somewhere alone, just in order to save the life of another





Above: Director Andrew Davies, left, Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher make an appearance at the Coast Guard Station in Alameda, California. Right: Kevin Costner in the dramatic movie *The Guardian*



PHOTOGRAPHS: TOUCHSTONE PICTURES; ENO YOUNG/AP/WIDEWORLD

*'Rescue swimmers are the elite swimmers of the Coast Guard who go out to save lives in all weathers'*

human being. It takes a very special mental approach to be that way, to say, "Yeah, I can do that." And the fact that there are such people out there, I find quite thrilling.'

When you meet Kevin Costner, a laid-back type with a warm smile, he comes across more like your friendly neighbour than a hero or a movie star. But then, he's used to putting people at ease. His father moved a lot in his work as an electrician, and Kevin used to go from school to school around the Los Angeles area, attending four different high schools in four years. Always being the new kid taught him to fit into any environment. It also taught him to size up his surroundings with both swiftness and accuracy.

'I was always able to measure people very well, and that has stood me in good stead through my life. I've always known what I wasn't, and I've never been scared by that. I wasn't a terrific student at school, I wasn't the smartest kid in the class, I wasn't the best at

anything, but that never upset me because I always knew the kid who was. So if someone would say to me, "You're not the smartest kid in this class," I'd say, "So what? Am I supposed to feel bad about that? If you're looking for the smartest one, I can tell you that I ain't it but I can also tell you who *is* the smartest kid, so let's go get that person and talk to him!"'

After school, he gained a degree in business studies from California State University in Fullerton, took a job in marketing, and, in 1978, married his college sweetheart, Cindy Silva. Their honeymoon was in Mexico, and on the plane back to Los Angeles, they happened to share a flight with one of Kevin's idols, actor Richard Burton.

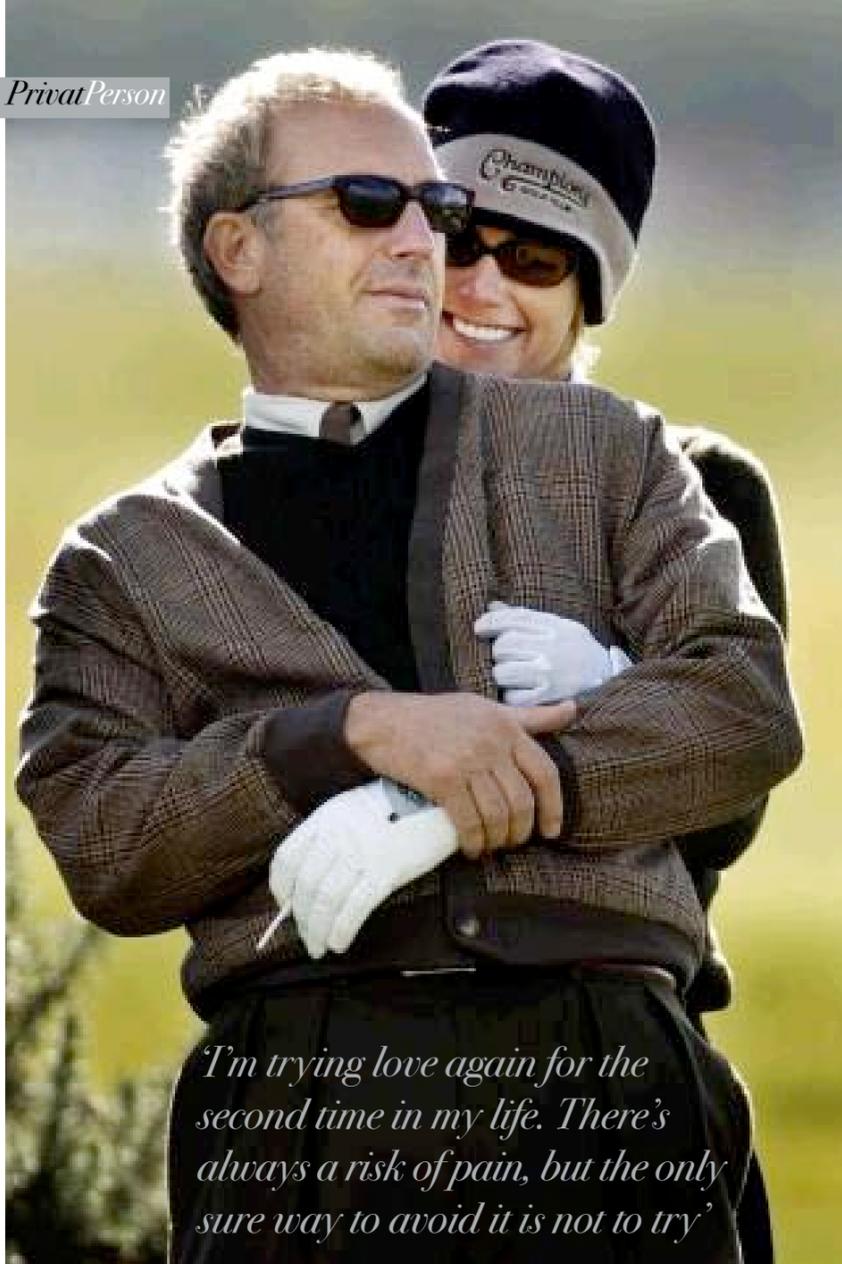
The two struck up a conversation, during which Kevin confided that in his spare time from business studies he had also been studying acting. Burton advised the young man to follow his passion – and, 28 years and a clutch of unforgettable films – and, yes, let us admit

it, a few disastrous flops (*Waterworld*, anyone?) – later, Kevin still says that that is the best advice he was ever given.

'I've lived a very blessed life,' he says. 'I don't know why a person gets lucky or what forces are out there in the universe to make me so, but I really consider myself lucky. OK, I haven't lived a life that's been unbruised, because I've certainly had my knocks. But if you look at me now and where I am, then I should slap myself if I were anything other than grateful for the life I have and for the career I have.'

He's even philosophical about his failed films. 'I've really enjoyed the journey of my life. Would I have liked all of my movies to have had the success that *Dances With Wolves* did? That would be nice.

'But making hits has not been something that has really driven me. If I'd wanted a career that made a lot of money, then I'd have done many things differently. For instance, after *Dances With Wolves*, I'd have made *Dances*



*'I'm trying love again for the second time in my life. There's always a risk of pain, but the only sure way to avoid it is not to try'*

With *Wolves II*, and after *Bull Durham* I'd have made *Bull Durham II*, and after *Field Of Dreams*, I'd have made *Field Of Dreams II*. And all of those films would have been safe successes. But that's not what I'm after. I feel I'm learning, and that I'm a better actor and a better director than I was. And I certainly don't feel I've peaked yet.'

He says that when he is looking for a new project to make, what is essential to him is, quite simply, a good story. 'I'm a story teller, whether I'm standing in an elevator talking to someone as one individual to another, or being able to reach more people on a mass level as a maker of movies. If I hear a good story and haven't shared it, it feels like a secret I'm keeping to myself until I can unleash it on my friends. It's a basic human instinct to want to tell stories. When you read a great



Above: Kevin Costner with his daughter, Lily Costner, at the Washington premier of the film *The Guardian*. Right: Kevin and Christine Costner on the Old Course of the Royal & Ancient, St Andrews, Scotland

book, you immediately want to give it to your friends – "Here's a book you'll like," right? And when you hear a good joke, you want to share it. It's no different with movies.'

He admits that this sense of vision in his film-making has led to some butting of heads with studios along the way. 'I always think about the movie I am making as a patient who can't speak for him or herself. Everyone's wanting to do this or that to the movie to change it to make it reach a wider audience, and people are saying to me, "Kevin you're such a knothed! Just have a meeting and talk about it!" But it's hard for me to accept that a movie can't stay the way it was intended just because it's trying to gather more people to see it.

'It's the same as in our own personal lives. Why should we have to change in order to make more people like us? Why can't we just be who we are and what we're about, and be honest and graceful and respectful and not change? It's the way I try to be, and it's the way I'd like movies to be, too.'

Off the screen, his marriage to Cindy sadly ended in 1994, but he is now settling happily into his second marriage, to beautiful former model Christine Baumgarten, whom he met in 1999 on a golf course at the Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort in California's Santa Ynez valley. The attraction was instant. 'She swings as well as anybody on the women's pro circuit,' he has said. 'And... maybe she's easy on the eyes too!'

Attraction led to love, and the two married in December 2004. 'I've had a second chance at this,' he says of his new life. 'I'm trying love again for the second time in my life, and that's all that you can do. There's always a risk of pain, but there's only the one sure way to avoid pain and that's not to try. I talk to my children about this all the time. If you don't want pain in your life, then don't love anyone. Because someday you will lose those people you love. And what's better? To not love and not experience the pain of loss? Or to put yourself at risk, and say, "I'm going to love this person right now." I choose the second way. And I think it's not a bad way to go through life.'

Indeed, it is not. ■