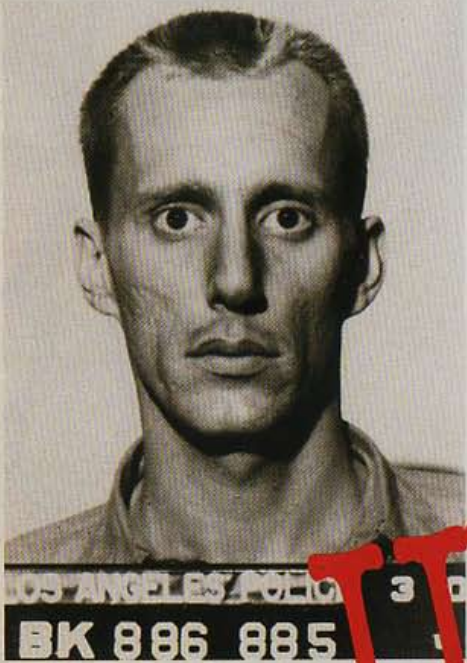


Hollywood's Most

James Woods is intelligent. Don't worry, he'll tell you so. James Woods is crazy. Just ask Sean Young. James Woods is outspoken. In fact, James Woods can be downright rude, especially about Faye Dunaway. Karen Moline went a few rounds with the most hostile man in Hollywood.



JAMES WOODS IS PLAYING NICE TODAY. THIS is the actor whom Pauline Kael, the tsarina of American film criticism, called "the perhaps most hostile of all American actors".

This is the actor whose undercurrent of rage and passion electrified audiences with his portrayals of a psychotic cop-killer in *The Onion Field*, a hood in *Once Upon a Time in America*, a photo-journalist in *Salvador*, a contract killer in *Best Seller*, a hard-nosed lawyer in *True Believer*, and an out-of-control coke-head in *The Boost*.

This is the actor who sued his *Boost* co-star Sean Young for US\$2-million worth of "intentional infliction of emotional distress". "James Woods," said Sean Young, as the lawsuit continued to drag on, "is a psychopathic person."

This is the actor whose wife of five months, Sarah Owen, sued him for divorce in 1989, stating that he often kicked, hit, spat on, and pinched her, forced her to watch pornography, and held a loaded gun to her head while hissing, "I ought to kill you for trying to leave me".

This is the actor who said of Faye Dunaway, who co-starred with him and Bette Davis in a made-for-television film called *The Disappearance of Aimee*, after he claimed Faye insulted Bette: "She stinks as an actress and she stinks as a human being. Napalm should be resurrected as a way of life for her."

And this is the actor who once said, "I don't ever want to hurt anybody. But if anybody tries to hurt me, they better be willing to do it until the day they die, because I will never forget it."

Hard to imagine such bile

spouting from the lips of the fella sitting next to me, because James Woods is playing nice. And when he does, impressing one and all with his fearsome intelligence, dry wit, and easygoing charm, it's nearly impossible to reconcile the image of the anger-driven and ambitious actor with the laughing guy dressed in an exceedingly boring preppie outfit of navy sportcoat, button-down shirt, grey flannel trousers, and black loafers. Woods is in the process of eagerly answering questions about his latest film, a rousing comic crowd-pleaser that's sort of a cross between *The Sting* and *Rocky*, called *Midnight Sting*. His skin is tanned, his hair is greying and his face is much more attractive and open — less sinister, perhaps — than he often photographs. He is relaxed and perfectly amiable; if you didn't come loaded with knowledge of his past volatility you might even think him incapable of anything other than a verbal knock-out or two in a war of words.

Of course, his amiability may have something to do with his financial stake in *Midnight Sting*. He does have points in the flick, so if it does well, so does his bank account. Perhaps that explains his openness as he spouts forth on a numerous array of topics. And when he does, it is in rapid-fire assault fashion, for he talks faster than any other human being I've ever met, except, possibly, Martin Scorsese. There is no stopping this Mr Motor Mouth once he gets going.

"I've always been a little complex, a little cerebral in nature so I thought, *this* is what it's like to be a big popular movie star — you actually get an audience to cheer at the end," Woods says. In *Midnight Sting* he plays a con man who teams up with a retired boxer (Lou Gossett Jr) to strip a corrupt boss (Bruce Dern) of his ill-gotten gains. It's the kind of film that is so ridiculously

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UNWANTED



entertaining you find yourself, surprisingly, screaming along with everyone else as the fight scenes progress. Woods adds: "The movie is really about a sting; the *deus ex machina* — pardon my Latin — is the boxing."

Pardon my Latin? I stifle the impulse to ask Mr Complex-'n'-Cerebral Motor Mouth to park his condescension at the box-office. Woods, 45, would undoubtedly be up to the challenge. He loves to banter. Witness the following incisive exchange:

Me: "I want to talk about how you claimed you were tested as 'off the IQ scale'."

Woods: "God, how do people know these things? Can you imagine MENSEA — carrying cards saying you're smart. What would be the point? And they are so boring. Beyond belief. And they are really stupid."

Me: "Can I finish the question I've been trying to ask?"

Woods: "Yeah, sure. 'After playing all those bad-guy roles, how does it feel...'"

Me: "No, do people perceive you as being something you aren't?"

Woods: "That was a good question, actually. I don't think smart people do. People who don't really care if it's true or reality get some mileage out of it. But we're talking about a press industry that buys its information from disreputable sources, and I'm not interested in any organisation which'll write anything for a buck just to sell stuff that fish is wrapped in the next day. The point is, for every issue, whether abortion or capital punishment or relationships, there are complexities that absolutely will not be solved with hysterical rhetoric and polemical insistence. It will take compromise and communication to be resolved."

Whew. James Woods has always been smart. He was an army brat whose family moved constantly until his father died when James was 12, and he hoped to be a surgeon until a gruesome, near-fatal accident — running through a glass door and severing the artery in his arm — put an end to those dreams.

Instead, he was admitted to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a prestigious think-tank) with a scholarship to study higher mathematics, and discovered the theatre instead, performing in 36 different plays. Just weeks shy of graduation, he left with about US\$100 in his pockets to pursue an acting career in New York. The going was tough. For Woods, although indisputably talented, is not classically handsome, and his intense intelligence made him a bit of a handful.

Undaunted, Woods pushed on, and began to appear in stock plays like *South Pacific* and *There's a Girl in My Soup*, before gradually building up to Behan's *Borstal Boy* and *Saved*, in a part turned down by Al Pacino in 1972. His first film role of note was as Barbra Streisand's college beau in *The Way We Were*, followed by *Night Moves*, *Alex and the Gypsy*, and *The Choirboys*, before indelibly stamping his mug into the collective unconscious with *The Onion Field*.

Although Woods is perceived as an actor who specialises in crazies, his career has actually spanned a huge range of thrillers, dramas and comedies, and he has done some of his best work for television, appearing in *Holocaust* opposite Meryl Streep, as the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous in *My Name Is Bill W.*, and as the dread lawyer Roy Cohn in the upcoming *Citizen Cohn*. His most acclaimed TV role, as the schizophrenic brother of James Garner in *The Promise*, is also Woods's favourite. "It was, coincidentally, the most honoured show in the history of television at that

time, and may still be," he says with typical modesty. "It was a pretty perfect film."

Lately, he's been doing a string of more light-hearted fare: *Immediate Family* with Glenn Close, *The Hard Way* with Michael J Fox, *Straight Talk* with Dolly Parton. All relative duds. Upcoming is a cameo in Richard Attenborough's *Charlie* and plans to direct the story of former heavyweight champ Sonny Liston. "I never think in terms of career moves," he explains. "It just seemed like a good idea to do some fun movies. My life's great and I'm feeling good, so..."

For one thing, he is happily involved with Heather Graham, 22, his *Midnight Sting* co-star. "We read a lot and just like to spend time together being lazy," he says. "The first time I met her she was reading *The Idiot* and I thought, this is the girl for me."

Flashback to 1984, when



Woods and ex-wife Sarah Owen.

I stifle the impulse to ask Mr Complex-'n'-Cerebral Motor Mouth to park his condescension at the box-office.

Woods met Sarah Owen — then 22 and working as a polo pony exerciser — at a petrol station on the Sunset Strip. "I was not a very happy person when I was younger, not very trusting," Woods had said. "Sarah just made me feel that it was okay to trust and be open. I thought, this is absolutely the woman for me."

Except she wasn't. Trouble surfaced after the filming of *The Boost*, when it was claimed that Sean Young sent Woods and then-fiancee Owen threatening letters, trampled his Beverly Hills gardens, poisoned dogs, and left a mutilated doll as a grisly souvenir of Sarah's abortion on their doorstep. The case was settled out of court, and Woods now has nothing but praise for Sean: "I was a beard in that little catfight," he explains, even though he was the one to file charges. "I didn't think it was right; it got out of hand for all the wrong reasons." Still, Young continues to dodge rumours that she is "difficult". "The problem was he saw me as the character and not me," Sean told me at the time. "He really fell in love with me and he wasn't able to overcome the fact that he did."

And when Owen and Woods split abruptly, so soon after their wedding amidst allegations of abuse, tongues continued to wag. "When this terrible article [Owen's version in *People* magazine] came out — how curious that it was published three days before our mandatory settlement conference after two years, and she's living with a millionaire — not one member of



With Lou Gossett Jr in *Midnight Sting*.

the legitimate press called my publicist," Wood says in his defence about his ex. "She was clearly out for greed. As some of the press is hitting a 100-year nadir, most of you guys have been respectful of my 40 years of good living and 20 years of doing fine work, doing charity, not being an alcoholic, not being a drug addict, not being a wife-basher, not being all the things you read about. And here it is three years later, and it turns out I was right. The judge completely dismissed everything with some pretty harsh words from the bench. He said she seemed 'confused' in her testimony. With a smile on his face.

"I get paid millions of dollars to put up with these kind of people," Woods adds. "But if you feel good about life and are surrounded by people who love you, well... I just stepped in dog shit and scraped it off as quickly as possible and got on with my life."

So much for "This is the woman for me".

Woods will undoubtedly continue to fascinate audiences with his multi-faceted portrayals of sinister baddies and smart-alec goodies, both types that he seems to know all too well. Is it important for him to be remembered? His eyes roll in mock exasperation.

"No, I'd like to be broke and anonymous the rest of my life," he says. "Can I think about this and get back to you? What do you think? Of course I'd rather be rich and famous and fabulous and handsome — what else am I? Anything else?" He laughs. "No, in all seriousness, the one thing we all want to be in life is unique. I'd like to think my career has a certain uniqueness to it. One of the nice things about being an actor is you do get to be seen, and your work stands forever — if they can find a way to preserve film, that is. And I've always had a wonderful rapport with my fans because they pay my salary and I'm very grateful for that, and I give them all the courtesies. It's fun. I had a paper route when I was a kid. I'm a regular guy." He looks at my skeptical expression and laughs again. "I like to think of myself that way," he insists. "I believe it's true. Even if I survived MIT."

A regular guy? The last thing I'd call Mr Motor Mouth is *regular*. Most who have seen James Woods's performances admit that his tightrope dance on the knife edge of unpredictability proves his versatility. Others say, it borders on the very horizon of sanity. Woods himself clearly plows ahead into a limitless future, insulated by the hermetic power of his fame and fabled intelligence.

"I've always said it's a matter of believing that honour is an essential ingredient of life," says this lawsuit veteran. "As is truth. I never find it difficult to be honourable. When I've gone through troubles and been slandered or libeled and so on, the honourable thing is to stand tall and say either you believe me or you don't."

Whether I do or don't is not the issue as our interview ends. "You're a good sport," Woods says of our humorous banter. He looks as if he's about to pat my hand, like a puppy. Why, if his whippet-fast mind didn't work faster than his mouth, I'd almost think he was once again a *touch* condescending, and I stifle another impulse to inform him that there are perhaps a few other people on this planet with the ability to string multi-syllabic adverbial phrases together in seemingly irrefutable offhand comments of devastating intelligence and complexity. But I don't. This is, after all, a man who once said of a journalist who crossed him: "She's a fucking pile of unmitigated pus ripped from the ass of a dead dog. I'll let her hang herself by her three tits."

So if James Woods wants to play nice today, I'm gonna let him.