

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER



Beatty! No! The Other One!

By Sara Vilkomerson

Last Wednesday morning, the actor Ned Beatty gently moved aside a woman's purse to sit down on a couch in a midtown Manhattan hotel.

"Women always have more stuff," he said. "I should know—I've been married to a few of them!"

The 69-year-old actor, white-haired and barrel-chested in a striped shirt and corduroy blazer, has a broad face that's been seen in over 140 films and television shows and gives him that Hey, aren't you that guy? quality. His first role—his powerful and unsettling portrayal as the brutalized Bobby Trippe in 1972's *Deliverance*—led to later parts such as the sidekick to Gene Hackman's Lex Luthor in *Superman 1* and *2* and his Oscar-nominated performance in 1976's *Network* (he lost to Jason Robards in *All the President's Men*, a film in which he also appeared).

He was in town to promote *Sweet Land*, an indie film co-starring Alan Cumming, Lois Smith and Elizabeth Reaser, in theaters Oct. 18.

"I got this call, and they tell me it's a small independent with no

money, but that it's filming in Minnesota and it's about early Norwegian immigrants," he said in his Kentucky-soaked baritone. He gestured to his fourth wife, Sandy, a slim, gray-haired woman who was sitting in the next room. "I said, 'O.K., you got me!' 'Cause I'm living in Minnesota and my wife is a Norwegian immigrant.' What am I going to say—no?"

Elizabeth Reaser, who commands the most screen time in *Sweet Land* and who appeared in last year's hit *The Family Stone*, joined Mr. Beatty on the couch. The night before, the 31-year-old brunette actress was watching TV when she came across Mr. Beatty's 1987 performance in *The Big Easy* with Dennis Quaid. "Now there was a bad B movie that turned out to be really good," Mr. Beatty said. "There's a lesson for you: Don't pass on the B movies. They don't call them that anymore, do they?"

The subject of last summer's big-budget film, *Superman Returns*, came up. "There're things about yourself that you can never understand," said Mr. Beatty. "One of the things I don't understand is ... I don't keep up with people very much. I'm always looking in front—maybe I'm afraid I'll fall over if not. I sort of felt like

I knew Chris Reeve longer than anybody else. He was a stand-in on a movie that I made—a terrible movie about submarines—called *Gray Lady Down*. Charlton Heston was in it, and let's say it wasn't his best effort. But Chris was in it. For some reason, I just liked him. I thought he was awfully good-looking. I used to tease him. I'd walk by saying, 'Too good-looking! Find something else to do! Be a model, I don't care. Swimsuits! Anything!'" He laughed. "So I knew him by the time we did *Superman*. But when he had his accident ... I couldn't ... I just kind of—and it's a weird way of saying it—but I kind of got paralyzed. I mean, what can you say? I didn't know his wife, I didn't know his family—the last time we spent time together, he was with a different lady. So, I don't know. Anyway, I don't want to see *Superman [Returns]*. I can't bring myself to see it. It's even here in the room in this hotel, but I can't watch it."

He continued about Mr. Reeve. "It's heartbreaking," he said. "He was a special guy. One of his big things was flying. People don't talk about it much, but he was a pilot. Do you remember the book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*?"

Continued on next page...

The guy who wrote that wrote another book soon afterward, about a barnstorming pilot, and a friend of mine wanted to try to make a movie out of it. Well, I got Chris interested in playing the lead character. So we flew up to Oregon to meet with the guy, and the guy had an old-fashioned biplane! So we got down there, and he wanted to take us up flying. Chris goes up there with him and is sitting in the front seat, and the guy is flying from the back. Chris doesn't have a stick. And he says, 'Well, how do I fly? I want control.' So for 30 minutes we look around, till we find this broom. So then we stuck a broom into the hole so Chris could fly. We never did talk any business."

"What do you mean, you put a broom in the hole?" Ms. Reaser asked.

"There's a hole down there, like a socket—and they put a broom in the hole and Chris is up there flying with this broom."

"I feel like you're pulling my leg," she said.

Nooo," Mr. Beatty said. "You talk to guys who know about flying and they'll tell you that it's the most stable airplane—that's why you can do all that stuff. You know, we haven't been flying for that long. When you think about it, it's an amaz-

ing thing. How did we get that far this quickly? Wars."

"Ashley turned out to be the bad guy in the company," he said. "She did this thing where she kind of faked that she was hurt. Oh, I don't know if she actually faked it. I don't know what the hell happened. But she was on crutches by the curtain call. Jason, he was so mad. He was really mad at her—he was so mad at her, he got un-mad at me!"

Mr. Beatty has two big movies coming up: *The Walker* in January with Woody Harrelson, and *Charlie Wilson's War*, starring Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts and Philip Seymour Hoffman, directed by Mike Nichols, due out in 2008.

"For some reason, I seem to have a career this summer," he said. "Don't tell anybody this, but I keep getting hired to play the Dick Cheney character. It's boring as hell! They show me these clips on how he talks like this"—he mimicked the Cheney-talking-out-the-side-oh-his-mouth motion. "Oh, he's terse. He's terse! In *Charlie Wilson's War*, it's interesting, because this is about real people—about the people who made it possible for the Afghans to defeat the Russians and get them out. I was so dumb, I went in there for a read-through, and we went to costume and I

put on this suit and said I wasn't sure if it was the right look for my character. They said, 'Well, would you like to take a look at him? 'Cause it's a real person.' This dummy didn't know it!"

Mr. Beatty, who recorded a gospel album, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, in 2006, originally wanted to go into opera singing but was rejected by the Cincinnati Conservatory. "The person I auditioned for told me maybe I could do musical comedy, but I was never going to be an opera singer. But you know who they did accept? Tennessee Ernie Ford, one of my all-time favorite singers. I felt like I shouldn't feel too bad, if he made it in. If I could, there's a wonderful musical called *The Most Happy Fella*, about a guy who grows grapes in California. It's fun, but I'm probably not right for it."

Ms. Reaser, who attended Juilliard, said that she couldn't get a role in theater. "It's hard to get a play in New York, for the reasons that we talked about," she said.

Mr. Beatty leaned forward.

"Listen here," he said, "this is between you and me: The camera loves you, you must know that. And that's wonderful! Don't worry about the rest of it."
