

Martin Landau

Martin Landau, winner of this year's Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in "Ed Wood," is in town to shoot "The Legend of Pinocchio."

He sat down recently with Velvet contributor David Speranza to discuss his past, present, and future.

Have you ever visited Prague before?

No. I've been to Vienna and to Budapest, having worked in both places, but this is my first trip to Prague. It's something I've been wanting to do because my daughter had come here and told me about the glories of it a number of times. And just recently Mark Rydell [director of "For the Boys"] came back from the Prague film festival raving about everything. He loved the city, he loved the festival, and he found he even loved his wife more—so I guess it's a terrific place.

What has been your strongest impression?

Well, just the fact that the whole city's a museum. I mean, at each turn in the road, on each street, you're surrounded by so many different centuries; it's amazing.

How do you enjoy playing Gepetto?

I think the thing that's exciting about it is that this picture could not have been made in the way it is ten, or even five years ago, because I'm literally working with a puppet. This is the Henson crew from England. I mean, I've worked with more wooden actors in my time—and that may sound like a joke—but it's really quite remarkable. This puppet is the cutest, most subtle, charming little actor I've ever seen. Mac, the main puppeteer, and I have such an interesting rapport that we ad lib sometimes ad nauseum.

How is this "Pinocchio" different from Disney's 1940 animated version?
In the Disney classic cartoon, which is

wonderful, both Pinocchio and Gepetto are drawn. But Colodi's original was about a grown man and a wooden puppet—and we're going to be able to capture that. It's a live-action movie, with a puppet with no strings that metamorphoses into a boy. My character is basically a guy who's—I wouldn't say anti-social—but he's not a social animal. He spends a lot of time talking to his marionettes, but has a long-suffering woman, his brother's widow, who's crazy about him. Genevieve Bujold plays the widow. He literally ends up with a wife and child because he finally touches feelings he hasn't touched in years, and embraces love. It's a wonderful piece.

Let's talk about this year's Best Supporting Actor Oscar.

That was the tip of the iceberg. I say that because I won every single award given out this year, all the critics' awards—which has never happened before, because critics from different cities like to disagree. I got New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, National Society of Film Critics, Texas Film Critics, Golden Globe Award, Actor's Guild Award, American Comedy Award, Saturn Award, and the Oscar, so—

You've got quite a well-lined shelf now.

My house is tipping. I've got to move a couple of things, because I live on a hill on top of Mulholland Drive. If my cat walks in, I think the whole place will tip over.

Has winning the Oscar given you more opportunities?

Well, I've been nominated a couple times before, so I was already getting a lot of work. Things changed around the time "Tucker" came out, in 1987–88. There was a period where I was making a living as an actor, but I wasn't really being considered for seri-

ous parts. I was doing television and other things.

You taught acting, didn't you?

I always taught, but that was never how I made a living. I basically taught actors who were out of work, so I didn't charge them a lot. I only taught because I wanted to.

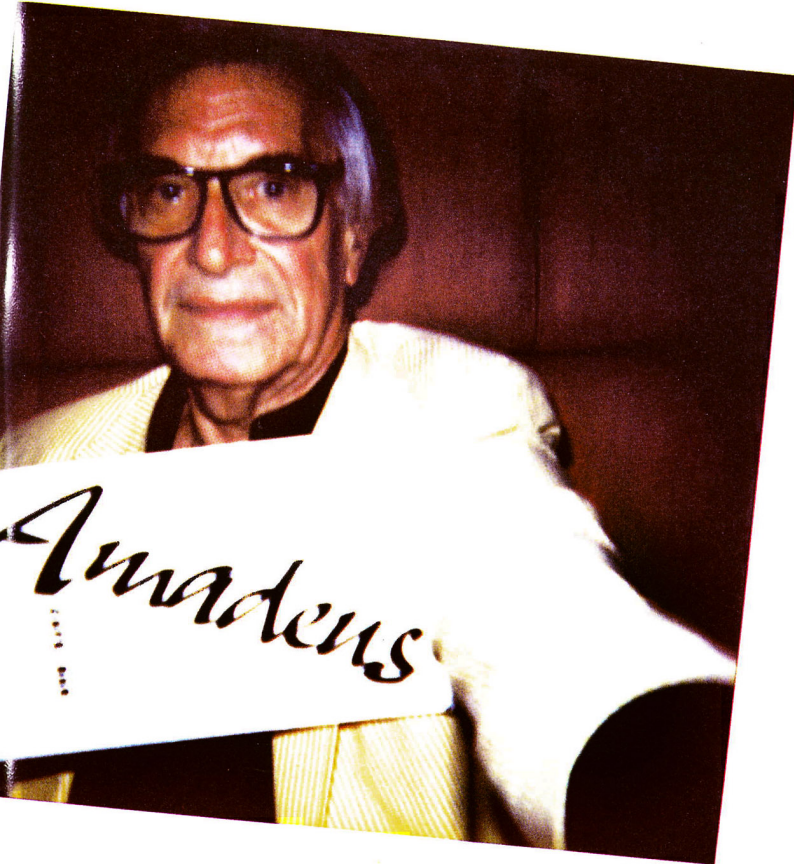
Who were some of your more memorable students?

Nicholson studied with me for three years, Harry Dean Stanton for three years, Warren Oates studied with me, Shirley Knight, Oliver Stone before he directed his first picture... I was always acting when I was teaching, but the roles were either one-dimensional, mindless characters, or they were meaningless movies.

So it wasn't a conscious decision to keep a low profile after "Space: 1999"?

No. After "Mission: Impossible" my name in television was still in pretty good shape, but I did "Space: 1999" because Barbara [Bain] and I wanted to be together at that point, the kids were growing up, we wanted to get them out of Beverly Hills High School. And I wasn't getting offers for good movies, I've got to say that [at one point] Bill Blatty wanted me to play the priest in "The Exorcist," but William Friedkin, the director, said, "No, he's Super Spy, the show's playing in seventy countries—no one's going to believe him as a priest." But I always made a living, I never had to wait on tables or drive a taxi...

Do you feel a sense of vindication now



that you're back in demand?

Pound for pound I always felt I was one of the best ones around. It was a question of getting up to bat and having someone pitch to me. I knew if I got up to bat I'd get a home run. And when I read the script for "Tucker," I said, "This is it—this is going to take me out of the doldrums." I knew it when I read it.

Were you asked to participate in the "Mission: Impossible" film, which was shot in Prague earlier this year?

Initially they were talking about bringing back the old team, with Tom Cruise as the young new guy, then having all the old people blow up or something and Tom being the only survivor. I said, "I'm not about to have Rolland Hand commit suicide—absolutely out of the question! Let him live forever!" Word got back that I had no intention of going near it, and I think a lot of the other fellows felt the same way.

Did you see Cruise's press confer-

ence, where he told film producers to stay away from Prague, that this was a terrible place to work?

I heard about it, but I didn't see it. I have the same dressing room as Tom. They built the bathroom for him, it's two rooms—I don't think it's a bad deal.

Have you had any problems shooting here?

None whatsoever. I think the crews are good . . . I've filmed everywhere

in the world. Last year I was in Morocco filming TNT's "Joseph" in 120-degree temperatures. It wasn't easy.

Maybe Tom Cruise should do a film in Morocco.

I don't want to say anything about Tom, but a lot of the young actors are very spoiled. They come out of a different tradition, really. If you came out of the theater, hung scenery, hung lights, did dress rehearsals on your only dark day, played shows for 13 weeks, did bus and truck tours—I mean, that's a whole other ballgame. And if you come out of that, you don't complain about silly things.

What do you think of the current elevation of kitsch and TV shows to feature-film status?

It depends on what it is. You can have "The Beverly Hillbillies," which is ridiculous, and you can have "The Fugitive," which is a terrific movie. So I don't think one can pass judgment. I mean, just because "Hamlet" is done once, doesn't mean you never do it again. Of course, I wouldn't do "The Wizard of Oz" again. But "Pinocchio" is an interesting challenge, because of the ability to do it the way we're doing it.

What are your plans after "The Legend of Pinocchio" wraps?

There's something I'm going to direct next May, a piece I wrote ten years ago. In a strange way it's sort of grown into itself, because no one understood it ten years ago—not in a way they can understand it now, the times being what they are. It's funny, it's romantic, and it also deals with suicide. My two favorite actors for the roles—two of the best young actors in Hollywood—have agreed to do it. I'm also supposed to do a picture with me, Anna Paquin, and an elephant; and then there's a picture with Juliette Lewis about a concentration camp survivor who, unhappy with his life, runs away to Europe where he meets an anti-semitic young girl—a skinhead type—and the two of them hook up and travel Europe together. It's an interesting love story. ■