



Photograph by **Amanda Friedman**

Special reserve

The actress Holly Hunter – steely star of *The Piano*, *Raising Arizona* and a gripping new BBC drama – is so pathologically private she won't even divulge whether or not she has children. But, as she tells *Helena de Bertodano*, the impenetrable guard is there for very good reason

It is perhaps significant that the film that made Holly Hunter's name, *The Piano*, is one in which she didn't utter a single word. Fiercely uncompromising, she is one of the few actresses who has never spoken about her private life – which is fair enough but makes her a little difficult to interview.

Not that she is unfriendly. Far from it. We meet in her hotel room in Los Angeles, where she is staying while she promotes a new television mini-series, written by Jane Campion, the writer and director of *The Piano*.

Top of the Lake is a gritty crime drama about a pregnant 12-year-old girl who

goes missing. Hunter plays an enigmatic androgynous guru called GJ, with long grey hair who dresses in men's clothes and exists on the margins of society. After watching seven hours of her looking like this, I find that the woman who opens the door is almost unrecognisable: petite and feminine, with carefully styled long blonde hair, she looks much younger than the character she plays.

Welcoming me warmly, she urges me to select something from her minibar. 'Minibars are very appealing,' she jokes, 'especially when someone else is paying.' In the end we both choose water, albeit expensive sparkling water.

Hunter, 55, settles into a chair at the foot of her four-poster bed, *The New York Times* spread out at her feet. Dressed from head to toe in black – leggings, a long flowing cardigan and ankle boots – she appears to be perpetuating the impression of the blank canvas.

She explains why she refuses to divulge any details about herself. 'There are millions of people out there saying, "Follow me [on Twitter]. Let me tell you about the nuts and bolts of my life," and I'm just not one of them... I object to the actual phrase "Follow me". You've gotta be kidding! Why would I want to follow anybody else? Nor do I want

them to follow me. The machinations of my life, the banalities – they’re mine. They belong to me. Let me bore my own self or titillate my own self with them – the beige, the colour..’

Her philosophy is simple – she maintains that she lays her soul so bare in her roles that there is nothing left to share. ‘I reveal all of myself. I bring all of myself to my roles. You only see me. You don’t see anything else but me. That is who’s there. They’re manifestations of my own self’

Hunter seems to specialise in smart women who are often eccentric and with responsibility only to themselves. In *Broadcast News* (1987) – which earned her an Oscar nomination – she played the driven television producer Jane; in *Raising Arizona* (also 1987) she played the baby-snatching cop Ed – a comic role written specially for her by the Coen brothers. And in the television series *Saving Grace*, which ran from 2007 to 2010, she played a dedicated detective whose life is shaped by hard drinking

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and promiscuity. And of course in *The Piano* (1993), which won Hunter an Oscar, she played Ada, a mute Scottish woman torn between two men, whose silence speaks volumes.

I ask what exactly there is of herself in her latest role, the strange GJ. Hunter chuckles and shakes her head, acknowledging that this was a stretch for her. ‘The part was like a conundrum. It was a cul-de-sac. On first meeting GJ it was unlike any human being I had ever encountered. Not that she’s inhuman but she is slightly emotionally unrecognisable.’ Did she hesitate? ‘Yes, I did hesitate,’ she says bluntly.

What sold the role to her was that Jane Campion was the director. It is the first time the women have worked together since *The Piano*, though they’ve stayed in touch through the years.

‘We’ve maintained this great connection with each other that’s remained really current. She called me and said she’d got this series, and did I want to do it’

I ask if she has things in common with GJ, who walks a rather alternative road. Has she ever been on a retreat? ‘No, I’ve never done anything like that.’ Yoga? ‘It’s not my thing. I talked to Jane about it. I said, “Should I meditate?” And she was like, “You don’t need to meditate.” She didn’t feel it would be necessary for me to fly to India to find somebody who is on a path. So I approached the character investigating what it means to have that kind of stillness, that lack of kinetic



energy. I wanted the character to be very real, so I wanted her to be doing totally fundamental, elemental things like eating, drinking, smoking.’

Hunter speaks in a pronounced Southern drawl, unsoftened by all her years away from Georgia, where she grew up on a cattle and hay farm. ‘It’s a great place to come from,’ she once said. ‘It’s also a place I had to get away from.’ The youngest of seven children, she jokes today that her parents were exhausted by parenting by the time she came along. ‘It was like, “We’re done!”’ So she was more or less brought up by her only sister, nine years her senior. ‘She was really thrilled when I came along. We were very, very tight and still are.’

Acting never even occurred to her until she went to high school. ‘It was something I didn’t really know about. There was a drama club in our high school and I just did plays. I was in the chorus in ninth grade [aged 14], but when I hit tenth I started playing leads.

It was a natural thing, it seemed easy and my parents fully supported me in the endeavour, even though it was a completely foreign thing to them. That made a tremendous difference because I never saw it as unattainable. I was like, “Yes, I need to do this, let’s go...”

The first time she appeared on stage she was hooked. ‘I loved the tremendous



Clockwise from above Hunter with Nicolas Cage in *Raising Arizona*; in *Broadcast News* (centre); and in the new crime mini-series *Top of the Lake*

connection that I felt with the audience. I felt them like a whole entity. I felt that they could see me and I could see them. It’s a nice feeling; everybody likes that; everybody likes to feel seen by their partner, their friend, their lover, their child, their parents. That’s what we all long for. It’s a feeling of belonging. And I think that’s why people go to the theatre or the movies. It’s not just an escape, it’s also the connection of being human.’

After graduating in drama from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Hunter moved to New York. She made her screen debut in the 1981 horror film *The Burning*, but her real breakthrough

came with *Broadcast News* in 1987. Shortly afterwards she played a firefighter in Steven Spielberg's *Always*. Spielberg later arranged a blind date between her and the Oscar-winning cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, flying them together in a private jet from Los Angeles to an awards dinner in New York. 'He introduced me to my husband,' said Hunter later. 'I'm forever grateful' – though 'forever' turned out to be inapt, because the couple divorced in 2001.

Since then she has been with the actor Gordon MacDonald, who has been described in some reports as British. At one point she is quizzing me about the British schooling system and I comment that she probably knows something about that from MacDonald. She looks at me as though I am mad. 'No, he is fully American.'

'There's been a rumour for years that the guy I'm with is British and I always allow that to...' Persist? 'Yeah'

'But...' I start.

'I know,' she says, laughing: 'There's been a rumour for years that the guy I'm with is British and I always allow that to...' She leaves the sentence hanging. Persist? 'Yeah, whatever people like. The reason why there's all these different things about me is that I never talk about my personal life.'

What is known is that they have twin boys, whom she had when she was 47. Their names are Claude and Press (apparently) but I have no way of verifying this. Although she is friendly, there is something so uncompromising and steely about Hunter's demeanour that I know there is no going there.

While I'm with her, she enthusiastically describes Craig Ferguson, the Scottish-born American television host, as her favourite ever interviewer, so later I look up a couple of interviews she has done with him, thinking maybe she actually revealed something to him. 'What age are your kids?' he asks during one show – and is met with a stony stare. 'Work with me here,' he beseeches.

'I kind of don't talk about them in public,' she says eventually.

'But there are children, right?'

'I can't deny or confirm...' she tails off.

'The existence of children?' asks Ferguson, jovially incredulous.

'Right,' concludes Hunter firmly.

The personal morsels are tantalisingly few. At one point, she tells me – unprompted – how much she loves living in New York: 'I never thought about moving to LA; I always wanted to be in New York. I moved there and now I still have a kind of love affair with the



Hunter with Jane Campion, who directed her in *The Piano*, in 2009

city.' I ask her in what area of New York she lives and she gives me a look. Is it somewhere very central, I stutter. She bats the question away literally with her hand – without uttering a word.

I get the same reaction when I ask if she is often recognised. 'Let's not even talk about that,' she says, then relents. 'People recognise me. Or often they don't. Most of the time I live a fully anonymous life, which is the way I like it.' She adds, sighing, 'Although everybody is so easy to find now. I would say it's pretty damn easy to find pretty much anything that you want to know about anybody...'

Although she describes herself as 'very much an urban person', she adds

that she does occasionally crave the countryside. 'We have a place that's not far from Montreal that's a beautiful getaway. It's remote. But I have to say I'm an urban creature. I like the flow of the city. I love to go out to the theatre.'

The theatre, she feels, is most alive in Britain. 'When I was last in London there were three productions of *Macbeth* going on almost simultaneously – that's an incredible appetite. I feel like London has the habit of the theatre so much more. Even the way people

lean up against the seat in the intermission and scoop up the ice cream with those spatulas – their body language is just beautiful.'

On the bedside table alongside her canopied four-poster bed is a weathered copy of a book about the outlaws Bonnie and Clyde – she has been cast in a television mini-series of the story, playing Bonnie's mother, Emma Parker. Acknowledging the book, she tells me, 'I do some research so that I feel entitled to play the character.'

I ask if she minds that, whatever role she takes on, she will forever be defined by *The Piano*. 'No,' she says adamantly. '*The Piano* was

a gift, never to be repeated. It was such a crystalline story. There are no downsides to having done a movie that I feel enters into the lexicon of greatness.'

Hunter talks about acting as a form of catharsis, both for herself and the viewer. 'I feel that is what is sacred about storytellers and storytelling – it's the catharsis of a community. We're trying to figure out who we are from one generation to the next. People have been telling these stories for as long as we've been in existence.'

To her, the audience is as interesting as events on stage. In case I have not got the message, she tells me that she is just a vehicle. 'I'm not a media personality, I'm an actress. I want to protect that thing: the suspension of disbelief. The rest of it is just distraction.' ●

'Top of the Lake' is on BBC Two this month