



THE GALAXY'S GUIDE TO

SAM ROCKWELL

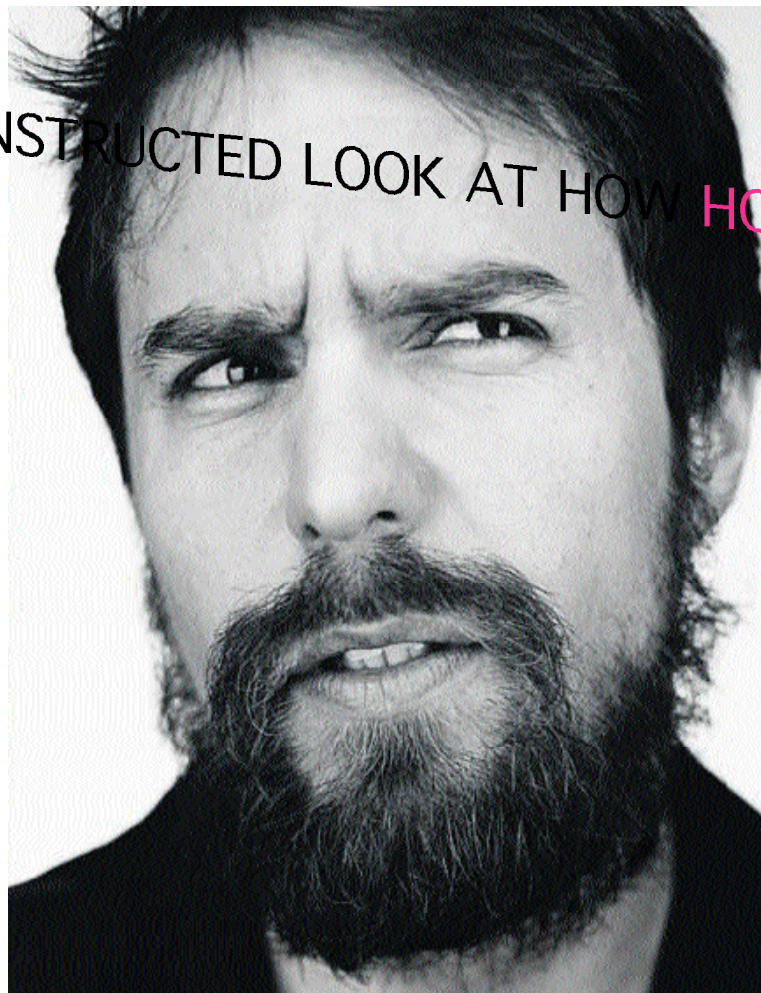
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FORGET THE BIG BANG: A DECONSTRUCTED LOOK AT HOW HC



There's make-believe, and then there is making someone believe.

Sam Rockwell is a practitioner of the former and a virtuoso at the latter. In his power, even the most mundane objects can become animated, even life-threatening. Take the butter knife. A few seconds ago, it was being a butter knife, spreading cholesterol on a piece of toast. Then Rockwell decided he wanted to use it to illustrate kali, the Filipino fighting style Matt Damon uses in *The Bourne Identity* by which the enemy is slowly and painfully torn apart. A sudden light flick of the wrist and—wat ch out!—it is a blood-seeking shiv that's coming terrifyingly close to your wrist.

Having spent 36 years on planet Earth, Rockwell knows all kinds of defense moves. If he were to be mugged today after breakfast at Life Café in New York City's East Village, he would have a plan of attack. "When they go, 'Give me all your money,' take out your credit card," he says, twirling a bottle of hot sauce like a baton. "You have a razor blade on it—and you just stick 'em." He then pours the contents of a pepper shaker onto the diner's countertop, licks two fingers, sticks them into the small pile, and explains: "You can also get people in the eye."

Sam Rockwell is not a violent man; it's just that he can't resist a great detail. (He's currently sporting a finely whorled Van Gogh beard and fingernails like miniature tombstones to play the title role in Philip Seymour Hoffman's Public Theater production of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*.) Nor is he a Method man; he doesn't talk about backstory or stay in character any longer than necessary (hence the Mickey Mouse T-shirt and Ugg boots). He is an actor in the purest, Mametian sense of the word: He relies on action.

That's why Zaphod Beeblebrox—the two-headed, three-armed, ex-hippie President of the Galaxy—gave Rockwell so much to work with in the Disney adaptation of Douglas Adams's cult novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, due in theaters soon. "Every aspect of what he did he embellished beautifully," says director Garth Jennings. "I remember turning up at his hotel one afternoon, and he was practicing how to spin a gun on his finger. He had four different guns he had bought, little plastic ones from a toy shop, and he was trying out different olive oils for maximum spin."

A student of acting coach Terry Knickerbocker and the Meisner technique, Rockwell often finds inspiration in the least likely of moments: in the downbeats and margins, the throwaway crusts. "I remember we were standing in the living room of my apartment, and I was playing Les Paul's 'How High the Moon' as if I had the guitar in my hand," says Chuck Barris, the former *Gong Show* host and self-claimed CIA assassin whom Rockwell portrayed in George Clooney's 2002 directorial debut, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*. "Sam lit up. He just loved it, so I did it over and over again, until he memorized it."

Although Rockwell is extremely open about the steps he takes in approaching any given role, they never quite equal the performance onscreen. Somewhere between preparation and execution, an eerie thing happens. "He kind of elevates and floats around during scenes," says Vince Vaughn, a close friend who worked with Rockwell on 2001's *Made*, directed by Jon Favreau. "All that work is done in advance, so when he gets there he's no longer acting—

he's living it." Because "it" has no other name, it can only be described as the Rockwell technique, which can be broken down thusly, though not exactly:

STEP #1: Don't force a square peg into a round hole. Rockwell has been known to sabotage a reading if he realizes midway that he's not a good match for the role. "I went in for *Scent of a Woman* and I actually talked [casting director] Ellen Lewis out of auditioning me," he says. "I was wrong for the Chris O'Donnell part."

STEP #2: Know your material—especially if it's based on Stephen King's best-seller about death row, *The Green Mile*. "I remember it said in the book that [Wild Bill] had zits on his ass. So I was like, 'Listen, you don't have to do this, but I think it would be good.' I mean, makeup people are amazing. They made me look like dog shit."

STEP #3: Be inspired. "I stole a lot of Michael Keaton in *Night Shift* for *Galaxy Quest*, with an Eric Roberts, Burt Reynolds kind of look. For *The Green Mile*, I actually stole from *Beetlejuice*. But you can't just watch movies. I read articles on death row, too, I talked to some wardens. If you're playing Chuck Barris, you hang out with him. You ride the subway and you go to bars and you're constantly encouraged."

STEP #4: Find a voice. "A lot of Zaphod was stolen from Bill Clinton and Vince Vaughn. Kind of Vince doing Elvis," Rockwell says. (When they get together, Rockwell and Vaughn invent "What would Elvis do?" scenarios well into the wee hours of morning. "I didn't say we were the coolest kids in Hollywood," Vaughn says.) Now he's Good Time Charlie: "Hey man, fantaaastic, I love it, come on, I love it," Rockwell says through a stoner smile. "Kind of like if Brad Pitt were president of the galaxy."

STEP #5: If it doesn't exist, invent it. Says Jennings, "At one point, [Zaphod] is watching himself on television, and rather than just sit there, Sam thought it would be fun if he were eating cereal straight from the box. So he invented this space cereal, and the prop department built a little box for him, and

ROCKWELL'S COOLEST CHARACTER ACTOR BECAME KING OF THE

putcheeseballs in there. I think he ate a thousandcheeseballs.”

STEP #6: See second-to-last paragraph of this article.

Rockwell was born in Daly City, California, the only child of actors

Pete and Penny Rockwell, who separated when Sam was five and later divorced. Though he eventually moved to San Francisco to live with his father, he stayed with his mother every summer in New York. “It was kind of a bohemian background. She became a painter,” he says, massaging his neck, which is sore from playing a catatonic Iscariot onstage. “I hung out with adults when I was a kid, so it kind of gave me an edge.” His first big break came when he was ten, courtesy of his mom, who recruited him to play a pint-size Humphrey Bogart to her Ingrid Bergman in her sketch comedy group’s spoof of *Casablanca*. He later enrolled at the San Francisco School for the Performing Arts, and at 19 landed a part as one of three brothers being menaced by escaped mental patients in 1990’s *Clownhouse* (which was executive-produced by Francis Ford Coppola’s son, Roman). Bolstered by his albeit inauspicious debut, Rockwell moved back to New York, where he worked steadily in theater and was cast in myriad thankless movie roles for the next few years: Least notably, he was “Head Thug” in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, “Jealous” in *Light Sleeper*, and “Polish Guy” in *Somebody to Love*.

After playing “Thug” once again in *Basquiat*, he finally turned some heads in 1996 as a skinny-dipping backwoods man who teaches an uptight businessman (John Turturro) to enjoy life like a child in *Box of Moonlight*. He earned more accolades in 1997 with *Lawn Dogs*, in which he stars as yet another societal outcast, this time a poor landscaper who receives the wrath of a gated Kentucky community when he befriends one of their own, a lonely ten-year-old girl (Mischa Barton). But it was 1998’s *Safe Men*—in which he and Steve Zahn star as two singer-songwriters who are mistaken for safecrackers—that truly showcased Rockwell’s comic style. “He’s not tipping that it’s funny at all,” says Paul Giamatti, who plays a Jewish mafioso in the film. “Man, he’s just got that thing where he can toss off a line with the weirdest reading. He’s so dry, so minimal. There’s so much restraint and subtlety.” Ironically, Rockwell got *Charlie’s Angels* through *Safe Men*, which Drew Barrymore’s producing partner, Nancy Juvonen, saw and loved. “The part was originally written for a Pierce Brosnan type, like a slick bad guy. A lot of people were turning their nose at [the film], but I thought it sounded fun, like a nice piece of pop art,” Rockwell

says. “I just really trusted Drew.”

In turn, a lot of Hollywood’s biggest stars have really trusted Rockwell. Clooney went to bat for his first choice when Miramax and even Barris rejected him for *Confessions*. “I didn’t know Sam, and I had other feelings about who should play the part,” says Barris, who has since spent Thanksgivings with Rockwell. “I thought Robert Downey Jr. or Johnny Depp would be great, and both of them wanted to do it. [But] Clooney said he wanted Sam Rockwell, and I think he said if Sam didn’t play it, he wasn’t going to direct it.”

Rockwell may not be a household name (yet), but he’s made a career out of stealing scenes from the so-called stars: Who could forget Guy, the unwanted extra in 1999’s ensemble comedy *Galaxy Quest*, or Nicolas Cage’s duplicitous protégé in 2003’s *Matchstick Men*? (Look for Rockwell’s cameo as Jake Gyllenhaal’s redneck uncle in the upcoming Gulf War epic *Jarhead*.) He’s even started getting A-list parts. Although Bill Murray and Will Ferrell were among the names initially considered to play Zaphod in *Hitchhiker’s* (Rockwell was brought in to read for the role of Ford Prefect), “within about thirty seconds, it was clear that this guy is Mr. Beeblebrox,” says Jennings. “Both Will Ferrell and Bill Murray are terrific, but then I met Sam, and really it was one of those instant things. He even picked up the script and started reading it there in the meeting, which very few actors do.”

Which brings us to Step #6 of the Rockwell technique: If the spirit moves you, go with it. Following the lead of one of his idols, Christopher Walken, Rockwell has made it something of a signature to break into an impromptu dance in almost all of his movies. “That’s his thing that he likes to work in for some reason,” Jennings says. “There’s a bit where he’s being shot at by Vogon soldiers,

and we had this enormous PA system that blasted out ‘Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag.’ The bloke can move. It’s ridiculous.”

“I’ve been known to shake a tail feather, but I’m not formally trained, I just sort of hoof it,” Rockwell says, with the kind of weightless cool that makes for the heaviest high school crushes. “There’s a paragraph in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that describes what it is to be a good dancer: It’s about being truthful through your body. Kind of like acting. Being moment to moment and not censoring. So it’s not about looking good necessarily. But then, you could argue, some people look really bad.” ■



ROCKWELL OF AGES: From top, as bit player Guy Flegman (far left) in 1999’s *Galaxy Quest*; with Martin Freeman (left), Mos Def, and Zooey Deschanel in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*; and channeling Chuck Barris in 2002’s *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*.