

**'I don't want to be Brad Pitt or George Clooney.'**

**'I've had as much success as I can handle'**

*Actor Ethan Hawke had an A-list wife, Uma Thurman, and blockbusters on his CV.*

*So why did he walk away from his Hollywood life? By Helena de Bertodano*

Ethan Hawke  
photographed by  
Dennis Golonka



A funny thing happens as Ethan Hawke arrives at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills. At first there is a little buzz of excitement, the restaurant staff are attentive, people stare. Then, suddenly, all heads swivel: Al Pacino has just loped in and Hawke is no longer the biggest star in the room. From that moment on, the Godfather is centre stage and we have our work cut out merely to get a glass of water.

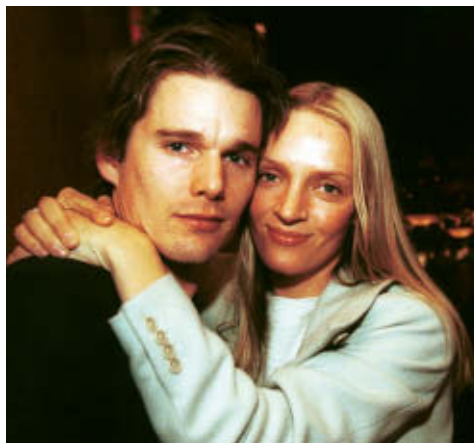
This, however, is just the way Hawke likes it: "I never wanted to be a name brand: Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, George Clooney – they are the top of my profession, but there's a huge responsibility and burden that comes along with being a legitimate full-scale movie star."

Unlike Pacino wearing his trademark black and sunglasses, Hawke looks out of place in these swanky environs. He is wearing a suit and tie, granted, but in the manner of a schoolboy trussed up for some occasion beyond his control (he is en route to a Golden Globes press conference). His cropped hair is spiked up, he is sporting a few days' stubble and is chewing on a toothpick. As if trying to distance himself from the glitz of our surroundings, we sit at a table outside. But it is inescapable: as we talk, the limousines pull up and disgorge the homogenised beautiful people of Hollywood next to the hotel's statue of Marilyn Monroe laughing, skirt aflutter.

It's not just that he looks out of place; he is out of place. There is no artifice to Hawke, who could perhaps be as big a leading man as Cruise or Clooney, but who is more detached, a New York intellectual who became a reluctant actor, stealing hearts as the soulful teenager in *Dead Poets Society* a quarter of a century ago.

At 43, he is still good-looking, but in a slightly scraggly way – his bottom teeth are wonky, and stand as a symbol of his refusal to conform (he was furious when a former agent asked him to sort them), to become one of what he once called "the pod people" of Hollywood.

Twelve years ago, it looked as though Hawke was firmly on course to become a "legitimate full-scale movie star". He was nominated for an Oscar for his role as a rookie cop in *Training Day* and had picked an A-list wife in the shape of Uma Thurman, who became the mother of his first two children. Since then, he has taken everything down a notch, throwing his energy into the theatre and low-budget indie films, many of them directed by his pal Richard Linklater, divorcing Thurman and marrying his children's nanny, Ryan Shawhughes, with whom he now has a further two children. He has always stressed that their relationship began long after his marriage had ended. "I've vowed to my kids not to talk about that any more, because no



**'If your personal life isn't working none of the other stuff matters. The ground falls from underneath you'**

matter what I say, somebody can find a sentence in it that will be in bold print, and somebody in my kid's school will show that to my kid and it's really hurtful."

He says he does not look back on anything in his life in a negative light. "If I were full of regret, it would be a sad, pathetic thing for me to say in an interview. But I'm an incredibly nostalgic human being. I think a lot of actors are. My point being, I am very nostalgic, but I work hard not to be."

In fact, he says, he is trying hard to put a more positive spin on his life. "My wife says by being introspective I often come across as being depressed or self-loathing. The truth is I'm probably immersed in one of the happiest times of my life. I feel like a lot of the groundwork that I put in in my twenties and thirties is starting to pay off. I feel really excited about the second half of my life."

His latest project is Richard Linklater's brilliant *Boyhood*, a film shot over a 12-year period chronicling in real time the life of

From top: Hawke with ex-wife Uma Thurman in 2000; with his current

wife, Ryan Shawhughes, at this year's Academy Awards ceremony

a young boy from kindergarten to college. Hawke plays the boy's father and helped write the script – he thinks of himself as much a writer as an actor: he has published two well-received novels and was nominated for two Oscars for screenwriting (for *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*, part of a gently romantic trilogy, also directed by Linklater).

On a personal level, he sounds equally happy: "If your personal life isn't working, none of the other stuff matters. The ground just falls out from underneath you ..."

He talks about a life that, from the outside, seems gilded but, he confesses, has been very different. "I thought life would be a lot easier. I somehow thought I would hit some magical place at 23 or 28 when you find yourself and people would realise how well-meaning you are and what a good person and how talented you are." He laughs and shakes his head. "It hasn't felt like that at all. It's just felt like a morass, a slog. I feel like a cat; I keep having to survive and land on my feet."

From an interviewer's point of view, he is refreshing. Most Hollywood actors I come across don't even grasp your name, let alone care whether you have a life outside the questions. Hawke actually seems to want to have a conversation. Knowing that the time allotted to us is short, he gives me his personal email. "If you think of other questions you want to ask me, just shoot me an email; I'll answer it." He is true to his word – I send him an email with extra questions and he phones me to answer them. "I want it to be a good article, too." He makes it feel like we are in this together.

How many children do you have, he asks as we sit at the table, waiting in vain for someone to take our order. We are talking about the passage of time, a big theme in *Boyhood*. Three, I say. "Don't you find you are far more aware of time if you have more than one child? When you have one, you think they're going to be that age for ever. I'm so keenly aware to savour my third and fourth children [aged six and three], because I know that age is going to be gone in seconds. And now, with a 16-year-old, I'm really trying to cherish having a 12-year-old: I realise this is the last summer he is even going to want to hang out with me."

Hawke talks intensely, never dropping eye contact, laying his hand at times on my arm for emphasis. Despite his determination to sound upbeat, he can come across as an oddly tortured soul: "I micro-analyse everything. It's impossible for me not to micro-analyse this interview, for Christ's sake ... I thought ➔

when *Training Day* came out, I would be able to parlay that kind of mainstream success into total creative freedom, and it's just been a lot harder than I thought.

"S\*\*\*, man," he continues. "I'm envious of the way Brad Pitt has lived his life. For example, when he makes his *Tree of Life* [Terrence Malick's experimental masterpiece], the whole world watches it. And you know what: if Brad Pitt had played the dad in *Boyhood*, Rick would have had a much easier time selling it."

Constitutionally, though, he is not made for the goldfish bowl of celebrity. "Fame is isolating. It's like a hall of mirrors – all you see is yourself. It makes you crazy, and I've worked very hard to resist that ... Don't forget, I've seen the best of my generation die: River Phoenix, Philip Seymour Hoffman ..."

Both actors were close friends of his. He starred in his first film, *Explorers*, at the age of 14, with Phoenix. It was a flop, a salutary lesson to Hawke, who went from being a "big shot" at school to a figure of fun. Now, he says, he is glad the film failed, because it prepared him for "a life of rejection".

A life of rejection? With more than 50 film credits to his name, surely that is overstating it a bit? "It doesn't matter if you're Billie Holiday, you get rejection all the time. If you feel it too intimately, you're never going to get out of bed. When you imagine getting famous, you never imagine the hate mail. You imagine people being adoring, not sneering."

Do people sneer at him? "Of course they do. That's what human beings do all the time." He describes how many of the films he makes are perceived failures at the time but then attain a sort of cult status.

*Boyhood* is likely to have a much bigger impact immediately. It is an extraordinary project, powerfully executed. "It uses time as clay," says Hawke. Six-year-old Mason's parents are divorced when the film opens and his father, who has been absent for 18 months, is slowly reappearing in his life. "My family just saw the movie and we got to talking about how it feels specific to our family. On the other hand, it shows how un-unique we all are, how our experiences are a collective experience."

Hawke's own son and daughter were three and seven when he and Thurman split. Hawke holed up in the Chelsea Hotel in New York for a couple of years. It was, he later said, the darkest period of his life. "Life hands you blows," he says today: "Death, depression, divorce."

Of his character in *Boyhood*, he says: "The father may be a ne'er-do-well when it starts, but he slowly finds a sense of responsibility – although it comes at a cost. He tells his son that if his mother had just waited, he would have become the boring, castrated guy she wanted him to be."

Hawke sighs. "So much about what makes



## 'Fame? You never imagine the hate mail. You imagine people being adoring, not sneering'

a relationship successful is the time of when two people meet each other, when they're really willing to give the other person what that person is asking for."

He says that he, Linklater and the other actors, who include Patricia Arquette as his ex-wife and Ellar Coltrane as their son, all contributed their own experiences to the writing of the movie. "I'm not the only person who is the child of divorce. For all of us, the movie was a little crucible where we could pour our experiences. I've also experienced divorce as a father and I could sit there with Ellar's dad and talk about what his custody deal was and how disappointing that sometimes is."

Hawke was three when his own parents divorced: "You kind of wake up to your consciousness having no idea why your parents split." Born in Austin, Texas, he was an only child – his father was an insurance actuary and his mother a charity worker. He spent the school year with his mother and summers with his father, and eventually moved with his mum to New Jersey. It was here that he heard about an open casting call in New York for *Explorers* and, his curiosity piqued, hopped on a train to attend it. Later he went to university, but the immediate success of *Dead Poets Society* scuppered his plans to get a degree. Twice he enrolled in New York University's English course, but the offers were coming in so thick and fast, he gave up. "I didn't want to be an actor," he once said, "[but] it seemed silly to pursue anything else."

A waiter finally arrives. Hawke orders water and a "green goddess" juice – a very LA combination of kale, cucumber and cantaloupe – and a prawn cocktail, which arrives just as he is whisked away: he looks

### With Ellar Coltrane in his latest film, *Boyhood*

at it, torn, then picks the whole thing up and takes it with him, glass goblet, ice and all.

A couple of days later, when we speak again, we discuss the time he was considered for the starring role in *Titanic*, a role that went, of course, to Leonardo DiCaprio. I ask if he ever thinks, "If only ..." "No, I don't think that – my sights were set on my own mission and if James whatshisname didn't want me, so be it ... I'll tell you this, I wouldn't have handled it as brilliantly as DiCaprio. I hung out with him a little when *Titanic* came out; it was like hanging out with a Beatle."

He cites DiCaprio and Quentin Tarantino as two people who have conquered Hollywood the right way. "Most people don't understand how hard it is to get a movie pushed through the Hollywood system that has any artistic credibility whatsoever. Yet every year DiCaprio is putting out a movie that is artistically and commercially viable. And Tarantino is making art films. I have a tremendous amount of respect for the handful of people who have infiltrated Hollywood and have come out on the other side still with their soul and artistic integrity intact ..."

Tarantino has recently been romantically linked to Thurman, so this is quite an endorsement. It is as close as Hawke gets to the subject of his first wife.

Despite his artistic principles, last year Hawke starred in *The Purge*, a ridiculous sci-fi horror film. "I've been fortunate to have an ability to do some commercial work. Sometimes I feel that ability is my greatest weakness ... More people saw *The Purge* on the first night it was out than have ever seen all three of the *Before* trilogy. A certain group of people likes [the indie work], but it won't pay my child support."

The occasional money-spinner makes Hawke feel even more compelled to keep up his exhausting dance of integrity on the fringes: "In the last three years, I did Brecht, Chekhov and Shakespeare: you can't be a mainstream movie star and cranking that out ... I think if your first love is writing, which is the case for me, your first love can't be movies."

He comes across as a genuine man pedalling furiously, if somewhat fruitlessly, against the Hollywood behemoth. With typical self-deprecation ("My grandfather always told me I should brag more"), he says there is little nobility in this quest. "People try to give me credit for turning down the mainstream Hollywood life, but it's just a survival instinct. I've had about as much success as I can handle, to be honest." ■

*Boyhood opens on July 11*