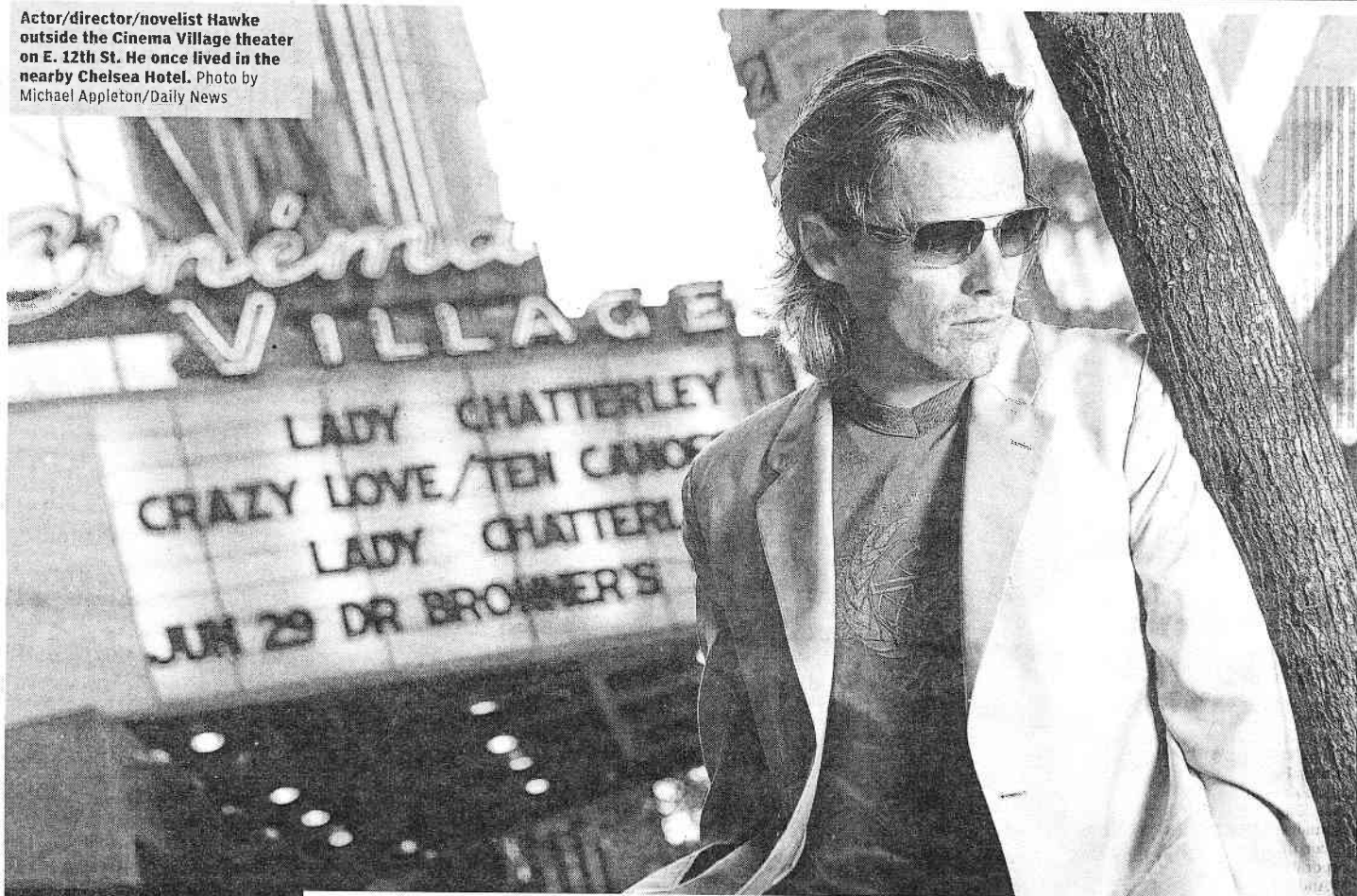


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Actor/director/novelist Hawke outside the Cinema Village theater on E. 12th St. He once lived in the nearby Chelsea Hotel. Photo by Michael Appleton/Daily News



Ethan Hawke talks about his latest film as a director, his passion for New York, being a father and being a son

BY MICHAEL GILT'Z

Ethan Hawke has a small role as an absent dad in his second film as a director and screenwriter, "The Hottest State," opening Friday. And while the 36-year-old Hawke says the most important role in his life is being a good father to his own two children, and he's known as an Oscar-nominated actor and writer, a filmmaker and a regular on the stage, perhaps the part he plays best is impassioned New Yorker.

Though talking about "Hottest State," the movie he adapted based on his own 1997 debut novel, is the purpose for doing press, the first words out of Hawke's mouth echo the classic complaint of New Yorkers upset at their changing city.

"You know that great diner where we talked before?" asks Hawke, talking about the Chelsea spot he was giving interviews at last fall for his Tony-nominated work in the epic trilogy "The Coast of Utopia." "It's gone! I went away and came back, and it was gone."

Hawke's new movie celebrates the city through the story of a struggling but confident young actor, William (Mark Webber),

falling hard for Sara, an aspiring downtown singer (Catalina Sandino Moreno). The film acknowledges the sad truth that a first crush isn't nearly as memorable as a first heartbreak. And like many, Hawke's heart can be broken when the city he has lived in since he was 10 changes too much, too fast.

"I couldn't believe it when Tower Records uptown closed," says Hawke, nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for 2001's "Training Day" and original screenplay for 2004's "Before Sunset" (with Julie Delpy and Richard Linklater). Born in Austin and raised partly in New Jersey, he has the affliction for

New York that only those who finally found themselves here in the city feel. "I couldn't believe it."

That's one less place to feature the soundtrack to his film, an innovative work filled with new songs by singer-songwriter Jesse Harris (who's worked with Norah Jones, among others) but performed by everyone from Willie Nelson to Feist.

As Hawke walks through Union Square toward a photo shoot, he casually responds to the one or two people who speak up when he walks by, though most people recognize him but leave him alone, in classic New York fashion. With his straggly hair and downtown energy, Hawke fits right in with the hippie, bohemian vibe that struggles to remain alive in the neighborhood alongside Whole Foods and Starbucks.

And the Chelsea Hotel? It's no surprise that the same day the media was reporting that the famously seedy spot's new owners were looking to jack up rents, Hawke was spotted in the lobby talking passionately with the manager, trying to keep the landmark alive in soul, not just structure.

"That was a coincidence," says Hawke.

MIND



MICHAEL O'NEILL

Above, Hawke directs a shot on the set of "The Hottest State." Catalina Sandino Moreno (l.) plays an aspiring singer in the film, which Hawke adapted from his novel.

who lived at the hotel for two years after his divorce from actress Uma Thurman and had an office there for five years, where he wrote his second best seller, "Ash Wednesday." It was also the location for his debut film as director, 2001's "Chelsea Walls."

"I went over there to do an interview. I saw Stanley Bard, the manager, and I said, 'What the hell's going on?' I just love Stanley. He's taken care of me my whole life. And I love that place. Chelsea Hotel is the last man standing. It's the last beacon of, 'Not gonna fall to corporate America.'

"And it looks like it just fell."

Hawke looks to be sturdier, having long ago made the transition from child actor in "Explorers" (1985) and "Dead Poets Society" (1989, his breakthrough) to an accomplished actor on stage ("Henry IV," with Kevin Kline) to movies ranging from the generationally hip ("Reality Bites") and the shaggy romantic ("Before Sunrise") to modern updates ("Great Expectations," "Hamlet") and genre flicks ("Gattaca," "Taking Lives," "Assault on Precinct 13"). Upcoming projects include Sidney Lumet's "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead," co-starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and due in October, and "Daybreakers," a vampire flick that seemed the most dramatic switch he could possibly make after Tom Stoppard's three-part Russian epic "Utopia" at Lincoln Center.

Always passionate and opinionated, Hawke is definitely less fiery and pointed than he was as a younger man, as he himself would be the first to say. So, when adapting a book he wrote more than a decade ago, Hawke found himself identifying less with William, the besotted young hero, and more



Hawke in "The Coast of Utopia" at Lincoln Center (l.) and with Julie Delpy in 1995's "Before Sunrise."



with the father whom William struggles to confront and connect with.

"I was so idealistic about love and art and politics," says Hawke. "I was so idealistic. I still am, but the world is much grayer than I thought it was. It's harder to make your way than I thought."

"I'm 36, and sharing custody of kids is really ... you know, you have to work really hard at what I would call 'love in action' — really being loving, sharing, being forgiving, apologizing, you know? It's big stuff. If I had gone through that when I was 17, I would never have been able to do it. It takes all I can [muster] now."

"It's really hard," says Hawke, whose own parents married young and separated when he was 5. "Everybody can have the best intentions, and it's still hard. It ain't easy at all. I'm much more forgiving of that character, the absent dad, than I was. While my relationship to my father does not mirror the one in the movie, it emotionally mirrors it. There are some similari-

ties, though it's not as simplistic as that. It's much more complicated.

"The biggest difference between me now and me at, say, 21 is my relationship with my father. He could relate to me once I was grown. We found each other in a way that we couldn't when I was younger. And he's been a real asset. I've been amazed how much easier life is when you go through life with a positive relationship with your father. I didn't know what a weight that was."

Professionally, Hawke feels good about where he's at and isn't too worried about what the reception for "The Hottest State" could be. He'd love to be asked to direct something else, but since his labor of love, "Chelsea Walls" — which co-starred Rosario Dawson, Vincent D'Onofrio, Natasha Richardson and Kris Kristofferson — disappeared so completely, he says he only hopes "Hottest State" will "pierce the radar" just enough.

"I have a secret hope that sometime over the next 10 years that there will be some guy or girl going through a terrible breakup," he says, ever the romantic, "and their friends will slip them the DVD and it'll mean something to them." ♦

Hawke says he used to be 'so idealistic about love.'