

Tom Hanks – Beyond Our Modern Day Jimmy Stewart

by Alexandra Lander

Tom Hanks' early acting career may very well have been like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates. He probably "didn't know what he was gonna get." Nearly thirty years later, after two Oscars, a slew of choice roles, and frequent turns in the director's chair, I think he can safely gather that the duds are gone, with only the creamiest, most delectable pieces left in the box.

Like the majority of people in our country, Hanks survived a troubled childhood. Instead of turning to alcohol and drugs, he found his escape in community theatre. Drama coaches were astounded at his level of talent for someone with no prior acting experience. Because of this, all the right people noticed him and he wound up in Hollywood.

Hanks' beginnings couldn't have been more humble. He played a cross-dresser on the cheesy sitcom *Bosom Buddies* and made numerous other appearances on *Happy Days*, *The Love Boat*, *Taxi*, and *Family Ties*. The experience certainly came in handy when they were casting for *Bachelor Party*, the brainless yet memorably hilarious comedy that launched his film career. Unfortunately, the film branded Hanks with a clownish typecast and sentenced him to B-grade movies through the first half of the eighties. He chased mermaids, teamed up with slobbering police dogs, and . . . let's not even mention that "volcano" nightmare. The best thing Hanks gleaned from that era was a lasting and deeply satisfying second marriage to actress Rita Wilson—evidenced by their mutual gaze of adoration for one another during one of his Oscar acceptance speeches.

The turning point in the career of this veteran actor was the role of a washed-out, dumpy women's baseball coach in *A League of Their Own*, who coined the popular phrase, "There's no crying in baseball!" People finally saw the serious side of Hanks, and his ability to play a character of substance. It was this new realization and perhaps a little bit of providence that dropped *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump* into his lap. After that, you could almost hear the squeak of chairs across the country as stunned audiences sat forward and took notice. Their chuckles faded, replaced by quiet weeping when AIDS took Andrew Beckett's last breath, or when Forrest put an affectionate arm around his young son. You could feel the warm glow of respect for the actor with the big heart, who had far surpassed Mr. Smith and his trip to Washington.

After winning back-to-back Oscars, Hanks was able to pick and choose only the choicest roles. Looking each one over like a baseball player waiting for the perfect pitch, he turned down roles like *Jerry Maguire* for masterpieces like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Road to Perdition*. His affable voice made the cartoon character Woody (in both *Toy Story* movies) ten times as lovable. Every once in awhile, Hanks would throw us a warm fuzzy (*Sleepless In Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*), raising the bar for disgusted men everywhere by perfecting the ability to being a man's man, yet funny, caring and debonair at the same time. He even tried his hand at directing in *That Thing You Do*. It was such a success that he hasn't stopped since. Even after becoming an icon, Hanks was never too good to let his hair down and have a little fun like the good old days. I'm sure everyone still remembers his appearance on *Saturday Night Live*'s "Wayne's World"

sketch, in which he played Wayne's nerdy cousin and roadie for Aerosmith ("Check! Check! Check! Sib-i-lance! Sib-i-lance!").

One of Tom Hanks' greatest gifts is his innate ability to convey a wealth of emotion with just one expression, or the inflection of his voice in a few words. There are times when he doesn't need any dialogue at all, which made the groundbreaking *Castaway* an unlikely success. This ability lends itself to Hanks' latest character, Viktor Navorski in *The Terminal*. In the film, Navorski is a citizen of a fictitious Baltic country stranded in U.S. Customs when his country is taken over in a revolution, and he is unable to enter U.S. soil until his questionable citizenship is resolved. In the beginning, he speaks little English and is unaware of his dire situation until he sees news footage of his war-ravaged country and has an emotional meltdown in the heart stopping manner that only Hanks can give. The tale takes a heroic turn as Navorski bravely perseveres in his year-long wait, creating a makeshift home in the terminal and forging bonds with various airport personnel. It is his will versus the ego of the head of airport security (Stanley Tucci) who wants more than anything for Navorski to be someone else's problem. He tries to trick him into leaving unlawfully and throws stumbling blocks in his path at every turn. This is the part of the film that was a little unbelievable for me. In this day and age, even with strict Homeland Security, I firmly believe that high-ranking officials would have protected someone as harmless as Navorski. The premise made for a compelling and well-acted story, however, with a touch of realism at the end, involving Navorski's love interest, Amelia (Catherine Zeta-Jones).

Hanks just completed *The Polar Express* and blazes on with six movies and a TV mini-series in the queue. With determination and a conviction for his craft that surpasses most, Tom Hanks maintains the quality of films we pay an arm and a leg to see these days. I can only think of one way to bring this review to a close.

Bravo.