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With the popular success of his New Age western, 'Dances with Wolves,' Kevin Costner is becoming as mythic for his integrity as he is for his all-American grin ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

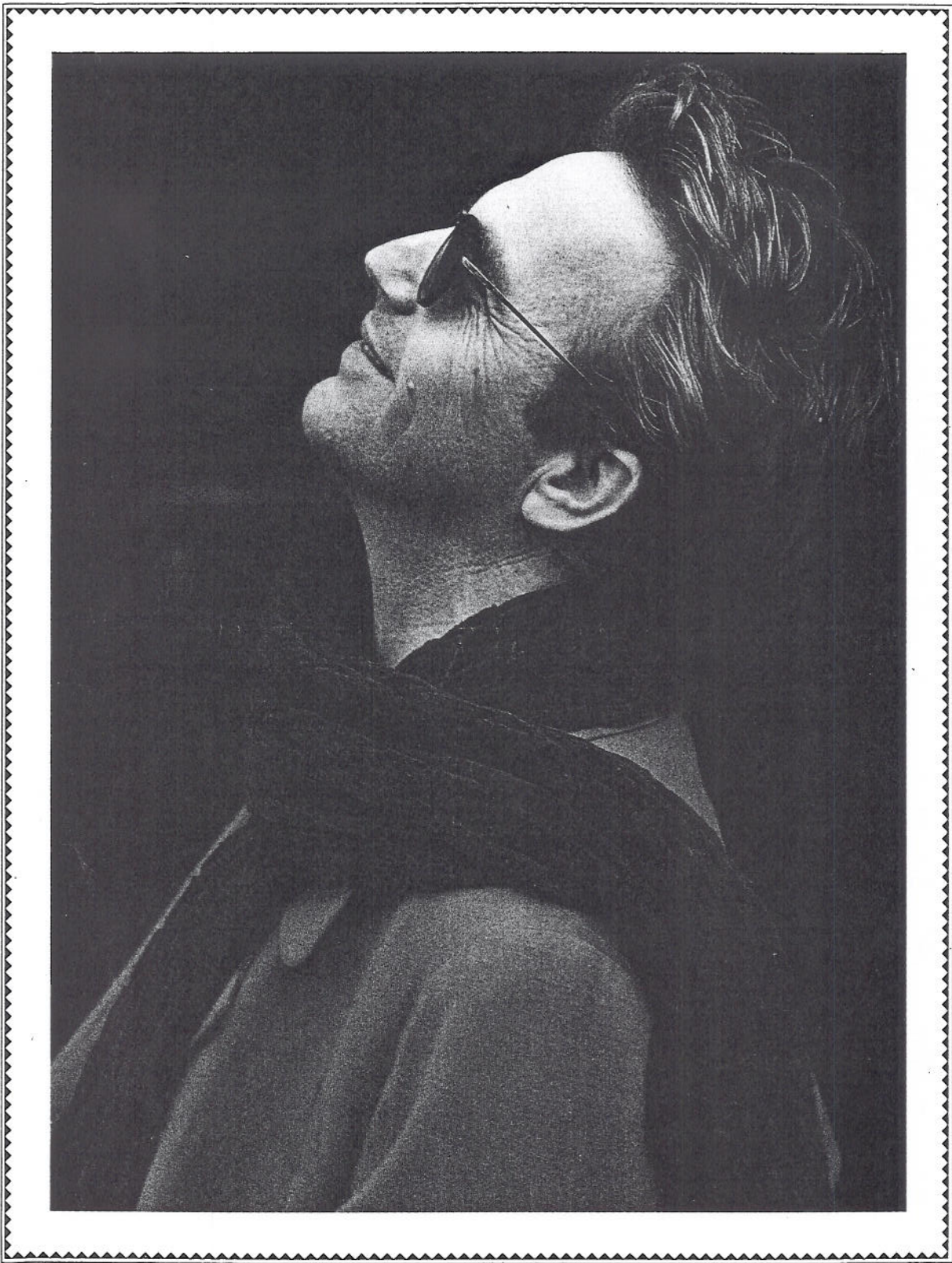
MAN
BY GEORGE PERRY

OLD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BYRON NEWMAN

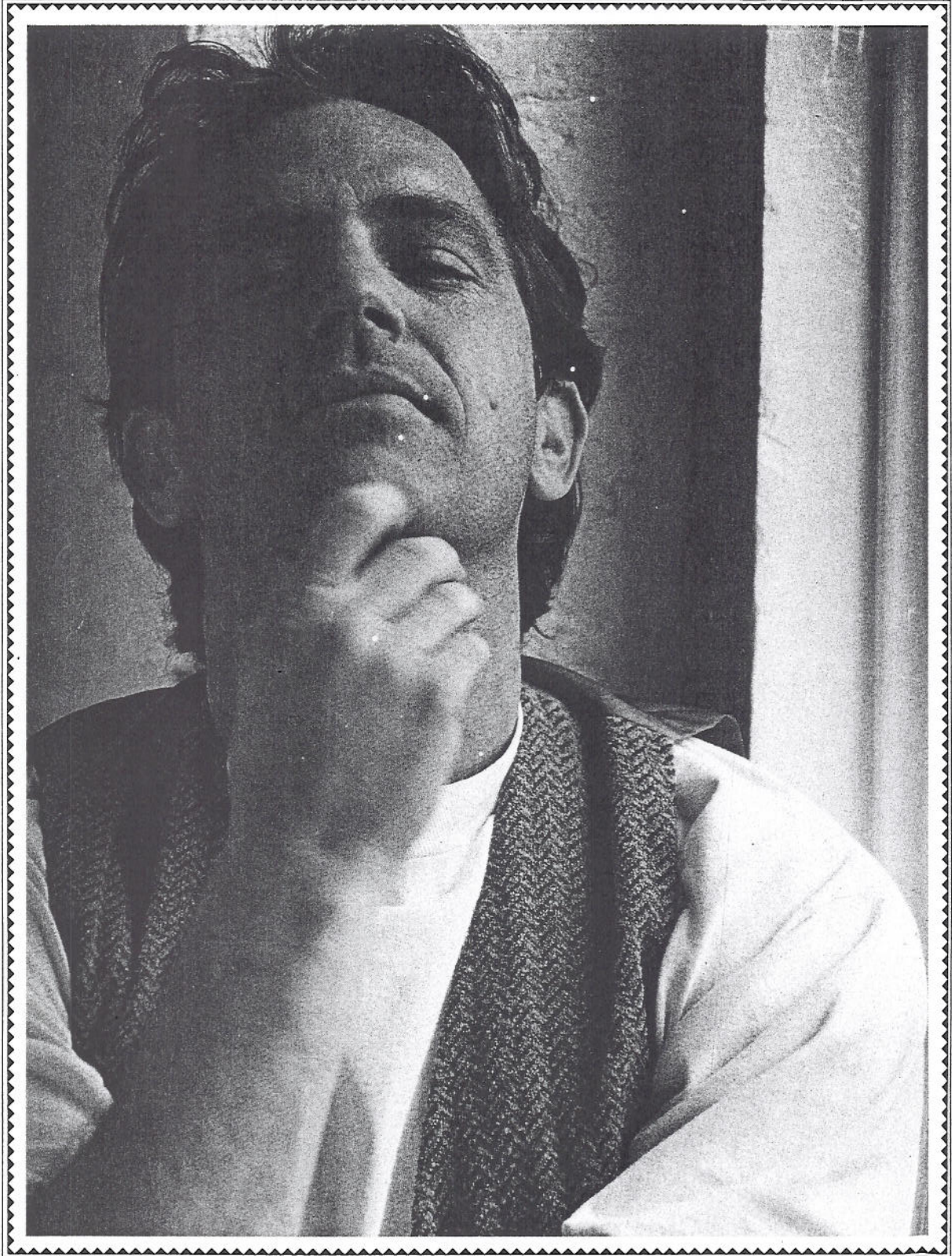
VALUES

THE US INTERVIEW



SUGMA

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24-US MARCH 7, 1991

KEVIN COSTNER PLAYED THE SCENE over and over in his mind. He was imagining what it would be like to confront Hollywood's studio executives with the concept and terms for his new movie, *Dances with Wolves*. He'd tell them that he was to both star in and direct the film and that even though he was a first-time director, he'd want final cut and a running time of three hours. He'd tell them that most of the dialogue would be spoken in an unfamiliar language and subtitled. Worse yet, the film would be a western, a movie genre rendered almost extinct after the *Heaven's Gate* fiasco crippled United Artists in 1980. It's no wonder that Costner drew on his own bank account and independent sources to finance the film.

Had the Hollywood majors invested in the (relatively cheap) \$18 million epic, however, the deal would likely have been as sweet as the one that saw the Indians lose Manhattan to the Dutch for \$24 in trinkets. As it turns out, *Dances with Wolves*, Costner's rousing revisionist western, is one of the surprise commercial hits of the winter season — and clearly the prestige hit of 1990. Domestic box office returns are approaching \$100 million. Costner and his populist film have been feted by the National Board of Review and earned Golden Globe Awards for best director and best drama. Now, the Oscars loom.

For dogged single-mindedness, Kevin Costner mirrors many of the characters he plays onscreen — quiet, decent, honest men who face up to heavy odds amid derision from peers. There was Eliot Ness, the Treasury man who smashed the Prohibition mobs for income tax evasion in *The Untouchables*; Crash Davis, the able ballplayer who endured 12 frustrating years as a minor-league catcher in *Bull Durham*; and Ray Kinsella, the Iowa farmer who built a baseball diamond in his cornfield so that he could mend a rift with his dead father in *Field of Dreams*. If the loner, possessed of values and driven by the strength of his own convictions, is the standard American hero, then Costner takes quite naturally to the role.

Born the son of a utility worker in Compton, California, in 1955, Costner has, from an early age, felt a profound kinship with the pioneers of the West. The bond may, in fact, be hereditary. Certainly, the character Costner plays in *Dances*, Lieutenant John J. Dunbar, is an

extension of his own. Dunbar, rewarded for heroism in the Civil War with a posting of his choice, opts for the frontier. On reaching the remote Dakota Territory, he is entranced by the vast, awesome majesty of the wilderness. Dunbar feels an accord with the Sioux, whose mysterious harmony with the landscape is alien to the white men who will follow with their railroads and townships and who will impose values on these ancient cultures with the ruthlessness of hungry Visigoths.

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Hollywood has portrayed Native Americans as savages who had to be suppressed before civilization could come to the West. Costner's film has helped reverse general perceptions about Indian culture and restore some of the ethnic dignity to the most oppressed of American minorities.

The actor/director's timing has been exquisite for more reasons than one. The nation of moviegoers that has responded so wholeheartedly to Costner's retelling of American history can only be described as a kinder, gentler one. And after *Revenge*, the critical and commercial debacle that was his last screen effort, *Dances* continues the roll that he has been on since 1987's *No Way Out*. Still, there has been a backlash against Costner and his film from critics who suggest that in demystifying the image of the Indian as barbarian, Costner has recast a simplistic version of history in which the white man is now the savage. But as a typically self-possessed Costner insisted in London, where he was embodying yet another character of mythic integrity in this summer's *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, that reading of the film is merely skin-deep.

‘Dances with Wolves’ was something of a personal odyssey for you as you are part Native American.

So I'm told, and I believe it. But my other ancestry is German. When I read *Son of the Morning Star*, which is about General Custer, I discovered that his original German name was Koster. Koster, Costner — they're very alike. When I was 18, I drove out on my own to Montana to the site of Custer's Last Stand. For some reason I had to go there. But I've always thought of myself as a pioneer in a previous life.

So the notion that you have Indian blood is really family lore?
Exactly.

You never knew your grandfather?

No. Somebody contacted me two weeks ago and said that my relative Costner was a noble Oklahoman and that he lived on a reservation. It would make sense that the woman who was with him was an Indian, a Cherokee, but I can't point at it exactly.

What is the Native American reaction to the film?

In general, I haven't heard anything negative, but I'm sure that in some corners there have been problems. Generally, it has been a real awakening. I have gotten letters from Native Americans in the business world, the white world, who have written to say, “I had forgotten who I was.”

Some of them are very, very emotional — the type of letters where you can actually see sentences stop on the page . . . you can see the writers trying to collect themselves. But I do think there's no going back after *Dances with Wolves*. It will be very difficult for any filmmaker to revert to the old ways [of depicting Native Americans] and not be hammered for it. I hope that it's going to be a benchmark.

What westerns have influenced you?

The one that got my juices going was *How the West Was Won*. There was one particular image right at the start, a sequence with the mountain men. There is a love story between Jimmy Stewart and Carroll Baker that is very romantic by anybody's terms. When Jimmy Stewart sets out by himself in his birchbark canoe, I knew immediately it was me. I was 7 when I saw it. Since then I have built three canoes on my own and gone down those rivers that Lewis and Clark discovered. There's no doubt in my mind that I was doing that kind of thing before. If one believes in previous existences, then I was probably running traplines in the Yukon. I don't know why, but I feel very comfortable in that pioneer world.

'Dances with Wolves' certainly has parallels with director John Ford's films — 'The Searchers,' in particular.

The Searchers was a very powerful movie to me. And I think *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a really well-drawn western. But in fact there aren't a tremendous number of great westerns; it's always the great ones that have inspired 50 other movies. Take *Red River*: Look how strong it is. Then for a contemporary western there's *Hombre*, with Paul Newman as a white man raised by the Apache.

How do you react to criticisms of violence in your film and that the whites are shown as bad, the Indians good?

There are some very tough scenes in the film, such as the killing and scalping of Timmons [played by *Murphy Brown's* Robert Pastorelli]. But when I show the Civil War, only one person dies. I won't do violence for violence's sake. When you see a Pawnee kill someone as if he were a bug, you have to understand that it was very natural for him to do that. We always transfer our mores to them. Does the killing make the Indian an animal? No, it turns him into somebody who is protecting his territory. The killing is very unemotional, except, of course, from Timmons' point of view. But some of the American critics, the intellectuals who rise above the movie, have taken a skin-deep look when they say all the white guys are bad and all the Indians are great. If you don't give in to that knee-jerk response and you analyze the movie from the beginning, the first guy you meet is John Dunbar. Everyone acknowledges that he's the nice guy. But the man he settles next to on the fence, he's not a bad white guy, he's just a very concerned guy. The general who says, "I'll save your foot," is not a bad guy, he's a good man. The man who blows his brains out is not a bad man, he's an eccentric man. The three most brutal white characters, who appear toward the end of the film, were to me victims of a mob mentality — their hatred fed each other's. But this doesn't seem to be clear to the high IQs of the world. They just say, "Oh, I get it, the Indians are all good and the white guys are all bad." I say it's no good talking to them.

Was there a special feeling during the making of 'Dances with Wolves' that it was something other than an ordinary movie?

Nobody who was asked to do this film said no, so there was no doubting the quality of the script. My sets are pretty comfortable

to work on; I believe in a kind of family atmosphere. I had four or five functions during the making of the movie, just to bring everybody together. Before we started we had a gigantic party in the park on the river. And two weeks later we rented five water-ski boats. I'm talking about an atmosphere of bonhomie and camaraderie. *How did the Native American actors feel about the project?*

I think that everyone works in concert, and that you really have to believe you are working on something very strong. They

history. As far as me making you promises, my actions will speak louder than anything I can say. And I can only tell you that I will treat people the way I want to be treated, otherwise f--- off." It was as blatant as that. Because I felt right there: I don't really care. This movie is not up for debate. There's one voice, and it's mine. Interestingly enough, it was probably the best thing that could have happened. They didn't feel as though they were involved, and they weren't. If you become involved with me you're totally involved.

That's the way I am. I don't beg for anything. I knew there would be misgivings, but I think it's important not to promise.

When I raised the money for this movie, when I met the investors, they asked, "Are you going to make a great movie?" I said, "I'm not sure." The guy who was trying to help me finance the film told me I had to say yes, and I said, "I really can't." I'm not telling you this story to hype myself, I'm just telling you the reality of how I deal with something.

Doris Leader Charge, the voice coach, must have had her work cut out for her, to teach the cast Lakota, the Sioux language used throughout the film.

Yes, she did. It turned into a memory kind of thing. I told them, "You have to learn it first,

then I can show you how to act it." Everyone except Doris had to learn the language.

Did your Indian cast rise to the occasion?

They did. There was a period during rehearsal when they weren't taking it as seriously as they should have. They weren't learning Lakota. I set a three-week rehearsal period, and after two weeks they hadn't learned their speeches. I was faced with having to cut their lines in half or consider not doing the film in Lakota. They may have been scared, but they weren't doing the basics of professional acting: learning the f---ing lines. I said, "Learn the lines and I can deal with you." I reminded them that they would like to be portrayed in a great light. I said, "Here's your chance, but look at what you're doing with it!" I had these beautiful speeches scripted and these guys couldn't even memorize them. Graham [Greene, the Oneida Indian who plays the film's dignified holy man, Kicking Bird] was the most professional, but at a certain point he started worrying about the other actors. Because they weren't learning, he suddenly forgot too and stepped away from the basic rules as an actor. You have a limited re-

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believed that. They also understood that people were paying them and caring about them and their comfort. It was going to be a long, hard shoot. I knew what it was going to be like, and it was important to me that we be ready to try and make it comfortable for everyone.

Were you able to speak to the South Dakotan Indian extras? Did they all speak English?

Some of the older ones didn't. The extras were important to me because if they weren't good, the movie wouldn't be good. I told them that. It was important to me that they eat off of the same truck as the principal actors. When we were location scouting a year before the shoot, some eager businessman set up a lunch so I could meet people in the community. There was a room filled with about 25 people, including 3 Indian leaders. They asked, "What kind of movie are you going to do?" When people back me up against the wall, I have a tendency to say, "I don't give a s--- what you think. I'm not looking for best friends. I'm not looking to set the record straight, as far as movies are concerned, and I'm not looking to reinvent

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sponsibility: Worry about yourself and your own performance. The atmosphere was like summer camp — we shot bows and arrows and rode horses every day and it was a lot of fun. But finally I said, "That's it! There's no more *anything* — not even rehearsal. We start in three days." And in three days they were ready. They had to be shocked into the reality of 60 people standing around waiting for them to do their job. **Do you see any of the Native American actors in 'Dances with Wolves' ever having fully developed careers in Hollywood?**

Sure I do. I think Graham is a very skilled actor. He's had a tremendous career onstage, but things become limited in film because of the nature of film. Films show you what you are — you can't become something else. On the stage you can depend heavily on disguises and accents. But I think he'll have a good career. I think Rodney Grant [the Omaha Indian who plays *Dances*' volatile warrior, Wind In His Hair] looks beautiful, although he doesn't have the experience that Graham has had. But I think he will continue to be used. He'll probably be dependent on Native American roles. Graham, on the other hand, could certainly cross over. But we're very slow in America. We don't really let ethnics carry our movies.

How was it to act in almost every scene, as well as direct? Was it difficult? It was a challenge. It wasn't as hard for me as people suspect. There were a couple of scenes where I would have been well served to be able to watch, as opposed to being in the middle of it. But in general it wasn't difficult for me. Still, I can understand why some actors do find it difficult. **When did you first want to make 'Dances with Wolves'?**

When I first read Michael Blake's book [on which the film is based]. Probably a year and a half, two years before we started.

Had you wanted to direct a movie earlier than that?

Yes, I wanted to direct *Revenge*, but that picture was a mistake.

You seem to like cinematic archetypes. Big stars of the past — Gary Cooper, James Stewart, Henry Fonda — always played the man who stood alone.

I think it's because I fit that mold. There are greater opportunities for a white actor who can speak. Traditionally, our stories need some kind of a lead character, so I'm in a very good position. There's a real demand for that type: Someone in his 30s

who can carry a movie. These are very great days for people like me.

Is it very rare in real life to come across the kind of person you play?

In reality, the big corporate man looks on the man with values as a dummy. As soon as the guy with integrity walks out of the room, it's "What a fool! We've got him!" The honorable man is an easy target. But I don't want to pretend that I am as brave as the characters I've played. The politicians look on an honorable man and say, "We can f--- him eight ways to Sunday.

'There are no rules, only passion. People of our age will always respond to passion. We still have the ability to be moved, to be inspired. It's a great feeling'

We know how to do it. We can make this honorable man look like a f---ing fool." The movies represent what happens when the hero acts in the heat of dilemma, and that's really what films are all about for me: dilemma. You're not sure what the hero will do. We like to think that he will do the right thing. And we admire the right thing — in movies. We don't necessarily admire it in our own world, because we know it's political suicide. When we watch a movie we say, "God bless this man, that he can be this voice." In real life, Mr. Smith would never have gone to Washington. He would have been made to look like the village idiot. He would have been locked up. It would be made out that he hadn't paid his taxes and had eight affairs. He would be done. And he would be the same man. Integrity is out of fashion. Maybe that's why we respond to it in films.

Would you play a bad guy?

I'd play a bad guy if he were written well. But usually bad guys are set up merely to be knocked down by the good guy — so they are not really worthy opponents.

'Dances with Wolves' seems to have awakened many Americans to the Native American's plight, and in some ways made it a popular cause.

Perhaps. I think Americans conveniently point at things — South Africa, the Brazilian rain forests — but still won't accept the fact that we've destroyed 400 cultures systematically. We're a pretty ruthless country. We pride ourselves on freedom, but we completely deprive others of theirs. We talk about how Cortés destroyed the Aztecs, but we don't acknowledge the extent of our own destruction. We pave it over. **You actually reveal the Indians as sexual beings in your film. Was that a first in the movies?**

Little Big Man did it, I think. There is a scene in Michael Blake's book where Dunbar masturbates, and I totally understood. It is after he meets the Indians for the first time and he comes back and he is so lonely. He does it kind of unwillingly; he cried when he left the Indian camp. He was so lonely for people. I wasn't able to incorporate the scene into the film, because it would have set up shock waves. But for me, it was a real clue to his loneliness.

Was it deliberate that you gave Dunbar no personal history?

No. I had to drop a line which may find its way back into the expanded, four-hour video version of the film that says, "Having grown up on the streets of St. Louis, I can appreciate the fierce one. He seems to be like the leader of a gang of toughs." But Dunbar is an enigmatic character. You're right. To get his past out I would have had to forfeit other more important scenes.

Will you do a movie on this scale again?

I don't know whether I will direct it or not, but I have another big movie. I don't purposely go after them, but I've always liked them. I'm very much a "longer is better" kind of guy. Today, we're making these canned, two-hour movies. Marketing has these rules that make it very difficult for films like *Dances* to be made. But I believe that you can sit through a long movie — it depends totally on the movie. I've had letters from heads of studios saying *Dances* has made them think. For me, it confirms that there are no rules, only passion. People of our age will always respond to passion. We still have the ability to be moved, to be inspired. And it's a great feeling. ■

George Perry is the film editor of the London 'Sunday Times.'