



Slice of Life

Nick Stahl

by Johanna Lenander

To many of us unfamous folks, the life of a child actor seems both exotic and slightly creepy. There's the *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* cliché of the kid who gets too much too soon and never quite manages to grow up gracefully. But in Nick Stahl's case the opposite seems to be true. Rather than smuggling an overly entitled inner child, Stahl seems more like an old soul trapped in a young man's body.

Practically a veteran in the business (he started acting in the late '80s) he has managed to become that rare thing: a 27-year-old character actor. Stahl excels at the brooding, mysterious types that carry around a lot of heavy baggage that slowly becomes unraveled before the audience's eyes. He is equally convincing as a hero and as a villain, bringing a sense of alienation and vulnerability to both. Besides obvious talent, Stahl also seems to possess a sort of earthy humility. Perhaps what makes him so unique is his highly pragmatic professional attitude. To Stahl, acting is work. It's a way to make a living. Something you do—not something you try to be.

"I've never really considered any other career," he says, explaining that this single-mindedness is partly a product of necessity. "When you start working and traveling as a 10-year-old kid, it leaves so little time for school. I sort of had to put all my chips in and really commit to it. So it became really the only thing that I knew how to do." Maybe it's good to not have had time for adolescent dreams of stardom. As a teenager, Stahl was already dealing with the very real, adult issues that every freelancer faces. "For most of the time I kept working, but I also had huge dry spells. But then I would seem to get through that phase and eventually get another job." Many of those jobs led to highly acclaimed (and deeply moving) performances like the young boy yearning for a father figure

in *The Man Without a Face*, and the teenage lover of a 30-something woman in *In The Bedroom*. For the most part, Stahl has stuck to smaller, ensemble-driven productions like Larry Clark's controversial *Bully* and the now defunct HBO series *Carrivale* (a hit among critics, but not with mainstream audiences).

His biggest star turn yet was the part of John Connor in *Terminator 3*. Although his part is underwritten and the movie is essentially flat, there's a fragility and despair to Stahl's anti-hero that feels real. Working on such a big production was alien to him in some ways: "It was just very different for me, because I've never been part of something so massive before," he says. "You do feel like you're part of a machine. You know, you almost forget that in this hugeness, there's a movie being made." The blockbuster aspect was also a challenge. "It does entail some sort of pressure, that this ain't going straight to video. People are actually going to see this, even if it's bad or I'm bad or whatever."

Stahl is currently operating in more familiar territory, starring in an independent family drama called *Ferris Wheel* by the Irish director Bill Maher (not to be confused with the American comedian) with Charlize Theron, Woody Herrelson and Dennis Hopper. The plot is centered around Stahl's character "a simple guy with a dingy, meager apartment who works on a road crew," and his 12-year-old niece who is abandoned by her mother (Theron) and left in his care. It's a project that seems very much up his alley: "It's just a great tale about a family. I like simple stories, that are well written and with characters that are clear. I love those kinds of movies. A true slice of life. I've always felt a certain confidence in doing those kinds of roles."



