

# CHRIS COOPER

by Sylvia Karcz  
photography by Baldomero Fernandez

The 13 or so seconds in which Chris Cooper accepted the 2003 Oscar for his role as a toothless orchid poacher in *Adaptation*, speak volumes. As his eyes grew big and his voice began to faintly quiver during his final moments, the actor raised his award, and with millions watching, shattered the divide created by the television screen. "In light of the troubles in this world," Cooper said, overcome with passion, "I wish us all peace."

And you believed him. It's the kind of timeless "a-ha" moment that inspires immediate admiration for someone you undoubtedly recognize and have come to appreciate but whose name you may not even know. Yet, while the years have passed and his roles have kept coming – Cooper has been in well over 30 films, including *A Time to Kill*, *Syriana*, *Breach*, *The Patriot*, *American Beauty*, *The Town* – those final seconds of his Oscar acceptance speech still succinctly describe the man behind the nominations and the decades worth of underrated film roles. With the quiet demeanor of a Midwestern Marlboro Man and the sensibility of a worldly scholar, Cooper carries the everyman in his hard-earned success as an actor: his subdued Missouriian drawl; his stints as a cattle rancher and all-around handyman; the unwavering devotion of a father who, in spite of tragedy, continues to fight for a greater good in memory of his son.

Born and raised in Missouri, Cooper found his first outlet for expression through music, singing everywhere from high school choirs to teen dance halls with various bands. When he realized that something more steady was needed to avoid getting caught up in the wrong crowd, he signed up to volunteer at the community theatre. Working his way from scene-shifter to on-stage presence, Cooper realized that he had found his niche. He attributes his success to good organization, hard work, and steadfast confidence, despite his reserved nature. "During my university years, [my shyness] is what really got me to go audition for stage plays," he says. "It was really getting in the way of communicating with people and being around people, so I figured the theatre was the perfect thing to break out of that. That was the kickoff point."

And while decades of notable performances are impossible to summarize, it's safe to say that Cooper has earned his place as one of the most respected and talented actors of his generation. Despite what may appear to some as a pigeonhole of military/government agency/macho-father-type roles, Cooper is keen to note that ultimately, the film industry is a business. "You get placed into a mold pretty quickly, but I don't have a problem with that," he says. "The roles that I have chosen have been great scripts and characters I thought I could bring something interesting to, so I don't have any regrets."



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Cooper concentrates his efforts as an actor largely on displaying the intricacies of human behavior. "You have three sources at your disposal: your imagination, your life experience and your research. Every role demands something different from you, and you go to any source you can to find that character." As for being the go-to "supporting" character time and time again? "I don't feel the need to carry a film at all. But I will definitely compete and help that lead actor in giving the best performance that he can."

Coupled with brains and a valiant call for action for issues close to his heart, Cooper is truly inspiring. From his frustrations with the government to his powerful campaign to bring awareness and improve the livelihoods of children with special needs, he is not afraid to play the role of advocate. "This is a business that you can get pretty self involved in, but having [my son] Jesse, it really made clear the priorities in life... [We] were pretty level-headed before, but it's amazing how a little boy can really straighten you up." Jesse was born with cerebral palsy and passed away in 2005. Since then, Cooper and his wife have been ardent about sharing their experiences in hopes of educating a nation that struggles to find a fair place for the disabled in society.

"It's a constant fight, and that's where I want my energies to go. Because there's a fairness issue, and the segregation is intolerable," he says, stressing that people must learn to look at the person underneath the disability and not just on the surface. *Knowing Jesse*, a book penned by his wife about his son and their family experiences, is one way Cooper hopes people may become aware of and inspired by the struggles and triumphs they underwent. "It's hard for people that are not around it to not be curious or fearful of it. But where are the disabled? We don't see them. We took Jesse out in public; he traveled with us. He was such a great, great joy. But the only time I see [the disabled] is at different functions and fundraisers. So where is our community, which includes the disabled? It's just so curious."

Through the creation of the Jesse Cooper Foundation, Cooper strives to make a significant impact by supporting outfits like the Romanian Children's Relief, which finds homes for disabled orphans, the Federation for Children with Special Needs, which fights for the inclusion of special needs students in public schools, and AccesSportAmerica, which works in increasing function and fitness for the disabled through high-challenge sports. The foun-

dation also assists low-income and English-as-a-second-language families who are overwhelmed by the untruths of a very flawed education system. "It's important for [them] to have advocates behind them so that they can get their children a good education and not have to deal with all the double-talk and segregation that is being pushed for children with special needs."

It's that double-talk and divide of our government, our systems and policies – of our country as a whole, in many ways – that irks Cooper most. "Early on, after 9/11, you virtually couldn't say a word about the administration. And I think, over the years, truths were told," he says. "We were manipulated as a country, and the real story is continuing to unfold of what a setup these wars have been. And then you come to this administration, and those very policies of the previous administration continue. And that makes me very, very disappointed."

That's not to say all hope is lost, though. Cooper comments how movements like the growing Occupy Wall Street demonstrations are comparable to how major issues of the 60s and 70s – from civil rights and women's rights to protests against the



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 Paul Smith jacket  
 Prada sweater  
 Pierre Hardy shoes  
 Ralph Lauren corduroy trousers  
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 Teddy Boy coat  
 Gucci shoes  
 Junya Watanabe trousers

Vietnam War – were voiced. “To really get something done, people have to go to the streets,” Cooper emphasizes. “It’s not going to happen by Tweeting and over the Internet, although that’s very helpful to get the message out. On a large scale, we have to get across to this Congress that they are not fooling anybody. It will eventually get to the point where we will wake up and become so desperate, that we will have a far more united voice, but I just think we are just terribly divided right now. And I don’t get the blindness.”

But in a media-centric age of overwhelming complacency, is change possible when such large majority of younger generations forgets what a hard-fought battle it was to get us to where we are at present? “You can take pockets. If you take a look at young girls today, for instance, I think they forget how their predecessors marched to get women’s rights in all aspects,” Cooper says. “And over the years, those rights have just been taken for granted. Young women don’t realize that their rights are slowly being taken away from them. I don’t want to come down on the youth today, but I must say that they are not very aware of what is being done to them, or how soon their lives will be affected in a very big way if they don’t speak up.”

As an actor, as an American, and as a human being of great principle, the world could use more people like Chris Cooper.

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