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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

Viggo Mortensen

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Interview

Viggo Mortensen

POET, PHOTOGRAPHER, MUSICIAN, ACTOR

By Marianne Love

PHOTO BY GEORGE PIMENTEL

Actor Viggo Mortensen loves North Idaho – enough so that he purchased land here in the 1980s. He returns several times each year to enjoy his forested residence not far from Sandpoint. Mortensen, age 46, gained worldwide fame while starring as the reluctant King Aragorn in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, filmed in New Zealand. He most recently played Pony Express rider Frank T. Hopkins in the Western flick *Hidalgo*.

Mortensen's acting career unfolded with a rocky start in the 1980s. In fact, he quit telling his family to watch for him in his early roles. Some were forgettable; some even ended up on the film editor's floor. He did show up on screen as an Amish farmer in *Witness*. An award-winning Los Angeles stage performance in *Bent* (1987) provided a significant boost to his career.

According to *Premiere* magazine, "Four years later, he got his big break when he delivered a vivid performance as a malcontent in Sean Penn's *The Indian Runner* ... " Ironically, Viggo had successfully auditioned for a Panida Theater stage role as Biff Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* before learning of his selection for Penn's movie. Panida Board member Deborah McShane remembers the unpretentious, calm and kind man whose audition "created an energy shift in the theater.

"Karen Bowers (Panida's manager) heard the very quiet, knowing and sensitive voice," McShane recalls. "She stopped what she was doing and came down the aisle. We cast him in the role." Later, during the first rehearsal, an absent Viggo called to apologize because he'd landed the part in the Penn movie and couldn't pass it up.

"It was really responsible for him to call," McShane says. "It was a great movie for him, and we felt really lucky to have had him audition at our theater."

The actor's career has rocketed since that movie break, especially thanks to *Lord of the Rings*. Mortensen, however, remains the reluctant superstar who prefers process to final outcome. Often called a "Renaissance man," he believes in showing up on time and dedicating himself to the project of the day, whether it be acting, photography, art, music, fly fishing, creating poetry, cooking from scratch, riding horses, enjoying family, keeping current on truly worldly topics or retreating to nature. His 10-year marriage to punk rock star Exene Cervenka produced both his best friend and son, Henry Mortensen, age 16. Henry lives

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alternately with each of them, and despite their divorce, the two remain friends.

Since his first visit here, the New York native has considered Idaho's Panhandle a sanctuary where he can slip in and out to enjoy its beauty and solitude far away from Los Angeles, where he lives while not on location for movies. Locals who know him respect Viggo's down-to-earth, modest attitude toward his worldwide fame. Most also respect his space, allowing him to maintain a veil of relative anonymity as he visits stores and restaurants around the area. He's a fiercely private man – content and equipped to entertain himself.

Viggo speaks softly and is reluctant to speak about himself. This humble being of limitless interests is not reluctant, however, to reflect on his experiences, passions and observations of the world around him.

What are your impressions of North Idahoans?

I like North Idaho because the people mind their own business, and they're not overly impressed. People can coexist and do good work and bad work in anything, anywhere. The people I tend to respect are those who show up on time, prepared, and respect their neighbors and the people they're working with. People have been really respectful of my family in that area.

Tell us about how you discovered this area and why you decided to put down roots.

I've always been one who, when I made a little money, would rent, borrow or buy a car and go on a road trip. Idaho was a place I first saw on a road trip in the early '80s and figured I'd go back. I returned there in the mid-'80s, rented a house and bought a little land.

I've spent a lot of time up there, and eventually my family came up. I like to just be outdoors, and it's a beautiful place, especially for getting away from the city and the movie business. Idaho is like a whole national park; it has the highest percentage of public land in the lower 48 states, and there will always be a debate about what to do with it. I think it's important to preserve it because there's so much forest land, lots of water, rivers, lakes, wetlands, but it is finite. You can't assume you can do whatever you want with it.

People are proud of what they've got in Idaho, and they want to keep it that way. Yeah, there are bad apples who will buy big pieces of land and clear cut it for money to buy some more, often without even visiting the place. I think any reasonable real estate person will agree there has to be some balance with land use. There seem to be enough reasonable people in this area for a healthy debate to continue. People seem to be able to talk, for the most part, with different coalitions consistently working to preserve the Clark Fork and the Pend Oreille and their feeder

PHOTO COURTESY ANNIE LOVE

> I try to take care of the places I go to whether it's where I live or hide. It's a cliche, but leave the place looking better than you found it. I try to do that – **always.**

Above, Viggo Mortensen talks to the press at the premiere in New Zealand. Left, fly fishing is one of many pursuits the actor enjoys. (Photo courtesy Mortensen family)

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streams. They seem to be able to talk with people more purely interested in exploiting the land for profit. As long as there's dialogue, there's hope.

I don't think people anywhere are so dumb that they're going to believe all that they hear from any one special interest group. If you live in Sandpoint, I think you can see what's around you. When you drive from one place to another, you can see what's happening. The land between Spokane and Coeur d'Alene, for example, has become a shopping corridor compared to the farmland I saw in the '80s. People can see the changes and eventually decide what course to follow.

I try to take care of the places I go to whether it's where I live or hide. It's a cliche, but leave the place looking better than you found it – pack it in and pack it out. I try to do that – always.

I do think organizations ... have done a good job working along with companies that make money on the resources. There are also lots of individuals who work hard privately to preserve what is there. They hike it, and they appreciate it. They're the people on the ground.

Over the years, how have you reacted to North Idaho's racist image?

It's not typically North Idaho to be racist or intolerant or to pave the landscape and cut every tree. That's just not typical. People ask me, "Why do you spend so much up there? Do you like being around those rednecks or Aryans?" I reply, "I don't know any, and I've never seen any." I know there are a few, but it's not typical of the people. There are good and bad people everywhere; it's just unfortunate that the bad people get a lot more attention than the good and average people. Same happens anywhere you go, I guess.

What about the Sandpoint area's most recent national media attention?

I think the media attention tends to come and go. You might get an influx of people from outside, even legislators, tourists or well-meaning individuals who get involved and do some good. But it's the people who live there who'll have the best feel for the area.

A forestry person who's assigned to Idaho will usually really care. Maybe they've had a land-use idea they bring from another part of the country to Idaho which can help. So there are things you can learn from outsiders, but I think the people who live there matter most in keeping things nice in their own back yard. ... The national magazine attention will move on. Don't mess with what's working; keep the balance.

A FEW VIGGO VITALS

Full Name: Viggo Peter Mortensen Jr.
Birthdate: Oct. 20, 1958
Birthplace: New York City
Parents: Viggo P. and Grace Mortensen (father is Danish businessman; mother is American)
Siblings: Two younger brothers
Education: Graduated in 1976 from Watertown High School in Watertown, N.Y. Earned degrees in 1980 in Spanish literature and U.S. government from St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. Speaks fluent English, Spanish and Danish.
Present Residence: Los Angeles
Past Residences: Argentina, Venezuela, Upstate New York, Denmark, New Zealand
Other vocations besides acting: Dock worker, flower peddler, truck driver, bartender, waiter, jazz musician, publisher and co-owner of Perceval Press (*www.percevalpress.com*)
Passions: His son, solitude in the outdoors, jazz, horses, cooking, poetry, art, fly fishing, photography, acting and wasting no time on life's journey
Movie credits of note: *Witness, Lord of the Rings, Hidalgo, The Indian Runner, Crimson Tide, GI Jane, The Portrait of a Lady, A Perfect Murder*
Book credits: *The Horse Is Good, Mo Te Upoko-o-Te-Ika/For Wellington, Coincidence of Memory, Miyelo, Hole in the Sun, Signlanguage, 45301, Recent Forgeries*
CD credits: *Please Tomorrow, Pandemoniumfromamerica* and *The Other Parade*.
Viggo Victuals: Have included New Zealand road-kill rabbit (it was fresh)
Distinctions: Was invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in June 2004, People Magazine's "50 Most Beautiful People" in 2002, GQ Magazine's Men of the Year 2003, 1987 Dramalogue Critics' Award for stage performance in Bent.
Idiosyncrasies: Likes to go barefoot but packs along footgear out of respect for convention.

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Share some thoughts on the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hidalgo* experiences.

It (*Lord of the Rings*) was a hugely successful thing that's become part of the world culture. It was a longer shoot … was there over four years with one long stretch for a year and a half. I'm glad they chose me; I made a lot of friendships. *Lord of the Rings* was an unusually interesting experience. I'm sure it will be the longest shoot I'll ever be in but also the most popular movie, the one that has affected the most people.

I've had good experiences in other movies, whether they were seen by a lot of people or not. They've taken me to interesting places and introduced me to a lot of interesting people.

Hidalgo I really enjoyed. It featured a lot of beautiful places, and I wouldn't, in any way, put that below the *Lord of the Rings*. The locations were tough for the people and for the horses. You tend to have a long experience like that and you can look at it as being frustrating or hard, but you tend to develop special bonds with the people and animals you work with, survive the experience with.

Tell us about your upcoming movies.

The first one is with David Cronenberg, a highly respected Canadian director. The story takes place in a small Midwestern town, much smaller than Sandpoint. I'm the father in a family, and the story deals with mistaken identity. Some violent people show up from out of town and mistake me for someone else they have a bone to pick with.

I'm also doing a movie early next year (2005) in Spain. It takes place in the 17th century during the period when Spain was the biggest power in the world. ... It's probably one of the most ambitious movies ever made by an all-Spanish crew. It will eventually come here. There will be some sword fighting good adventure in it.

To read the full transcript of this interview with more about Viggo's love for horses, his interest in photography and experiences on location for movies, visit www.mariannelove.com.

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