

Tango

Last Sunday we got to discussing the actor Robert Duval and I said I had been impressed by his presence in films – even in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which he never spoke a line. I once wrote of being especially impressed by him in the 1993 film *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway*. It takes place in Florida. Richard Harris plays a resident of a seniors' motel by the ocean. He's seventy-five but won't admit it, doing push-ups, flexing his tattooed muscles. He's a loud ex-sailor, longhaired, unshaven, still a flirt.

And then there's Duvall, who plays a retired Cuban-American barber with a pleasant Spanish accent. By contrast with Harris, Duvall is a quiet, dignified fellow who dresses casually but neatly. He has a set routine each day, stopping at a coffee shop to order a bacon sandwich and chat with the waitress who serves him. He then spends time on a park bench carefully working a crossword puzzle, pausing on schedule to carefully unwrap and eat his bacon sandwich. It's here he meets Harris who loudly intrudes upon Duvall's routine. Patiently Duvall begins to socialize with Harris, always politely appalled at Harris' unkempt appearance and loud ways.

But soon his graceful manner begins to impact on Harris. The process comes to a climax when Duvall suggests that Harris do something about his shabby appearance and offers to give him a haircut and shave. Then occurs one of those beautiful moments in film. In Harris' run down apartment Duvall has him sit down and puts a sheet around him. The camera then dwells upon his snipping Harris' hair, quietly, gently; combing and snipping along around the ears, the back of the neck. You can sense Harris relaxing under the remote touch. Then we see Duvall honing his flat razor on a belt, back and forth slowly; testing the sharpness lightly with his thumb. Then we focus on the lather, the brush stirring in the cup, the lather applied to Harris' face and upper lip by hand. And then, with a quiet, "I won't hurt you," Duvall begins to run the razor down Harris' cheek, under the chin - in soft, sure strokes. It's as though Duvall were sculpting a new man out of the old, a work of art, bringing out the latent beauty of an old man who misses his youth.

Having toweled away the excess lather, Duvall then goes to his barber's kit and pours a generous amount of aftershave lotion into his cupped hand. He bears it dripping to where Harris sits entranced and applies it carefully, firmly, slowly, affectionately massaging his cheeks and neck, his whole face. You can almost smell the aroma and feel the sting. It seems as though the scene lasts

about fifteen minutes though it's no doubt less. And as Harris emerges from the experience, a fine looking, smooth, peaceful man instead of loud extrovert, you realize you have just been mesmerized by the performance of an ordinary, everyday deed - a haircut and shave - but performed by a man of grace and majesty who has turned this ordinary deed into a quiet ballet. No need for special effects or the usual shoot-'em-up finale. This scene should be memorable long after Rambo and all such pyrotechnic blockbusters have become as dated as Hopalong Cassidy.

After watching that film I finally knew what I want to be when I grow up: a man of grace who deals with himself and others and a bacon sandwich the way Duvall does - with reverence, dignity and a style reflective of the gracious, divine artist who made me - a man of grace who dances life in the stately way Duvall dances the Tango at the film's end.