

EDGE

interview

John Heard



Leading men come and go in Hollywood. Only a handful, though, have the ability to disappear into a supporting character. **John Heard**, who passed away shortly after this interview, was at home at either end of the spectrum, which accounts for his long, interesting career. Heard first wowed critics in his early 20s as an Obie-winning stage actor in New York, and quickly moved into film and television roles. He reeled off a string of memorable performances in the 1980s, including *Cutter's Way*, *Cat People*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *Heaven Help Us*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Big*, *Beaches*, *Mindwalk*, *Awakenings* and *The Pelican Brief*. In 1990, he played Peter McCallister, the dad in *Home Alone*. Jenny Stewart knew John Heard for more than two decades. She reached out to John to get the story behind his role in *Home Alone*...and the unusual challenges he faced as one of the most-recognized actors of his time.

EDGE: When you got the script for *Home Alone*, did you have any idea that this was going to become such an iconic movie?

JH: No. No idea.



Hughes Entertainment/20th Century Fox

EDGE: Many people have pointed out that the premise is hard to swallow. Could a family board a plane for Europe and leave a child behind?

JH: That's a good question. And that's what Katherine O'Hara (*above*) and I had to ask ourselves. The two of us didn't know. Between the two of us, she had the more difficult part. I could just be sort of a dummy, a goofy

guy—I made him a gynecologist—I didn't care, as long as she was as focused as she was in terms of losing our son. Then we learned that it was a comedy. Why is this funny? How do we play this? We didn't really know how comedic all that slapstick stuff was going to be until we saw it. It wasn't until the second *Home Alone* that we knew that we could be funny.

EDGE: So you both were playing it straight?

JH: We were playing it straight. Or, we were given an opportunity by the director to be comedic—but not necessarily *personally* comedic or funny, not somebody making jokes.

EDGE: Have you ever misplaced a child and felt that kind of panic and terror?

JH: Sure. From the moment you have children you're experiencing that. I can remember a time when I was in a little video store, a perfectly safe place, in Rhinebeck, New

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York. My son, Jack, was four or five. I was talking to the girl who ran the store with her mother, and I turned around and he wasn't there. We were towards the back of the store, so there wasn't any place for him to go. It was literally like he had disappeared. I flipped out. I'd taught him not to run around to try to find a parent if he became separated, to stand in the same place where he lost his parent—teaching him his phone numbers, stuff like that. I started racing around in a circle. “Jack! Jack!!” Somehow he had managed to blend in with the videotapes in the corner of the store; I didn't see him. I hugged him. “Oh, my God, there you are!” God, it was so horrible. I know the feeling, and it's a really horrible feeling.

EDGE: What do you remember from the set of *Home Alone*?

JH: Michael Jackson came to the set to see Macaulay Culkin. They were buddies. We were all getting into a van while we were shooting the ride to the airport, and I hit my head getting into the van. Someone took a picture of them standing in front of the van with me wearing the camel hair coat from the movie holding a hot water bottle on my head. I don't know what happened to it.

EDGE: You grew up in the Washington D.C. area. Do you consider that home?

JH: That and New York City, I guess. I've spent an equal amount of time in each.

EDGE: What did your parents do?

JH: My father worked in the Pentagon. He was under assistant to the assistant to the under assistant to the Secretary of Defense. He was in charge of contracting and military appropriations. He was an engineer. On weekends, my father would go play his saxophone, which he loved dearly, and my mother would go and perform in a community theater play.

EDGE: Who got you into the theater as a young man?

JH: My mother, probably, and my sister, Cordis, who wanted to build a theater in our garage. My mother said

to me, “Why don't you get out of the house and do something?” It was more of a threat that, if I didn't, she would make life more difficult. The first show that I ever was in at the Chevy Chase Community Center was a show called *The Happy Wanderer*. The kid that was going to sing in the show got sick. He had one of those operatic voices at age 12. The lady that ran the group of us—she was very sweet, I had a crush on her—said to me, “All you have to do is walk around, John, and pretend like you're singing...and we'll play something.”

EDGE: Poor singing voice?

JH: *Terrible*. When I was in college, I did an operetta, and I only had one line to sing. I had a director who literally pulled his hair out every time I sang. And, he didn't have much to pull out! He was like, “Don't you *hear* yourself?”

EDGE: How many roles have you had where you had to sing?

JH: None. Well, actually, I did a repeat role in *The Sopranos* and they called me up and said, “Tony's going to have a dream return thing, like years later, and you have to sing around the table. It's part of the dream that he's having, and you're singing [sings] You're once...twice... three times a lady. That's one of the hardest songs in the world for anybody to sing! So I called up David Chase, and said, “I'm not singing this. I can't sing that song.” He said, “I never thought of that. It never occurred to me that you couldn't sing.” Like it was all my fault. He didn't change it, so I had to sing it. I had to take singing lessons for a week to sing even a note of it. And I had to sing it in front of Annette Bening and Jimmy Gandolfini, they were two people at the table. Annette was really nice. Gandolfini was always really funny. He said, “Wow, you sound a lot better off camera.” Annette Bening said, “Jimmy! Don't be mean!” She was, like, give him a break. I never forgot how she stood up for me.

EDGE: One of your first movie roles was playing Jack Kerouac in the 1980 film *Heart Beat* along with Nick Nolte and Sissy Spacek. What was it like stepping into such an iconic character?

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JH: It was scary because I'm not anything like him. I picked a certain time when Jack Kerouac had written *Maggie Cassidy* about his hometown in Lowell, Mass. I identified with that. I went to school at Clark University, which was in Worcester, and I knew from counties and dark New England nights and so on and so forth. Also, he was a member of a boy's gang, he was Catholic, he was Canadian—French Quebecois. He had a rugged side. He was poor, his mother looked out for him, I don't remember if his father was around. But, he was a lot tougher than me. I was a little bit more effete, so I was worried that I was going to come off too bookish. Jack Kerouac seemed pretty downtrodden to me and he was such a heavy drinker. So I'd get into fights with the director, John Byrum, all the time. He'd say, "I don't give a crap if it's the real thing, just play the scene, stop being so glum."

EDGE: He was looking for a different Kerouac.

JH: This was a time in Kerouac's life when Carolyn Cassidy and Neal Cassidy and he, I think, were having the most fun—riding around, both of them being in love with her, and her with them. They were being cutting edge, so that was what the movie was trying to show. He didn't want me to be Jack Kerouac in *The Dark of Night*. He used to take my girlfriend at the time, and put her on a ladder behind the camera, and surprise me so that she would make faces or something, shake her booty, so that I would perk up.

EDGE: What was it like off-set with Nick and Sissy?

JH: Sissy we didn't see that much of; we scared her off very early on. She was like, "They're going to throw me in the pool." Nick and I—and his friend Billy Cross—hung out every night and just drove L.A. We were up all night every night, and went from one end of L.A. to the other. Billy drove. We'd pull into one house after another, 20 minutes apart, to see girls with their hair up in rollers, with their pajamas on, going [falsetto] "Hi, Nick!" with their face in their hands. Everybody loved Nick. I mean everybody loved Nick. Everywhere you went everyone

loved Nick Nolte. He was great! He's a great guy!

EDGE: He's a man's man.

JH: Yes. He's very much a man's man. All the stunt guys used to love him. We used to drink over at The River Bottom, and they would actually come in the back room and sit down in our booth to meet Nick and say hi to Nick. That's a very rare thing for an actor; that was quite a tribute. With me, it was like "Who's *he*?"

EDGE: How did coming of age in the late 1960's influence who you are?

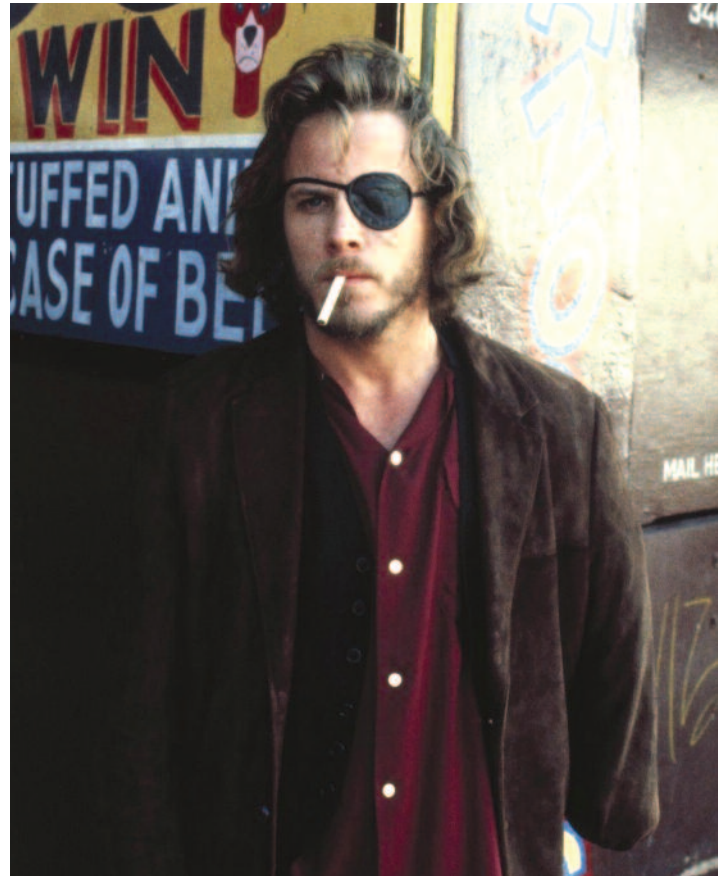
JH: After college, I went to [grad school at] Catholic University to stay out of Vietnam. It was a stupid decision, since they weren't giving anybody deferments for going to grad school anymore. But, I tried anyway! I thought that I'd get a master's degree in theater drama. I'll teach... that will be fun...I'll be connected to the theater, get hooked up in some theater department somewhere in the United States and stay in that privileged world of academics. It was 1968, and I was graduated from college and I didn't know what to do. It was a time when everything was interconnected with an alternate lifestyle.

EDGE: And?

JH: I realized that I had no ability whatsoever to write a masters thesis! But, Catholic U. had a touring theater company that traveled around the country performing plays for \$80 a week. My acting teacher said I could go. His actual words were, "Everyone else is in Vietnam, John, so yeah, you can go." I guess you can say that's when the "acting bug" hit. We drove everywhere—Iowa, Michigan, Georgia. Setting up the show, performing, breaking it down. And, in between, we were getting into all sorts of trouble. It was a political time. It was a lifestyle. It was anti-government, anti-corporations. It was a great way of being in touch with everything that was going on in your lifetime at that age.

EDGE: Did you consider yourself a hippie?

JH: I didn't have the guts to go the whole distance as a hippie. Friends of mine did. You have to remember that



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we were all supposed to go to Vietnam because of the draft. Extreme things had to be done to stay out of going. Some guys tried to flunk the physical, or said they were crazy. I didn't have to do any of that because of theater, I was lucky enough to work.

EDGE: What should I add to my Netflix queue to see John Heard at his best?

JH: Everybody points to *Cutter's Way* (above). I don't know. That was another instance of me being not quite gritty enough. That's what Billy, Nick's friend, said. Maybe *Big*. Although *Big* is a little one-note. I wish I had done more in *Big*. I was just trying to get through the words and make them believable. Sometimes, you have to show up and remember to be creative, to come with something that's not straightforward.

EDGE: You were a bad guy in *Big*. Do you prefer playing the bad guy or do you like the funny, good guy roles?

JH: I would prefer to play the "theater of the absurd" guy—an Ionesco kind of a transition from World War II



Gracie Films/20th Century Fox

into the '60's kind of thing. Not-stand up humor. A humorous character with a point of view, but not trying to be funny. Playing a bad guy for me, that's hard.

EDGE: How so?

JH: Because there is a tendency for me to become over-emotional, and most bad guys are great when they are emotionless. They're straightforward, prepossessed and physically formidable. Look at Joe Pesci. He's only—what?—five feet tall. But every time Joe gets pissed he's so wonderfully bad ass. And yet, at the same time, he's the funniest guy in the world! You know when he did that thing about "What's so funny about me?" in *Goodfellas*, well he did that to me one night in a hotel. He came in and I was standing at the front desk. He told me a story about some guy that kept bugging him. He kept saying [spot-on Joe Pesci imitation] "Don't make me come ova dere, don't make me come ova dere." I think he was trying it out on me, because he ended up putting that in *Home Alone*, and it was hilarious. He has some kind of unique combination of talent, a voice and a physicality that he blends into one person. He's engaging as a bad guy and that's where I'd like to be.

EDGE: Are you still having fun acting?

JH: Yes. I have a lot of fun. I like to have fun. I like to screw around and I like to be sort of a jerk, and give people a hard time, get people to leave me alone. They think that

I'm some big grouch. But people forget that you're standing there between takes and you're thinking about what you're going to do or what you're going to say.

EDGE: Are you interested in doing stage again?

JH: Yes, I love the stage. I love theater, its' my first choice. I always think that I could be great on stage. I don't know why. I think that's the tradition of being on stage, you think you can be great. I don't think you think that as much in movies. But, I think that about theater.

EDGE: Is that because of the energy you get from the audience?

JH: Maybe. I just think traditionally every young actor thinks *my* Hamlet is going to be the *greatest* Hamlet!

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Editor's Note: John Heard passed away following back surgery on July 21 in Palo Alto. After turning off her recorder, Jenny Stewart asked John what his future plans were. His final words to her were, "Let the chips fall where they may." Jenny had this to add: "Ironically, our interview started with us joking around about his inclusion in a celebrity death hoax scam that had gone viral. He humbly thought that he was being confused with the actor John Hurt, who had died in January. I offered that he, John Heard, was now part of an elite crowd of performers whose deaths were faked on social media. John was a contradiction of terms. He came from the Washington D.C. establishment, yet spoke—and sometimes acted—like a character from *Easy Rider*. He was gritty, yet mannered, dangerously funny yet hermetic in times of self-doubt. He initially wanted to take a safer path in life, but ended up on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, which brought him celebrity and, I hope, happiness."