

My Name is William Hurt and I Am a Movie Star

by S. Asher Sund

In the community of southern California where I live, it is not uncommon to run into movie and rock stars on occasion. My girlfriend, for instance, recently spotted Meryl Streep sitting with a friend in a café, and another friend of mine saw Guns N' Roses frontman Axl Rose in the health food store. Axl's basket was full of individually wrapped vegan brownies and muffins from the deli.

It was not such a surprise, then, that William Hurt should show up in one of my composition classes at the community college where I teach. Perhaps more surprising, or at least to those whom I've since told this story, was the fact that I did not recognize him for the first four weeks of the course.

Only when I received his first essay, "My Name is William Hurt and I Am a Movie Star," did I realize who he was. I will attempt to reconstruct from memory as best as I can here one telling and quite beautiful section:

I developed a pretty serious drug addiction and didn't shower or cut my hair. The paparazzi started showing up in the bushes outside one of my gated houses, snapping pictures of me as I took out the trash. This was how my life went for years. But then I had this dream, this vision.

Otherwise, it was a meandering, thesis-less essay rife with punctuation errors. He cited Wikipedia as his only source. Furthermore, this vision of his that he went on to explain sounded basically false, written in a writerly voice not his own. As a composition teacher, I have an ear for such things. I did some research, which amounted to a marathon weekend of watching William Hurt movies, so that I wanted, afterwards, to stab myself in the heart. Finally, I came across "A Time of Destiny."

Based on an opera, “A Time of Destiny” is about two GIs—Martin, played by Hurt, and Jack, played by Timothy Hutton—who meet and befriend each other on the battlefield in WWII, not realizing that they are brothers-in-law. Earlier, Jack had eloped with Martin's sister. After the elopement, the father-in-law, Martin's (Hurt's) father, tracks down his daughter and abducts her to teach her some proper “old world” lessons about marriage. In the movie, the father dies, drowns in a lake, and Martin/Hurt, after learning that his brother-in-law is now his sworn enemy, seeks vengeance by getting assigned to his brother-in-law's platoon in Italy.

The screenplay, for Roget Ebert, at least according to what I read on Wikipedia, was too complex, and I would have to agree. I found William Hurt's performance less than engaging. Limp, actually. I found the whole WWII thing uninteresting. The abduction seemed outrageous. I didn't care for the father. I was glad he drowned. I wanted to drown everybody, in fact—the whole cast and the crew, and Hollywood itself—and I got through the movie only by drowning myself in scotch.

In the essay, Hurt basically plagiarized the movie, using it as an analogy for the “Hollywood war” between actors and agents and studios, everybody fighting against each other for the best scripts and roles. Obviously, for the last two decades or more, William Hurt had been on the losing side of this battle. I gave him an F for choosing to act in a movie like “A Time of Destiny” in the first place, not to mention for his failure to properly reference the movie in his paper, amounting to plagiarism. But I did like that part about the paparazzi. I wrote in the margin, “Nicely executed, but try next time to avoid the clichés. Paparazzi, really, I mean, come on. Give us something real. And *PLEASE DO NOT USE WIKIPEDIA AS YOUR ONLY SOURCE!!*”

During our individual conference, he said, “But I was trying to tell you something real about my life.”

“This is not real,” I said, holding the essay out to him. “You're telling me about a screenplay for a movie that *you acted in.*”

“Yes, but there's a subtext that you didn't obviously get.”

“But William,” I said and laughed—a short, bursting guffaw that amounted to more of a conversation end stop than a laugh. “There is no subtext. There is never any subtext. Life is only the roles that we find ourselves in, with poorly drawn out dialogue in our sometimes too-complex of scripts.”

Before he dropped the course, I met up with Hurt one last time during my morning office hours. He said he was having a hard time keeping up with all of the work I was assigning.

“You’ve got to believe in yourself, William,” I said. “That’s your problem. Somewhere along the line, you stopped believing in yourself.”

“But do you believe in yourself?” he asked me then.

“That’s not the point,” I said.

“And why is that not the point?”

“Because I’m the teacher here, goddamnit, and you are my student.”

At that, William stood and erupted into a fifteen-minute, off-the-cuff, red-faced, raging tirade. He threw his finger into my face, jabbed it at me, back and forth in the air, and told me outright that just about when he had started to like me, or wanted to like me, he had begun to despise me. He hated me as he had never hated anyone ever before. I was, as they say, spellbound, overwhelmed with emotion, to the point of tears. Not to sound too ridiculous, but Hurt was giving me the hurt, and it felt good. When he was done, he had spittle at the corner of his lips.

“*Now,*” I said. “If only you can act like that.”

“I was acting,” he said.

And that was the last I ever heard from him.

