

DENNIS HOPPER on James Dean (James A. Gallagher Interview, 1983)

And..and you know, so much too has been written about, about James Dean and, and ..of course you, you and he were very close...What uh... ah wha... ..what kind of influence did he have on your life?

Well, every time I smoke a cigarette too short I think of 'im ...I know that this is a ...he says boy you really short..he says you really smoke your cigarettes short.....*(laughs)* and uh I'm not... that's .. I do things like that.... ..uh...get down and...um..I saw a man act that uh..I thought I was really..uh...I thought..uh that I was one of the best actors in the world when I was eighteen, nineteen years old, or on the way to being, you know...and uh....watching him on Rebel Without a Cause..I just uh... he was doing things that were so far over my head...uh..that uh I couldn't even comprehend them. I.. I threw him into a car ...on the Chickie Run. I grabbed him and threw him into the car and I said you gotta tell me what ya.. what ya doin'....cause I don't understand what you're doin'. I said should I go to New York and study, you know, at the Actors Studio, and what, I mean what should I do...and he said don't go to New York to study..*(laughs)*..all right...he said just uh...just..uh..... ..he said just ...do it.....do it, don't show it...And I said whaddaya mean do it don't show it? And he said well like, ya know, if you're smokin' a cigarette, ya know, don't act ...*(puffs dramatically on cigarette)*...smokin' a cigarette, ya know. Just smoke the cigarette when you feel like it, right?...And, uh, he said, uh, just, just the, the simplest things will become very difficult but like, ya know, just do them, don't show them... He said like, ya know, if someone.. uh.. opens the door...and uh...*(puffs in on a cigarette)*...ya 'turn and look...*(puffs out smoke)*..and they got a gun in their hand... ..well *(laughs)* you may...you may get up, and make a joke...I was like.. you're lying, I was like they're..you're scarin' the hell out of me whaddaya doin' here...and like uh...uh..ummmm.... but ya gotta see the guy...ya gotta see the guy...and ya gotta see the gun ...and then you gotta ..react however that is and it doesn't have to be the same every time, you know you can say...ya..you can say that.. that a lot of different ways but first...first thing is...ya' gotta hear the door...door opens, guy's got a gun...and you can say to the guy ya', ya' ya' scarin' the hell outta me, I mean ...however it comes out.....That's not uh, ya' know, to be supposed how, ya' know, you're going to react to it so to do something not to show it, all right?...Uh *(thinking)*.....He said at first the simplest things like smokin' a cigarette or drinkin' a cup a' coffee will become very difficult... and he said then pretty soon you'll forget about it, things'll start happening. He said then if you, ya' know..ok...so he gave me a little advice, little tips like that. He said like..uh...uh..another one he said um.....Everybody tries to think that, like, ya' know ...ok, I'm alone in the room ...all right?...but like in point of fact I'm not alone in the room...even though it says in the script I'm alone in the room. because..there's a woman sitting over there...there's two men here...one sitting and one asking me questions, and one like ..um...um directing or whatever and one, the camera..and the sound and this guy and lights and there's somebody taking down uh...uh..if I'm matching this shot , ya' know, because I just smoked a cigarette...so I'm not really alone in this room. But until I can accept the fact that there are other people in this room... ..until I accept that as a reality — there is a camera here...and I'm not alone in this room...and I can ...*(thinking, cigarette in hand and and staring to the side of the stage)* ..then...there's a possibility of me being alone in this room.... *(thinking, puffs on cigarette)*...uh... or for example ...uh, let's say that there's a script girl writing down to match , ya' know, ok I just smoked a ...I just took a drag off this cigarette. ok? ...*(gestures to someone off camera and puffs)*...I'm talkin' to you, right?...*(puffs)* ...She wrote down I took a drag off this cigarette ...That means when they come around and do my over-the-shoulder... ..uh-oh... I just put my hand over here. Then never mind they're gonna have to match this ...*(puffs)*...then they have to match this, too. Now I've done it twice... ..But I'm talkin' about...do you know what the weather's like outside?... *(puffs)*...It's snowing...*(blows out smoke)*...*(laughs)*...or...It's snowing...the plane's not going to be able to come in.... *(stares motionless)*... ..The deal's off. ...*(stares motionless)*...*(gesturing with finger)* And you know what that means, don't ya'? *(still gesturing with finger)*...don't ya'?...She just wrote down that I'm pointin' at ya'...I mean, it's using a simple reality that, like, ya' know,...what..

that you can find humourous. And you can even look at 'er, because like, I mean we're in a restaurant, you can look...you can look at 'er, you can look at him..you can look at 'er...you can look over there..ya' can look...uh..wherever you want — I mean, people don't know what you're lookin' at....But I'm saying you use that ...(*brushing ashes off his pants*)...uh-oh, I did that. Now, that could be...depending upon what kind of scene it is, whether it's a...whether I'm angry at you, or whether, ya' know, I'm explaining something to you, or whether I find it humorous... that everything...that geez...that everything I'm doing... now I have to, like, ya' know, ...now I have to like um...reproduce this again 'cause they're gonna the two...they're gonna do the two-shot and the master shot and the close-ups and so on...and match this...ya' can take that in a humorous way...but that... that's a simple reality....And ... uh ... to come and say... uh... ya' say hello to somebodyand they ..uh..go..uh....screw you... ..ya' go whoa wait a second... ..I mean it's just moment to moment reality.....There... there were several things that he taught me that were very valuable. But one of...the most valuable was to be able to use what's around you that...rather than like, ya' know...shutting out...OK...I'm... now...alone, or like we are now in a restaurant, or we're...no we're ..we're ...uh...actually ...we're uh...we're videoing this...(*laughs*)...and that's what it is, and that's the reality of it...(*brushing ashes off his pants*) And thank god I don't have to match any of this ...(*laughs*)....wardrobe! ...uh... make-up man...But uh...anyway, tho'...those things I learned a lot from.

Those are really kind of technical things that really apply to film acting as opposed to ...

Well, then..but then after Dean died I came and studied with Strasberg, and Strasberg used to have us on the stage, and he would say, “Look at us.... (*gesturing with his outstretched hand*) because we're real and you're real... we're real and you're real”.... And so, it's not that much different than stage acting. You have to accept the fact that there is an audience out there, that you are on a stage before you can get into any kind of reality at all. Uh ...I mean it's the old story of the drunk coming in the middle of ..a...performance and tryin' to find his seat. Ya' know, or whatever. And...uh...If you're doin' a comedy, I mean you can use that as a humorous thing rather than letting it stop your performance and...and bother you...uh...you can use that. If you're in...if you're in a tragedy, you can use that...that that guy's coming in here...and then he's...and he's screwing up my performance...and he's doing that, but you're not saying that. You're ...you're Biff in Death...in Death of a Salesman or whatever, I don't know, and you're saying those lines ,but there's still a drunk out there that's comin' in here and then...um..you know, and you use that in...in some way, so it's not the difference. The difference is accepting the reality of the circumstance of where you are because you're in an imaginary given circumstance, anyway, if you're acting...and uh..it's just learning to use the reality of what's going on around you...to help reinforce you.