



## O'TOOLE

# OSCAR WINNER?

*After conquering the desert and himself, the brash son of a bookie now is touted as a prize talent.*

By TREVOR ARMBRISTER

Peter Seamus O'Toole is a cocky, outspoken, thin-shouldered Irishman who hates physical exercise, shuns all forms of discipline and wears green socks for luck—of which he lately has had plenty. He dresses like a construction worker, chews on a thumb and wears a smug expression that is somehow reminiscent of a grown-up Peck's Bad Boy. Until quite recently, few people had ever heard of him.

Yet as this issue went to press, the odds were better than two to one that members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences would nominate O'Toole for an Oscar as the best male actor of 1962. For weeks the movie-industry grapevine has granted him an excellent chance of winning. If this happens he would become, at 29, the youngest and most unlikely unknown ever to capture filmdom's top award.

The possibility sparks some natural questions, for the august academy—whatever its faults—is seldom prone to flighty behavior. And answers at first seem elusive. O'Toole's new eminence can hardly sprout from the breadth of his film experience, which consists of a mere three pictures. Nor can it stem entirely from his physical appearance: A plastic surgeon straightened his nose a while back; an oculist prescribed glasses after an eye operation. His scruffy, rough-hewn looks are handsome enough but somehow fail to fit the Adonis mold.

O'Toole is colorful in a contradictory way. Off camera he fosters an engaging if not altogether true picture of himself as a brash, irresponsible sort—a latter-day Errol Flynn. On camera he changes pitch, seldom sulks, squeezes every shade of meaning from his lines in a furious, cast-iron desire to excel. "I'm the hardest-working bloody actor I know," he says, and there is little doubt he believes it.

Striking evidence of this is O'Toole's performance in *Lawrence of Arabia*, the \$13 million saga of adventure in the desert which opened last December in London, New York and Hollywood—just in time to qualify it, and him, for consideration in this year's Oscar balloting. O'Toole is cast as T. E. Lawrence, the brash, enigmatic British army lieutenant who swaggered into the Jordanian desert in 1916, molded feuding Arab tribes into a cohesive unit and turned them against the Turks—thus helping the Allies speed the end of World War I.

O'Toole's performance is momentous. For three hours and forty-two minutes a clattering entourage of 2,000 camels and 15,000 men sprawls across the wide screen—galloping hell-bent for

destiny through haunting stretches of desert. The shimmering sand, whiplashing wind and curdling bloodbath of war backdrop a first-rate cast: Alec Guinness, Jack Hawkins, Claude Rains, José Ferrer, Anthony Quinn and Arthur Kennedy. Yet O'Toole dominates the film. He is on camera for 218 minutes, and he spins off—now with arrogance, now with resignation—a record 648 lines. It is the longest speaking part in the history of movies.

O'Toole came perilously close to missing the part entirely. "At first, when I acquired the rights for *Lawrence*," says Sam Spiegel, the squat, hawk-nosed, immensely gifted producer, "I wanted Brando as my lead. He is a big name, and this is an expensive production."

Brando rejected the offer. He was already signed for *Mutiny on the Bounty*. If Spiegel wanted to wait until he was through with that, then perhaps they could talk. Spiegel next turned to Albert Finney (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*), a moody young British actor who, incredibly, also declined the part. Finally David Lean, director of *Lawrence*, suggested O'Toole.

Spiegel was skeptical. True, the young Irishman had drawn rave reviews at the Shakespeare Theater in Stratford-on-Avon for his performances in *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Troilus and Cressida*. But *Lawrence* demanded an actor with skill—and perseverance. And Spiegel had heard of O'Toole's reputation as a braggart and a drinker.

"Sam was against me from the start," O'Toole says, wincing. "He believed those stories. We didn't get along at all. It hardly helped matters when a fifth of whiskey tumbled from my pocket during our first meeting."

Egged on by Lean, however, Spiegel arranged for a screen test. When he saw the results he decided he had found his man.

Surprisingly, O'Toole hedged at the contract offer. He insisted on a clause that allowed him to bring Sian, his wife, to the desert once a month at the producer's expense. Spiegel, who had refused such privileges to other members of the cast, was furious. At length he gave in. "I would have taken this role for nothing," O'Toole admitted later. "And I would have done it without the clause. But I couldn't tell Spiegel that."

Hardly had he signed the contract when he began the arduous task of burrowing into Lawrence's life, seeking clues to his mysterious motivation. He made visits to Lawrence's birthplace in Wales and to Dorsetshire, England, where Lawrence was killed in 1935 in a motor-

cycle accident. He pored over the 40-odd books written by and about the man and nearly memorized all 661 pages of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—Lawrence's own account of his desert campaigns—on which the Robert Bolt script is based. Reading was only the beginning. For weeks he talked with men and women who had known Lawrence, both in the desert and, later, in England, where he had returned to seek anonymity in the Royal Air Force.

Yet in one sense, says O'Toole, the talks only complicated matters: "It was impossible to find any two men who could agree on Lawrence."

In January, 1961—four months before shooting was scheduled to start—O'Toole began the third and most demanding phase of his education. He arrived in Jordan, determined to learn the Arabic tongue, familiarize himself with Bedouin dress and master the art of riding a camel. He had trouble almost immediately.

"After a few rides," recalls photographer Mark Kauffman, who camped out with the *Lawrence* entourage, "Peter developed a nasty cyst on his backside. It was bleeding and obviously painful, but he refused to complain."

"I wasn't trying to be heroic," O'Toole explained later. "I just knew that if I told someone, I would have to go to the hospital. And that would have meant four more weeks in the God-forsaken desert."

In the beginning the Bedouin seemed hardly hospitable. "I was scared stiff," O'Toole recalls; "they wore guns and daggers and sat for hours without saying a word. I was sure they were planning some untimely end for me. Finally I realized that the Bedouin never speak unless they have something important to say. It was wonderful, like being in a warm bath. For the first time in my life I didn't have to push a conversation."

In May, 1961, filming began at Jebel Tubeiq, a barren, uninhabited speck in the Jordanian desert 150 miles from the nearest oasis. Merely gaining access to Jordan presented problems for several Jewish members of the unit. Spiegel—aware that Jordanian immigration officials often barred Jews from entering—had to enlist the aid of Anthony Nutting, a former British Foreign Office spokesman and close friend of Jordan's King Hussein. And reportedly, letters had to be written explaining that the Jews were really Protestants.

These efforts hardly seemed worth the trouble. The temperature at Jebel Tubeiq hissed above 125 degrees during the day, and the nights grew

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bitterly cold. Scorpions and horned snakes lurked in the sand. Food was airlifted from Britain. Water, at three dollars per gallon, was hauled across the steaming wastes in giant tank trucks. "Physical discomfort," director Lean had said, "is the price of authenticity."

By this time O'Toole could speak a passable Arabic, ride a camel at 30 miles per hour and don native robes with confidence. And now the Bedouin were calling him "El-Aurens," the same name they had once given Lawrence. Yet few people expected him to plunge into the role with the stamina he showed. "Ordinarily," muses Sian, "he hates physical exercise, but there he was showing great endurance. It was almost as if he had somehow assimilated Lawrence's masochistic pleasure in driving himself to exhaustion."

"Peter broke his back for only one reason," says one member of the cast. "That was David Lean. Somehow word got around that Lean didn't think Peter was tough enough. One time Lean made him run up and down a sand dune 25 times just to see if he could do it without blinking his eyes. Peter was determined to prove he could do it, and he did. That is the mark of a great director, getting a performance like that."

If the role was physically demanding, it was also dangerous. One afternoon, for a scene re-enacting a Lawrence raid on Turkish cavalry, O'Toole led his "raiding party" of 50 Bedouin in a camel charge against 400 other Arabs. The latter, who belonged to a different tribe, resented the Bedouin and resisted more fiercely than necessary. Knocked off his mount, O'Toole fell to the ground and suffered a minor concussion.

Despite such rigors O'Toole retained his sense of humor. One morning after struggling through a difficult scene he lumbered over to ask photographer Kauffman for a cigarette.

"You know, Mark," he gasped, "if someone had just given that bloody Lawrence a cigarette, a bottle of whiskey and a woman 44 years ago, none of us would be in this bloody place today."

At the end of September, 1961, weakened by dysentery, insect bites and loss of weight, Lean's "Mobile Maniacs" returned to England for a rest. The film was half completed: There still remained six months' shooting in Spain, three months' work in Morocco and several weeks of interior filming at home. Yet even at this point rumors of O'Toole's performance were sweeping London, and critics started comparing him—somewhat presumptuously—with Lawrence.

There is some basis for that comparison. Both men have Irish blood; both are ambiguous in manner. Both men went into the desert in their 20's, and both gained acceptance by the Arabs in the same ceremony—when they doffed their Army uniforms and put on the robes and headbands of Arab leaders. But there comparison falters. Physically, Lawrence was a runty five feet four; O'Toole is six feet. Lawrence was a scholar and an introvert. O'Toole, who abandoned school at 13—"the other students were not as brilliant as I was"—is an extrovert. Lawrence loved the desert. O'Toole hated it.

In December, 1961, the crew trekked to the ancient Spanish cities of Seville and Almería, then later moved on to Morocco. By August, 1962, the major portion of the film was in the can.

O'Toole came home for good and checked into a rest home in Surrey. As Lawrence he had suffered burns on his feet, temporary loss of the use of two fingers from a camel bite, a sprained neck, an injured leg, a dislocated spine and several minor concussions.

He got little rest. Producers flooded him with scripts. Warner Brothers dangled the role of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*; Richard Brooks suggested he do *Lord Jim*. It was a strange twist of fate for a young man who, only months before, had not even been able to pay his rent. For prior to *Lawrence* the acting career of Peter O'Toole was hardly a study in profit-making.

Mustered out of the Royal Navy in 1954 after a two-year stint on a submarine, he had come to London with less than five dollars in his pockets. Unshaven, wearing sneakers and a splotted green corduroy suit, he burst into the venerable Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and demanded an immediate audition. Somewhat taken aback, examiners gave him oral and written tests and later concluded that his performance merited a scholarship.

Graduated from R.A.D.A. two years later, he spurned a possible film contract and journeyed instead to Bristol to join the Old Vic repertory company. The pay was low, \$22.40 a week, and for the first year of his stay he had to mail back more than half of that to a landlord he had neglected to pay in London.

"Finding enough to eat in Bristol," he says, "was a constant challenge. I had to frequent little cafés looking for waitresses I could charm. The girls felt sorry for me and usually let me have spaghetti and tomato sauce when the headman wasn't looking. But that was all. Just spaghetti and tomato sauce."

### Mein Papa was his break

Despite this *Oliver Twist* existence, O'Toole kept busy on stage. In three and one half years at Bristol he played 72 roles, ranging in depth from Hamlet to a comedy part in a Christmas pantomime. Finally in 1957 he got a chance to appear in the West End, London's equivalent of Broadway. The role called for an old man to sing *Oh, Mein Papa* and it was an unlikely vehicle for a young, ambitious, nonsinging Irishman. O'Toole accepted it anyway and rehearsed without pay. But just as opening night loomed, an income-tax collector came calling.

"That chap was going to confiscate everything I owned," O'Toole grins. "But all he could find was one guitar, two bongo drums, a moth-eaten overcoat, five shaggy shirts and twelve pairs of worn boxer shorts. He took one look at the collection, and that was the last I heard of him."

From that moment on, his luck seemed to change. In a drama called *The Holiday*, he met Sian Phillips, a young, doe-eyed Welsh actress who played the part of his sister on stage. "She knew I was straight from repertory theater," O'Toole explains, "so she presumed I would have no money. After a while she began taking me to dinner." Several months after the play went on the road, Peter and Sian were married.

His next West End play, *The Long and the Short and the Tall*, put him over the top. London critics, a normally frosty lot, applauded his interpretation of an uncouth soldier and gave him their Actor of the Year award. Encouraged,

O'Toole snared a small part in the movie *Kidnapped* and finally signed on as a lieutenant of guards in Jules Buck's production of *The Day They Robbed the Bank of England*.

Buck, a portly, balding man who is now O'Toole's business partner, recalls that he wanted Peter to play the role of an Irishman. "But Peter said no. He was going to be that lieutenant or nothing at all. He didn't want to be known as 'Peter O'Toole—stage Irishman.'"

On the basis of that performance he received five movie-contract offers. Again he proved choosy. Turning down an estimated \$100,000 in fees, he decided to spend a season at Stratford. "I needed the experience," he says now. But it was also likely that the prospect of becoming, at 26, the youngest leading man in the famous theater's history tugged at his ego. And it was from Stratford that he moved to *Lawrence*.

To his friends, the Peter O'Toole who returned from the desert is not the man they used to know. "No one," O'Toole retorts, "could spend months steeping himself in Arab philosophy, customs and history without changing. I would never do it again, but I would not have missed it either. It was an adventure, a campaign."

If he has quieted down and become more respectable, as his friends charge, O'Toole is nevertheless doing his best to maintain the old front. Even today with a relatively—for him—bottomless bank account, he dresses slovenly, spends money whimsically and tends to overdramatize stories about himself and his family. He never tires, for example, of telling how his father, an Irish bookie, evaded the law; how he himself ended up in jail after badgering a policeman, or how his ability for consuming ale set a record—two and one half pints in 40 seconds—at the Dirty Duck Pub. Most of the stories are no longer taken at face value.

"You can believe anything you want about his drinking," says Alec Guinness, "but Peter is a real professional. He threw no tantrums and hardly missed a single moment of rehearsal time. I can't say a thing beastly about him."

Since leaving Stratford, O'Toole has turned down 20 movie and stage roles. He is taking his time to make sure of his choices. Curiously enough, most of the roles he has accepted hardly threaten to increase his box-office stature.

At this moment, for example, he is starring on the London stage in Bertolt Brecht's *Baal*, a weird and far-out excursion in which O'Toole plays a guitar-strumming poet. He has signed for \$500,000 to play King Henry II in Paramount Pictures's production of Jean Anouilh's *Becket*, and after that he talks of appearing in *Lord Jim* and in a low-budget film production of *Waiting for Godot*. Some of these roles are not what one might expect from a potential Oscar winner, but they do point to an O'Toole contention: "I'm not a leading man; just a character actor."

"Peter may think of himself this way," insists producer Spiegel, "but the fact is that he *exudes* lead. He combines sensitivity and virility as few actors have ever done before. The early Barrymore had it; the early Brando had it. Peter has it. If he avoids the pitfalls and does not succumb to the adoration almost certainly in store for him, he could become one of the great actors."

Says O'Toole himself, "I am a professional. If I wasn't sure I could deliver the bloody goods, I would get off the bloody stage." THE END