

# ERIC ROBERTS: ACTING IS LIKE GIVING LIFE



Roberts as Mayor Dellasandro in Hallmarks' PANDEMIC

**In the name of full disclosure: Academy Award® (RUNAWAY TRAIN) and multi Golden Globe® (RUNAWAY TRAIN, STAR 80, KING OF THE GYPSIES) nominated actor Eric Roberts has been on my wish list to interview for some time. Editor Eric Lilleør gave me this assignment after I cast Eric Roberts as a lead in my screwball comedy feature THE WHOLE TRUTH, also starring Elisabeth Röhm and Sean Patrick Flanery, which I'm directing as you read these pages.**

*By Colleen Patrick*

**T**O MEET HIM IN PERSON, ERIC ROBERTS radiates infinite talent (his energy feels like there's an untapped vein of gold talent in there—that must be the acting coach in me), a pleasant ease, maturity with a touch of ingenuousness, and the American southern charm that reflects his childhood roots in Atlanta, Georgia.

He has proved over the years to be a survivor—personally and professionally—who now thrives in every area of his life.

The one constant that has sustained Eric since he was just four and a half years old: his art. Young Eric discovered by accident he enjoyed performing because his dad realised his gifted son—who suffered a serious stuttering problem—had no problem speaking clearly and fluently when he memorised lines. Eric credits his

father for hooking him up with his secreted soulmate—acting.

After completing his training at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, he returned to the US and began his professional career in New York City, where he received a Theater World Award for his Broadway role in *Burn This*, going on to perform in literally hundreds of roles in dozens of films, television programmes and plays. He has won several other acting awards, including Best Actor from the New York Independent Film Festival (*LA CUCARACHA*), Best Actor from the Boston Society of Film Critics (*STAR 80*), and a Golden Satellite for Best Supporting Actor (*Less Than Perfect*).

His work in the Emmy®-nominated TV film *In Cold Blood* earned him another Golden Satellite nomination for Best Actor.

No article about Eric Roberts would be complete without mentioning his role in *THE POPE OF GREENWICH VILLAGE* (on everyone's primary "films to watch" list) or his most recent appearance as Salvatore Maroni in this year's mega-blockbuster *THE DARK KNIGHT*.

My personal experience with Eric is this: he's an A-list artist in constant demand who is his own man. He decides what he does and does not do—and how he does it, not his representatives. He works very hard, he continues to improve his craft, he's approachable, down to earth, humble, fun, easy to work with and his on-location comfort requests are simple.

He appreciates people who know their craft, who work as hard as he does, who understand storytelling, the medium in which they work (theatre, television, film) and especially directors who know how to direct.

It would not surprise me if much—even most—of his best work is yet to come.

**You started acting at a very young age...**

It started out first as an exercise to help my stuttering. I found I enjoyed it, then I found this whole world of playing other people—with other accents, other voices, who had done other stuff, and I just got carried away into it. By the time I was twelve or thirteen, I had done about fifty plays. I grew up in Repertory Theatre. So I was going to take the world by storm when I was twelve. In my own mind, I was ready to go. [Soft chuckle]

**How does an actor know how talented they are?**

Acting is like athletics. If you're a sprinter, you know if you're in the top two or three guys at the end of the race out of six or seven. You know when you're fast. But you know it only to a point. Like a fast athlete, if you're a good actor, you're as fast as the guy running next to you. I use a lot of analogies with athletics about acting because to me they're both God-given tools we have to nurture and bring along. If you don't, then you only get to the regional, you don't make it to city or state or national [competition].

**What makes the champion athlete is what she or he does off the field—the practice, the exercises...**

It's also true in acting, because your performance is only going to be good if everything you've done to prep it is proper. Like if you learn your lines, know your beats, know your character's background, why he wears what he wears, why he had his hair cut the way he does... I always have a different haircut for all my guys because they have a different feel to all of them when I rub my head, or scratch it, so I can be in that character's head—not in my last character's head, and not in mine.

**Tell me about your views of acting for the camera versus acting for theatre.**

One is very small, and one is for the house—the whole house has to understand what you're going through as a theatrical actor. As a movie actor, it's moment by moment. They make it easier and smaller for you by getting close to your face, or your hand, or whatever they're filming in close up. You can just breathe [Soft exhale] and it says everything. On a stage, that wouldn't get noticed.

**Rather than small, I like to say camera acting is intimate. One indicates space, the other comes from within.**

I'd agree with that. Because now, especially with high definition, they can see the pores of our skin. How much more intimate can



Roberts as Merle Hench in World Films' THE BUTCHER

**“Every little moment means so much to an actor to really knock it out of the park in reality, and when you have a director on your same page it's such a luxury because they know what to look for without even talking about it.”**

you be except to actually smell somebody? And God knows, that'll come along eventually.

**What sort of roles do you like to play?**

I was always going to be a character actor—from the time I was a child. All the actors I loved watching as a kid, like Lon Chaney Jr., who was *The Wolf Man*. I loved those kinds of parts; they aren't really bad guys and they aren't really good guys. They're in the grey area of life. I always identify with that, for some reason. So today, even when I play really bad guys who do bad things, I want to make you, the audience, feel that it could also be you. That although this horrible person is doing this horrible thing, it could be any one of us doing this awful thing. It's much more fun to watch—it's much more personal.

**When you're portraying a character on camera, do you have the sense you're drawing the audience in?**

No, it's not like actually fishing, like you're throwing a hook out there to get something specific. What you're doing is throwing your hook out there for yourself, and when

it lands properly it's going to catch whatever it catches. The focus is on who you're playing, not on who's watching. Because also with a camera, it's a machine watching. You kind of have to pretend it's not there at all, and just be the character—even though you're always aware of it.

**How do you prepare for a role?**

That's a huge question, but I start with the very basics. I read my script once; I just read it as a story when I go through it first. Then I go back through it, with my character in mind, and I do what I call my “colouring book” end of it, which is highlighting all my stage directions in pink or orange. Then my dialogue in yellow. This way I can just glance at the page and know what's in it. Then from there I decide how he's going to sound, why he's going to sound that way. And everything from that to how he walks and why he walks that way. One of the most important things is how my character is dressed. I think dressing, even if you're trying not to dress, you're still making a statement. I think all dress is some kind of

## INSIDER'S POINT OF VIEW

statement—about what you are, or what you have, or what you don't have, or what you don't have access to. It's just a huge part of the character.

**Some actors start with the character's underwear...**

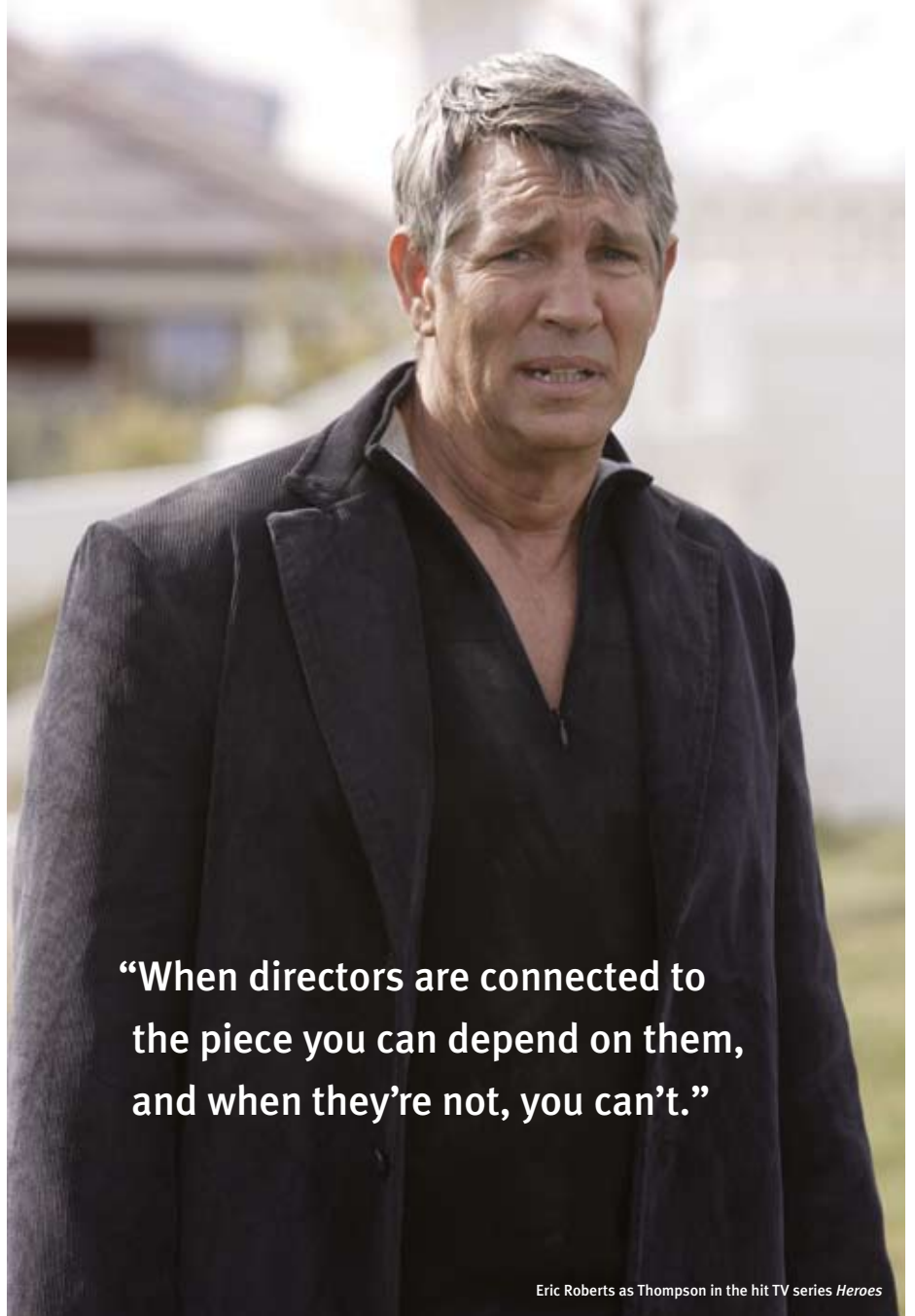
I do only if it shows. If it doesn't, it won't be on my mind. If it's not on my mind, I won't worry about it.

**Some actors like to stay in character even when they're off camera. How do you feel about that?**

It depends on what you're playing and how hard it is for you. When it's really very hard to maintain a very odd or very unsettling character, then you have to always maintain it. Like the three movies I had to do that: *THE POPE OF GREENWICH VILLAGE*, *STAR 80* and *IT'S MY PARTY*. In those performances, I pretty much never broke character while I played them. They were guys as far away from me as you could possibly get. One was a sociopath who ended up being a murderer; one was a petty, uneducated thief—very funny; and one was a very intelligent gay man. They were as far away from me as you could get, but I liked them very much as characters I created in my homework. I had to maintain them in everything from what they liked and didn't like, what they like to eat, everything. I don't really recommend it. It's hard on you; it's hard on everybody who knows you. Unless it's a role you can't create the way you usually do, I wouldn't do it because it's really, really hard.

**With all the changes you've seen in the industry, is the material you see now better or worse?**

I don't know, because the industry goes through cycles. It goes through cycles where the artist is the most respected and in charge, and/or the director is, and/or the producer is, and/or the agent is. We're in a cycle now that's all about the agents. And the lawyers. And since both those guys don't spend time on sets, they know probably the least of anybody in our business about the actual craft itself. So we're going through a cycle now where artists aren't having any demands made of them, so nobody's shining. And all the new guys are not great—the new girls, too. So we're not having anybody take us by storm right now because we don't have someone with the proper eye out there looking for them. But it will change. There's just this bad cycle now, with a lot of bad stuff being made. We went through it in the fifties, the eighties, and now we're going through another one. It'll pass.



**“When directors are connected to the piece you can depend on them, and when they're not, you can't.”**

Eric Roberts as Thompson in the hit TV series *Heroes*

**As an actor, how do you deal with that?**

It's just the way it is, babe. What are you going to do? Just grin and bear it. Because as an actor you set yourself up to always lose something.

**What do you mean?**

I mean because of all the parts I've always wanted, of all the parts I've pursued, I might have gotten like 15 per cent of them. That's just how it is being an actor. It's what happens. You're not tall enough or old enough or talented enough or whatever it is. You're asking to be set up for a bad day on a lot of days. You just stay with it because acting is what you love to do.

**How do you pick your roles?**

I used to be very very particular. It was really gruelling for me. And then they gave my Academy Award® to the wrong guy, so I decided, fuck this, if there's anything good

about it, I've got to do something. It was driving me crazy because I love to work. I'm a workaholic. I'd act every day if I could. Because I love getting up early, going to the gym, going to the set. I love every aspect of it. But basically you're on your own.

**On your own?**

Sometimes people you work with are terrific, other times, no. I did a classic film—that's heralded now—where the other actor didn't learn his dialogue. So I had to create my own cues. I was working for both of us, so my character came off as manic. But we're both celebrated for that film. And you have to expect not to have a good director. The really good directors are nearly always writer/directors. Bob Fosse was by far my favourite experience, and he also wrote the piece he directed me in. When directors are connected to the piece you can depend on them, and when they're not, you can't. I've



WITLESS PROTECTION



THE BUTCHER

**“You know, we have a generation that sees acting all the time—on TV, in films, the Internet—so they think it’s easy.”**

and you’re the only person like you on the entire planet. And that’s what’s going to work—or miss. Here’s something I do that I think gives a role more depth: when I’m playing a really tragic character, I try to bring the sense of what makes him happy; for a silly character, I like to include a tragic note in him.

**Acting students are told to do so many things by “experts” that are totally counterproductive to becoming a good actor.**

I know, I know. We have a generation now that’s in their 30s or 40s who were taught to teach actors, and they’re all giving them bad advice. They’re telling students to act “a certain way” as opposed to how to act. Learned the right way, acting can be really fun. But it’s also really lonely.

**How do you deal with the loneliness?**

Ah, we all have our ways. I chase my wife [Eliza Roberts].

**Your acting philosophy?**

You know, I’ve heard it said many times that acting isn’t brain surgery. But it is very precious. When it’s really good, it’s really precious. And when you do it just right, it’s like life; you’re honestly creating life. It’s developing understanding through your creation. It’s the best feeling in the world anybody could have. Except probably a mom giving birth. My wife tells the story of her two births over and over—and as much as we get tired of her telling the same stories, we know what she experienced was really magic. Well, it’s the exact same thing with acting. When you really hit it, you’re really living someone else’s life for a reason in order to show your audience another way of experiencing something. Then it’s like giving life; it’s an incredible feeling. That’s why I’m still doing it. ■

made 160 to 180 films and I’ve had maybe 12 to 14 good directors. They’re just rare. They’re really rare. Same with this whole new generation of DoPs [Directors of Photography] who don’t light actors—they only light sets. So you aren’t lit any more as an actor for any purpose at all except to be seen. And I find these DoPs to be really deplorable and terrible and lazy and fake. Not unlike directors who say, “I like the big picture.” I find that all very fake. Every little moment means so much to an actor to really knock it out of the park in reality, and when you have a director on your same page it’s such a luxury because they know what to look for without even talking about it.

**How does that feel?**

It’s like any work place. You show up at the work place and somebody’s bound to disappoint you. It’s just life. You just grin and bear it and keep on trucking. I keep on

trucking because I love what I do. Every bit of it.

**Most people don’t understand how much work goes into performing for the camera, how hard it is.**

They’re not supposed to. The best stuff should look the easiest. When it looks like everything’s at your fingertips, that’s when everyone thinks, “Oh, that part was made for him.” They have absolutely no idea how hard it was to put everything at your fingertips. You know, we have a generation that sees acting all the time—on TV, in films, the Internet—so they think it’s easy.

**Any advice you have for good actors or those coming up in the ranks?**

Lots of casting directors and agents are all after “so and so” type—a look or a type of any given month of any given year. Don’t ever think about that. You are who you are