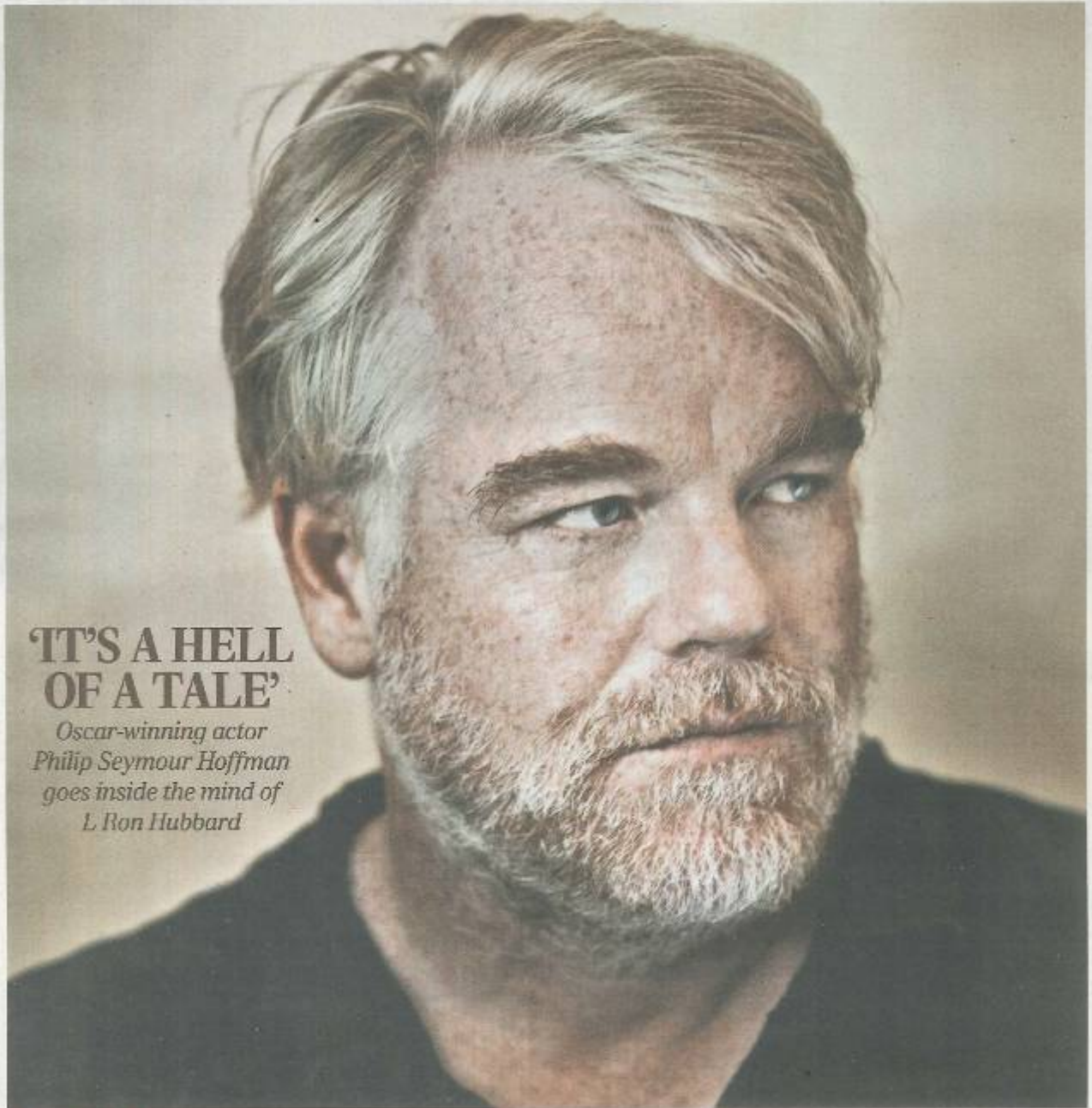


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review

The Daily Telegraph



'IT'S A HELL OF A TALE'

Oscar-winning actor
Philip Seymour Hoffman
goes inside the mind of
L. Ron Hubbard

Exclusive The untold story of how this year's Booker Prize was decided, by **Amanda Foreman**

Playing with fire

Philip Seymour Hoffman tells **Robbie Collin** about his new screen role as an L Ron Hubbard-style spiritual leader

From the roof of the Hotel Excelsior on the Venice Lido, two ash pink minarets stretch up to pierce the blazing blue sky.

Topped by plump domes and with elegant horseshoe arches running down its flanks, from the outside it looks like some ancient Moorish temple. But this faded palace, perched on the outer edge of a sandbar that divides the Venetian Lagoon from the Adriatic Sea, was in fact built in 1908 by a shrewd hotel consortium. It's a monument to nothing, save itself.

In the hotel's cool and cavernous Sala Stucchi, underneath an enormous chandelier festooned with tinkling Murano glass beads, sits an unlikely demagogue. Philip Seymour Hoffman, the 45-year-old Oscar-winning actor, is wearing an olive green baseball cap and a striped brown polo shirt, on which there are some splotches of olive oil, or perhaps sun cream.

'There's a risk that people will be annoyed, but I hope they will see the film for what it is'

He does not appear to have shaved in days, maybe weeks, and the whole lower half of his face and upper neck is flecked with fluffy silver hair. His eyebrows, like two ginger caterpillars frozen mid-creep towards the bridge of his nose, are furrowed.

"We all wake up every morning and wonder why we can't just run through the streets naked, having sex with whoever we like," he says, with some conviction. "There's a voice inside all of us that says, 'Ahh, screw it, I don't want to keep a lid on it any longer.'"

"If you can convince people that you can free them from that urge," he says, rapping on the table, "you've got it made."

Hoffman is the star—or more accurately, the co-star—of *The Master*, a film about a man who can do just that. He plays the gnomish Grand Poobah of a religious movement called The Cause which, in the unsettled, uncertain Fifties, is growing in numbers and strength.

His name is Lancaster Dodd, although we don't hear it spoken for at least an hour: until then, his disciples simply call him the Master. Even though Dodd is nothing more

than a mildly dangerous crackpot, Hoffman bathes the role in throbbing, Messianic charisma. Should the acting ever go belly-up, he could carve out a quite lucrative future as a cult leader.

Among his followers is Joaquin Phoenix's Freddie Quell, a tortured ex-naval officer desperate for purpose after the Second World War chewed him to gristle. Phoenix gives a performance of such acid intensity that Hoffman admits he occasionally felt uneasy around him on set; not least of all when the two actors were filming a fraught scene in San Pedro prison and Phoenix unexpectedly destroyed an antique porcelain lavatory.

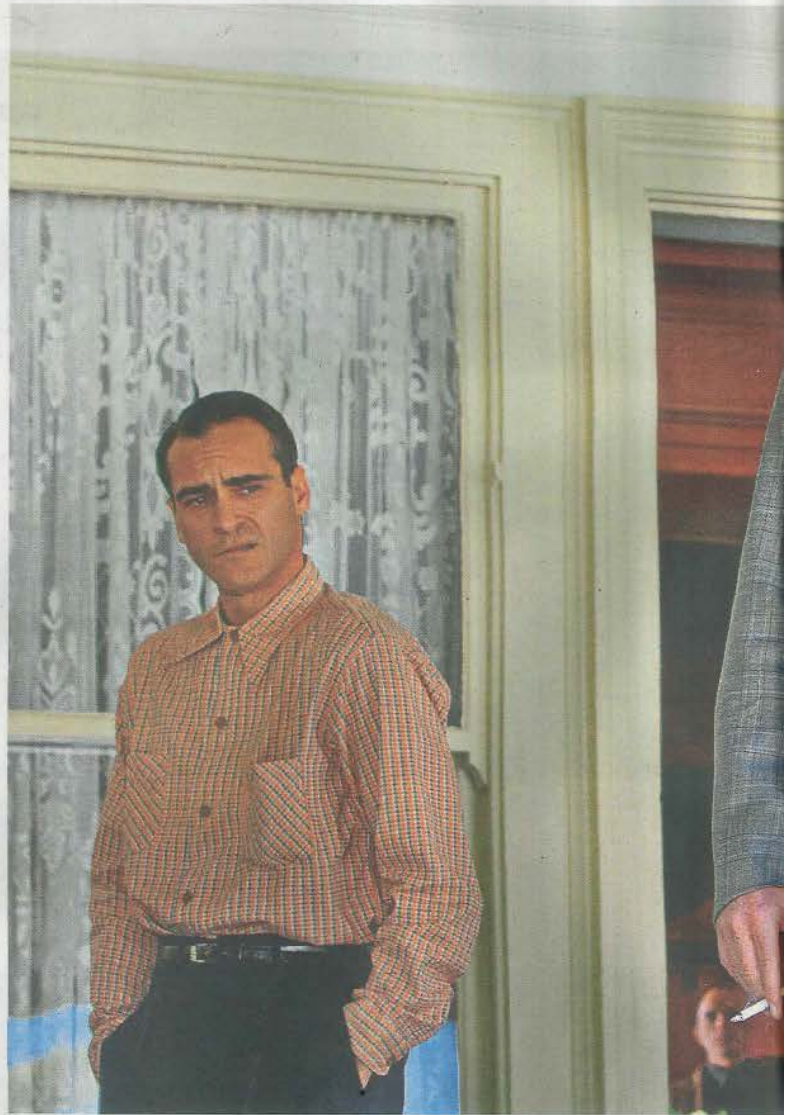
"Joaquin was inside that guy all the time, and he had to stay there, because when you go away from a role like that, you don't want to go back," he says. "But when we shot that scene, it didn't feel like some crazy leader and his disciple. It was two grown men who love each other and whose relationship is almost symbiotic, and in trouble."

Before its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival last month, director Paul Thomas Anderson described *The Master* as a "love story" between Quell and Dodd, and many of their scenes carry a teasing romantic subtext: after a particularly intense "programming" session, for example, the pair share a cigarette with post-coital geniality. ("I swear when we were doing that it didn't feel anywhere near as wild as it looks," he chuckles.)

And there's an extra tinge of intrigue at play: as was widely rumored when Anderson began work on the film in 2009, the character of Dodd is based heavily on L Ron Hubbard, the controversial founder of the Church of Scientology.

Like Hubbard, Dodd claims his belief system can treat illnesses both physical and mental, and he grills his followers with a series of seemingly random questions in a manner not unlike Scientology's auditing exercises. Dodd's eldest son Val denounces him as a fraud, just as Hubbard's eldest son L Ron Jr did in a 1983 interview. Dodd, like Hubbard, relocates from America to an English country house in the late Fifties. (Saint Hill Manor in West Sussex remains the UK headquarters of the Scientology movement.)

Anderson has downplayed these connections: he counts Tom Cruise, one of the Church's most famous adherents, as a friend,



and set up a private screening of the film for him before its release. Hoffman seems keener to discuss the subject, although he insists that he and Anderson had no intention of making "The L Ron Hubbard Story".

"I didn't want to make the movie to — those guys off," he stresses. "I wanted to make it because it's" — he pauses and looks heavenwards — "well, it's a hell of a tale."

"I don't have a grudge against Scientology. But Hubbard, who started that movement at that point in history, and had that excitement around him, is the kind of man who would bewitch a damaged person like Joaquin's character. And I think that's fascinating; you can tell a lot about the leader from the kind of followers they attract."

Hoffman relied on Anderson's own research into Hubbard's background. He didn't read the Scientologists' holy text, *Dianetics*, nor did he submit himself for auditing.

"I read what I needed to read but I didn't go further than that, because I didn't want to do an L Ron Hubbard impression," he



says. "I didn't want audiences to think it was a straight Hubbard biopic, because it really isn't."

Nor is Hoffman worried that the film may adversely affect his career. (Scientology is widely acknowledged to have many high-profile supporters in the American film industry.) "I'm not saying 'Hey

everybody, come and see *The Master* and find out what Scientology's all about,' because that's not fair," he says. "So I'm sure I will still find work. There's a risk that people will be annoyed, but I hope they will see the film for what it is."

Was he worried about trampling on other people's dearly held



Dangerously charismatic: Philip Seymour Hoffman as the head of a religious movement in *The Master*, alongside Joaquin Phoenix, as a tortured ex-naval officer

beliefs? "It crossed my mind," he admits. "But ultimately I was creating my own character. We took a long time examining our intentions with this film, which is to tell this love story, this religious tale" — two more raps on the table — "which gets at a lot of things Paul and I find very interesting."

The creative bond between Hoffman and Anderson may not be as celebrated as the ones between Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro or Tim Burton and Johnny Depp, but it has been just as fruitful. Hoffman has appeared in five of Anderson's six films, starting with his debut, *Hard Eight*.

Growing up in western New York state in the late 1960s and 70s, Hoffman's childhood passion was not acting, but sport: specifically American football, baseball and wrestling. But a neck injury sustained during the latter ruled out careers in all three, and with encouragement from his mother Marilyn, a lawyer with a keen interest in the local arts scene, he joined his school's drama club as a way to pass the time.

This, coupled with a visit aged 12 to a production of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, kindled his enthusiasm, and he went on to study drama at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. His first part in a major film after graduation came in 1992, alongside Al Pacino in *Scenes of a Woman*, although his breakthrough role came five years later when he played scotty, the gay boom operator in *Boogie Nights*, Anderson's sprawling, Scorsesean chronicle of the San Fernando Valley porn industry.

"We had the best time on that film. Not because of the topic," he adds quickly, "but we were all in our twenties, none of us had kids, if we were in relationships then we're no longer in them now, and we were in the Valley all summer, playing these crazy people. It was wonderful. We still talk about it all the time."

Their next collaboration was *Magnolia*, an Altman-esque meditation on forgiveness in which the lives of a clutch of Valley residents tessellate in unexpected ways. As a nurse trying to bring peace to a telethon producer on his



deaths, Hoffman was the film's beating, aching heart.

Then came Anderson's 2002 romantic oddity *French Kiss*, in which Hoffman played a short-tempered mattress salesman. Three years later he won his Oscar for the title role in *Capote*, directed by his old drama school buddy Bennett Miller. (Following a wild spell at New York University, Hoffman swore off drugs and alcohol at the age of 22.) He went on to work with film makers as diverse as Sidney Lumet (for *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*), Charlie Kaufman (*Spreedache, New York*) and George Clooney (*The Idea of March*).

Still, whenever Anderson calls,

Follow my leader: L. Ron Hubbard founder of the Church of Scientology

'We all wonder why we can't run through the streets naked having sex with whoever we like'

he's there like a shot. "When you make movies with him you believe you're actually there more than with any other director," he says. "There are some shots in this film and I was like, 'holy — where did these people come from?' The type of people that exist in old photographs, and suddenly there they are, right in front of you, flesh and blood."

Next for Hoffman is a role in a film series which itself has a cult-like following. He will play the rebel leader Natarch Heusenbat in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, the second film in a franchise Hoffman admits he thought would be "crap" until he saw the first installment, which was released to unexpected critical acclaim earlier this year.

"I was incredibly pessimistic, but then I read the books, and it was like, 'wow,'" he enthuses. "I didn't even know *The Hunger Games* was a big deal, but I'm incredibly impressed with it."

"My son is about to turn 10, so I bought him the books and I'm going to read them with him, if for no other reason than it's the first time I've made a film that's suitable for him."

Hoffman smiles warmly, and the blue-white sunbeams streaming in from the enormous windows opposite wear his face in a beatific glow. In this light, he could be a prophet, or an ideologue, or a charlatan, or anyone.

© *The Master* is released on November 2

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