

# Will Oscar Finally Toast Peter O'Toole?

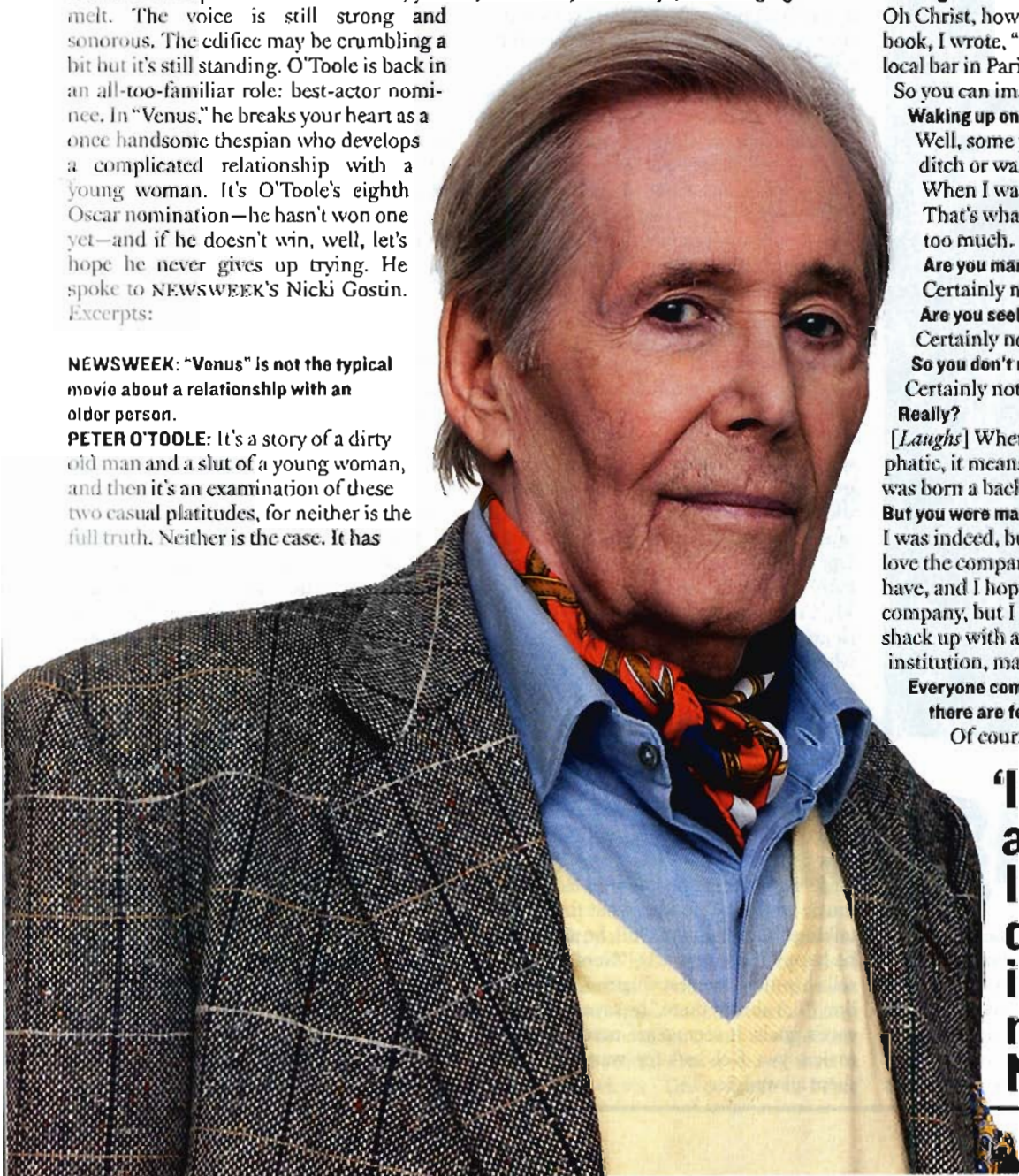
The legend on awards, aging—and good Scotch

IT'S A BIT OF A SHOCK WHEN PETER O'Toole enters a room. He's unsteady on his feet—he's 74—and his piercing blue eyes are rheumy with age. You get the feeling that a strong wind might knock him down. But his shirt collar is at a jaunty angle, he's sporting a lovely ascot and when he opens his mouth to talk, you melt. The voice is still strong and sonorous. The edifice may be crumbling a bit but it's still standing. O'Toole is back in an all-too-familiar role: best-actor nominee. In "Venus," he breaks your heart as a once handsome thespian who develops a complicated relationship with a young woman. It's O'Toole's eighth Oscar nomination—he hasn't won one yet—and if he doesn't win, well, let's hope he never gives up trying. He spoke to NEWSWEEK'S Nicki Goslin. Excerpts:

**NEWSWEEK:** "Venus" is not the typical movie about a relationship with an older person.

**PETER O'TOOLE:** It's a story of a dirty old man and a slut of a young woman, and then it's an examination of these two casual platitudes, for neither is the full truth. Neither is the case. It has

surprises and, I hope, great humor. **Did it make you think of your own mortality?** No, not at all. It's a separate compartment. It's like asking a plumber when he finds a leak whether it reminds him that he may have prostate cancer. **In the movie Vanessa Redgrave looks at old pictures of you and says, "He was gorgeous."**



**You were gorgeous.**

And now you get this prune. When one is young and vain and all the usual things that young men and women are, one never thinks one is anything in particular.

**Do you still drink?**

Not in the same quantities, but I had a lovely Scotch last night. I just don't ... They were good days and I don't regret a drop. I remember Richard Burton and me, when we were doing "Becket," for 16 weeks we didn't have a drink. But the night we finished, oh Christ.

**Could you drink Burton under the table?**

Neither of us could drink either of us under a table.

**So it was a draw?**

[Laughs] Yes, yes.

**What's the most you ever drank in one evening?**

Oh Christ, how can I remember that? In a book, I wrote, "Do you ever go into your local bar in Paris and wake up in Corsica?"

So you can imagine.

**Waking up on an island!**

Well, some people would wake up in a ditch or wake up in bed feeling awful. When I was a boy, people drank.

That's what you did. We all drank far too much.

**Are you married?**

Certainly not!

**Are you seeing anyone?**

Certainly not!

**So you don't miss the company?**

Certainly not!

**Really?**

[Laughs] When you find me being so emphatic, it means I'm telling you nothing. I was born a bachelor.

**But you were married.**

I was indeed, but I was born a bachelor. I love the company of women. I always have, and I hope I have some more of their company, but I don't particularly want to shack up with anybody. It's a very difficult institution, marriage. It's not for me.

**Everyone complains as they get older that there are fewer and fewer parts.**

Of course there are less parts for

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old men and women, but you know someone always wants a wheezy, old granddad who will fall off his rocking chair.

**Do you have any good friends left?**

They're all gone. Oh yes, I've got one left. I buried four last year. And what that is, of course, is a bloody inconvenience.

**What, going to all the funerals?**

No. I like writing, and say I finish a chapter and I think, That's not bad, I'll go and ring Ron. And then I'll remember that Ron is dead. I wish they had more consideration than to die on me.



**FOR PETE'S SAKE:** In 'Lawrence of Arabia' from 1962 (above) and today (opposite)

**Does your doctor tell you to exercise?**

A couple of years back I was feeling a bit under the weather so I went to see a physio and he said I should do something, so I went to the cricket school in Lord's and spent six weeks there. I confess that I felt very good indeed. Came Christmas, I woke up and thought, I'm awake and I don't have to work, how lovely! I jumped out of bed, tripped on a pair of shoes and busted my hip. How's that for being fit?

**Do you still read Shakespeare?**

I've got my sonnets by the side of the bed. But I think Shakespeare's plays are vastly overrated.

**Really?**

I do, and above all vastly overdone. Royal F---ing Shakespeare Company. There are maybe 10 or 11 plays which are masterpieces, which are sublime, but to do the whole 37 of the wretched, bloody things?

**What do you think your odds are of getting the Oscar?**

Five to one, four to one, whatever it is.

**I think you'll win.**

I've heard that for 50 years.

**When you got the honorary Oscar you said you'd love to win the lovely bugger outright.**

Of course I would! I don't want to be an honorary anything. Give me a job and let me do it to my utmost, and if people feel like rewarding me with money or a medal, cool. But I don't want a gold watch at the end of retirement ■

# The Man With Two Brains

Whose words these are we thought we knew. But his notebooks show Robert Frost discovering himself.

BY DAVID GATES

**F**ROM THE 1890S UNTIL HE DIED in 1963, Robert Frost wrote down ideas, homemade aphorisms and fragments of poems. As one of his jottings says (God knows in what context), "I reel them off with one brain tied behind me." As you'd expect of a man who fetishized plainness, he used cheap spiral notebooks and flip pads and school composition books. Frost wouldn't mind our looking through them: he often destroyed drafts of his poems, but gave notebooks to friends and institutions. And now that Frost scholar Robert Faggen has published them—700 pages, with all the crossings out and [illegible]s preserved—we can see that the notion of having two brains wasn't just a gag. "Hegel taught the doctrine of opposites," Frost wrote in another entry, "but said nothing about everything's having more than one opposite." This was a squash court of a mind, in which two Frosts—or more—whacked contradictory thoughts that ricocheted in all directions.

Frost remains America's chief celebrity poet, but don't expect his notebooks to hold intimate shockeroos, like those in John Cheever's journals. (Still, Focus on the Family may not care for the unfinished, and undated, poem about "two women on a farm without a man" who have a dairy cow named "Lesbia.") Since Frost used his notebooks to think through his poems, his essays and his teaching, they reveal only his working mind—and that's revelation aplenty. "Form," one entry reads, "is only the last refinement of subject matter"—which solves the old form-versus-content debate. Or: "An idea comes as close to something for nothing as you can get"—which uses deliberately crass language to celebrate the mind as a cornucopia of gifts freely given. Or: "Suppose we write poetry as we make a dynamo without ornament—well only the great poetry can be written that way"—which is as good a statement of function-over-frills mod-

ernism as any by Ezra Pound. Or a thought for 2007: "A nation should be just as full of conflict as it can contain ... But of course it must contain."

That last aphorism is one of Frost's many variations on his idea that "Life is a bursting unity of opposition barely held," and of the related idea that art doesn't take sides or give answers: "Artist of very high degree," one possibly self-praising entry reads. "He is neither moral religious nor patriotic." By now, nobody buys Frost's old image as a rustic autodidact or a versifying Andy Rooney. He read as widely and deeply as any American poet—the notebooks allude to the likes of Dryden, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Einstein, Santayana and



**THE POET OUTRIGHT:** At home in Vermont, 1958

Maria Montessori—and funny as he was, he could still outbleak T. S. Eliot. He was also American poetry's biggest ham (at least until Allen Ginsberg), and his poems were performances: not just in his well-known public readings but on the page. These deliberately preserved notebooks, too, might have kept one eye on an audience. But unlike the much-revised poems, they sometimes show this least innocent of men taking himself by surprise. ■