

RICHARD CORMAN

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Nelson Mandela, the queen of pop and a charity project that's close to his heart – portrait photographer RICHARD CORMAN speaks to Daisy McCorgray about capturing the human spirit



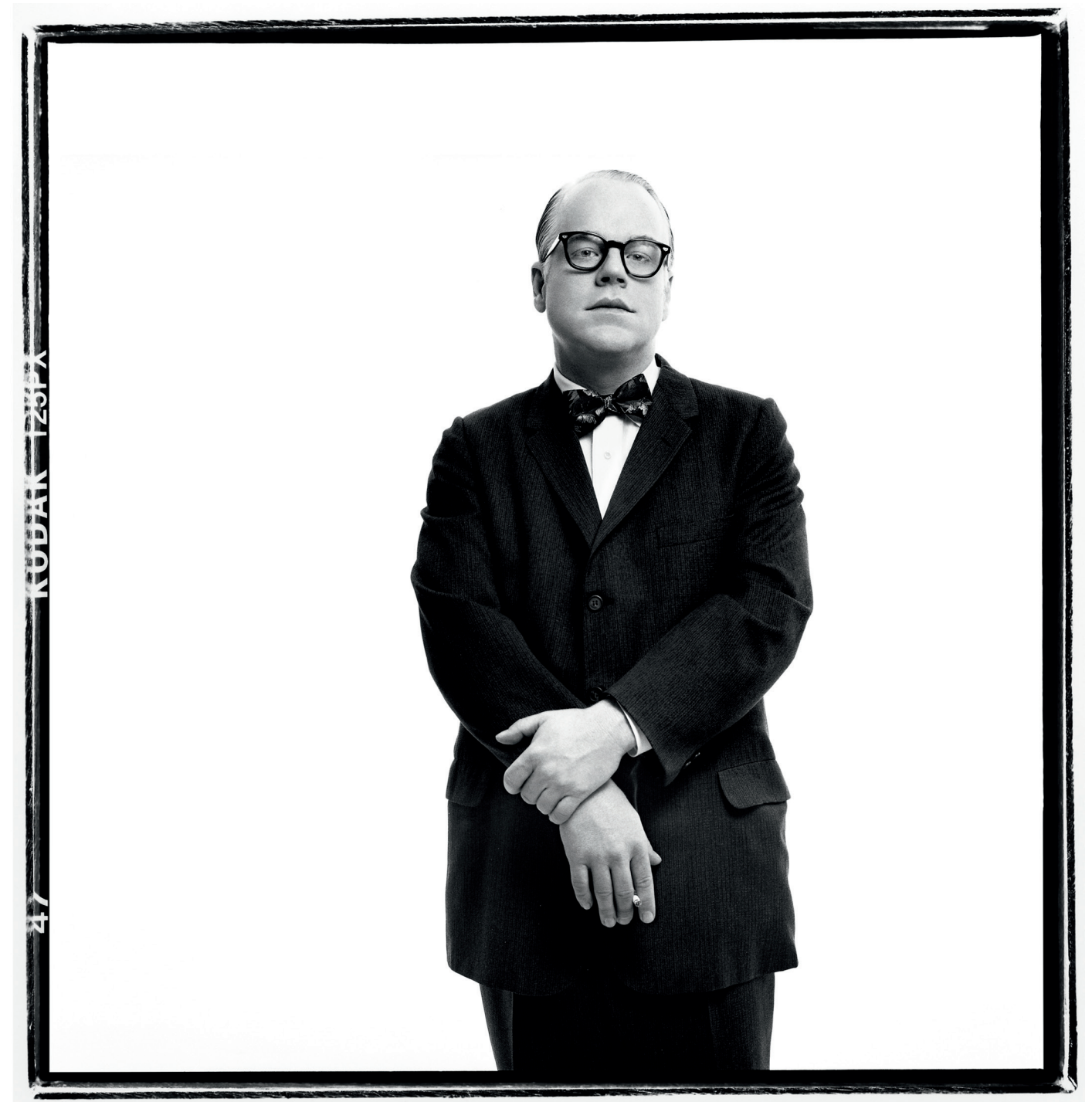
in the months before the world belted out 'If we took a holiday' along to the now infamous synth-infused eighties classic, *Holiday* – Madonna, far from her pop-queen status of today, was lounging against the stove in a downtown New York apartment for the lens of one man. That man was Richard Corman, and as you might have guessed, it's an experience firmly etched in his memory. "It was crazy, and it still is!" exclaims Corman, from his New York studio. Always on the look out for new, interesting people to photograph, Corman took a call from his mother – a film producer – on that influential day in 1983. "I met somebody today," she said. "She's not going to get the role in the project, but I've never met anybody that looks like her, that is brash like her – an absolute original – you gotta call her right now and go and meet her." This is exactly what he did. ➤➤

"I'm a New York kid, but at the time I wasn't familiar with the East Village – it was a total ghetto. No question," he says. "I got there and there was literally a gang of men and children standing outside. Madonna had yelled down from the fourth floor to say 'a friend of mine is coming in, it's cool.' It was like the seas parted and they let me in. She looked over the banister and I saw these beautiful cat-like eyes and her waving, yelling for me to come up. And that was the beginning."

Entering the apartment, Corman was offered espresso and bazooka bubblegum on a silver-plated tray. "It was just so random! It was funny, but it wasn't pretentious – it just felt like that was the way she was with everybody. I remember her saying that she was going to change the world, and she said it straight faced. She was fiercely determined and always singing somewhere – she always had her little boom box with her. That night, she gave me a cassette and when I played it I was blown away by the demo tape."

The resulting six shoots, captured throughout 1983, weren't released by Corman until 2013, as he "never felt they were relevant or it was the right time." Madonna "was always relevant, but the pictures weren't," he explains. "Now they seem to me like they could be any kid on the street, they feel so 'today'. The torn denim and the jewellery and the dark-rooted hair..." And their relevance is validated by the unexpected speed and intensity with which they have caught the public imagination – who can truthfully say they don't enjoy a voyeuristic gaze upon a well-known figure? A quality that time, multiplied by the unseen nature of the images, has added to this collection. The book, *Madonna NYC83*, sold out in three weeks and every day Corman is inundated with Madonna-based Instagrams and tweets.

Yet this tale of eighties cult beginnings is only a chapter in the life of portrait photographer Corman; exciting, yes, but defining, no. On the academic track a few years earlier, Corman, fascinated by people, was studying for a career in psychology. But it was in his down-time from academia, cycling New York's streets, that photography found him. "I'd get up early in the morning, get on my bike and go downtown to photograph when there was nobody around. It was a great journey and the short of it was that I fell in love with photography. The scariest part about stepping across that line to be a professional photographer was that, at that point, people would be judging your work. Until then it was for me, but once you cross that line then you're open to criticism for better and for worse." Preferring to develop his skill set apprenticing, Corman applied to places "that would take just about anybody," he laughs. "I got paid nothing, and worked 24 hours a day." But soon, with a little experience under his belt, he approached a studio for work that kicked off a chain of events to mould his future. "They said their studio manager had left and gone over to Richard Avedon's studio, and he was looking for somebody. In my mind I was like 'my god, if I could ever work for someone like that it would change my world!'" And so, after a successful meeting with the studio manager, Corman heard those momentous words: 'Mr Avedon would like to meet you'. "The studio was connected to Avedon's apartment. I went up and he was literally in the bathroom shaving – he was going out to the theatre. He interviewed me, we hit it off, and somehow I was hired on the spot. My life changed, immediately."



Above: Philip Seymour Hoffman for the *Capote* role. "The reason why I got that job is because they wanted it photographed with similar lighting and camera that Avedon would have used to shoot Truman Capote in the sixties. I was hired, because they knew of my relationship as Avedon's apprentice. So we created a campaign based on that – the exact 8 x 10 camera, the exact place of the lights, the exposure."

Left: The Special Olympics.

The value of learning from "one of the visionaries of modern photography" is hard to put a price on for Corman. "The way he approached things intellectually, emotionally and artistically was just dumbfounding. I will never forget it – it was priceless and absolutely changed my life and perspective. Reassuringly, the advice gleaned from his mentor was simple: "You're always as good as the people around you". "When you're working with a group of people who are all in it for the same reason," he explains, "whether it's to make somebody look beautiful, to light something in an edgy way, the makeup or the location – it makes the photograph. I saw that sense of teamwork with Dick all the time and, other than his intellectual gift, that made his pictures stronger – I think he would say the same thing."

Today, as a prolific photographer who has certainly stood the test of ➤➤



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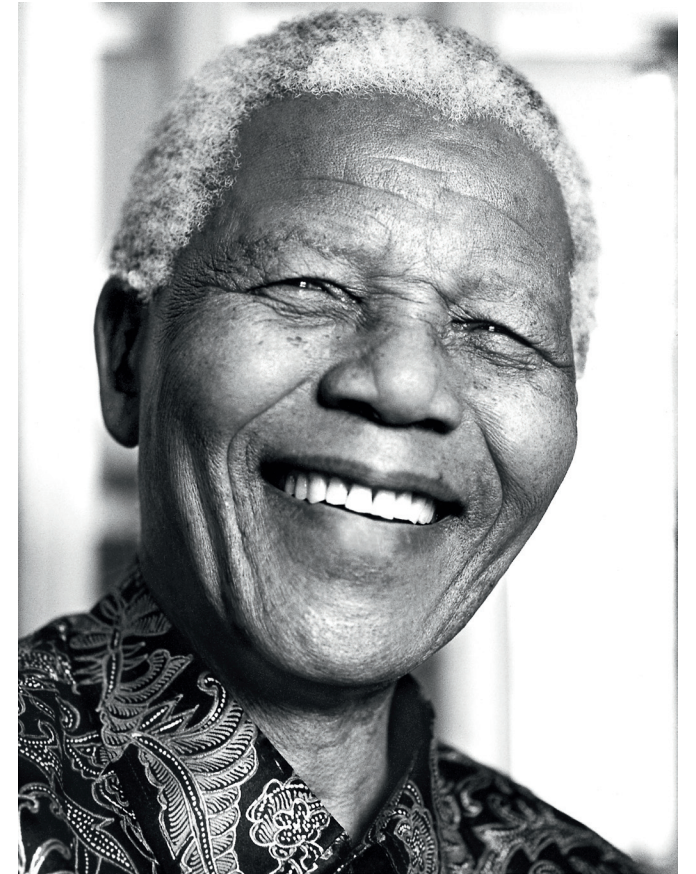
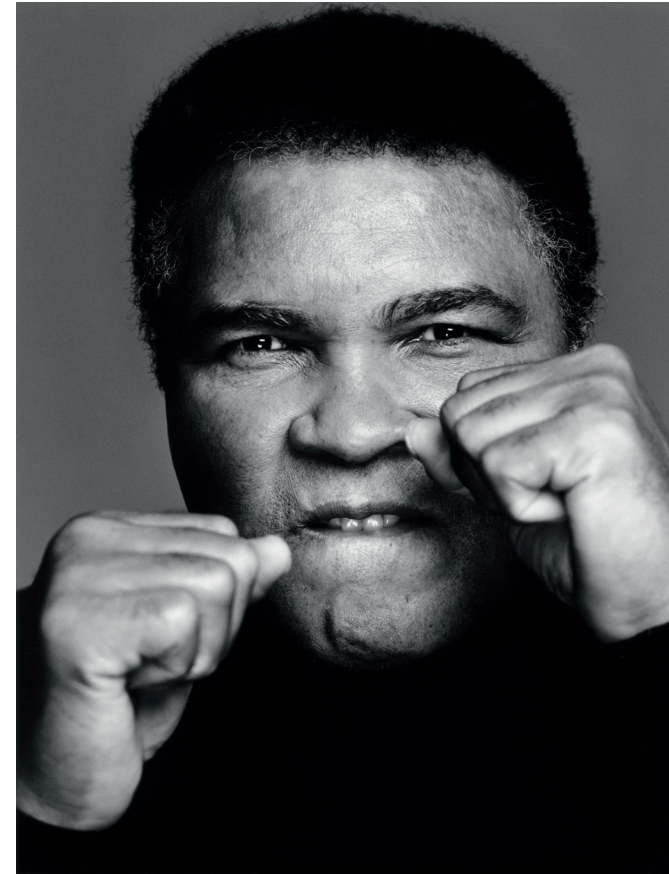
66 The experience of photographing somebody outweighs any photograph I could possibly take. It's always more potent.

Above: "There's no question: a project for TV network A&E. Its show *Dog the Bounty Hunter* became the darling of the network – it went through the roof!" Richard says of his most extravagant shoot. "I had to take an entire team to Hawaii to shoot there. And this family was impossible to work with, they all wanted their own trailers and masseuses – we're talking him, his wife, their kids – it was crazy and by far the most expensive and extravagant shoot for something that was so mundane and simple. The network had no choice but to do it – they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for a print shoot. But it was fun!"

time, what would Corman's apprentices say of him? "It's always incredible because I learn as much from them as they from me," he says. "I would hope they would say that I have humility, but also integrity; and I'm the first one to raise my hand and say 'you know what, I don't really know that'."

Avedon provided the stepping stones to new arenas for Corman; the early eighties saw him working not just with Madonna, but with an eclectic Lower East-side crew from Boy George and Johnny Rotten to the artists Basquiat and Keith Haring. This "creative carnival" of NYC is something that still has a strong draw for Corman today – he frequently captures new artists and performers, driven by their sense of opportunity and innovation. "It's thrilling because there's no formula, they have no image... yet," he enthuses. "That's the beauty of living in New York City – every time I go in the subways or walk the streets, I'm blown away. It just gives me so many ideas." Corman's early passion for new talent saw him taken under the wing of men's fashion mag *L'Uomo Vogue*. "I would shoot entire 40-page stories for them of young artists; musicians, football players, the young Hollywood scene. They were incredibly loyal to me during those periods. It was all editorial, but it allowed me to touch base with these people at a young point in my career and really set the stage for what was to evolve." And evolve it did, from De Niro and Scorsese to Ralph Lauren, his portfolio is a visual journey through the fashion and entertainment industry, past and present. "I photograph the human spirit," he says, "whether it's commercially, editorially or personally."

In addition to the cult of celebrity, Corman also documents ➤➤



many great thinkers and athletes of our time and it is in these arenas where he has overcome challenging projects to shake even the most level headed of pros. All shoots are challenging, he says, yet "the most moving, powerful, frightening, was when I was asked to fly out to South Africa and photograph Mandela, in the cell he had lived in for 17 years on Robin Island – he had never been back there. The night before, I met with his security team and they said, 'Richard, you'll probably get two to three minutes and when we say it's over, it's over.' They were very serious about that. So we were prepared in that cell a couple of hours before he was – all of a sudden, I heard he was coming and it was just terrifying. I went up to him and said 'I'm so honoured to be here with you!' and the first thing he said to me was, 'It's my honour to be here with you.' You just felt his humility and it just totally took the edge off. We took a roll or two of film, I was shooting with a Rolleiflex, and it was breathtaking – all I saw was this beautiful smile on his face. And then he was gone."

Yet this experience exemplifies the way Corman approaches his work – he is wholly without artifice, never trying to imply that capturing a moment can ever be more powerful than life. "It's a lovely picture of him," he says modestly, but the experience of meeting with Mandela's security the night before – "they might as well have just put a gun to my head while I was photographing" – and Mandela's "heroic nature", defined the moment to a far greater extent. "I remember what I was feeling when I look at any picture that I've taken. I don't write, per se, but I photograph – that's my diary. The experience of photographing somebody outweighs any photograph I could possibly take. It's always more potent."

So where does he feel his strength lies, other than in the obvious realms of image making? "My strength, without question, is communicating with people," he says. This ranges from meeting

subjects before a shoot to "get a sense of where they're at" and the sensibility of the shoot, to "this ability that when I meet somebody on a set, I wouldn't say I'm always comfortable, but in their minds I'm always totally at ease and able to create some kind of comfort zone. Or, if I don't want that comfort zone, to be able to create that bit of anxiety that makes the picture even better." Yet this anxiety goes both ways and Corman states that he is always nervous before a shoot. "I used to be an athlete and it's that same feeling: butterflies. It doesn't matter who I'm photographing; I feel responsible for the people in front of my camera and I want to make it as important or as interesting as I can."

However, there is one ongoing project that holds a powerful significance for Corman. "I grew up with two siblings that had intellectual disabilities, so this was my way of giving something back," he tells me. Since 1991 Corman has been documenting the Special Olympics. "In the end, I got far more than I could ever have given because these athletes are amazing and, in my mind, far from disabled." He's currently creating a campaign for the 2015 Los Angeles World Games in collaboration with controversial pop-artist Mr Brainwash. Corman views the project as his most important work; the images encapsulate everything he aims for in a photograph. "There's no wall in front of them – it's unadulterated humanity in its purest form. Any of those images take my breath away – it's an absolute inspiration," he muses. "If you haven't been to one, it will change the way you think... about everything."

While Corman can still be seen, Rolleiflex in hand, shooting film for personal projects; today's digital world demands this occurs only on

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a project-by-project basis, he says. "Clients don't want it – they want immediacy, to know that they're going home with 'the picture' and that it's done," he says. "Quite frankly, that was the excitement and anxiety of shooting analogue – hoping that everything was sharp and there wasn't a mishap. Now you roll with this sense of 'wow! Look at it, it's basically done.' It's a false sense of everybody's a photographer, now. But everybody's not – it doesn't mean you can't take a beautiful photo on an iPhone. But try doing that with 30 clients standing around and the pressure of having to produce something on the spot; then you need to know your shit, you really do. I'm not a techy guy – I wish I could take photos just with my eyes, but I can't, unfortunately."

In line with many others in the industry, Corman sees motion overtaking the stills market. "We already see motion consistently on billboards," he says. "Photography will always have its place, but technology will lead us. That's the reason why I only have a few cameras – I rent the greatest and the latest if I need them, or six months later they're obsolete." ➤

Above: Ralph Lauren.
Right: "Muhammad Ali was my hero growing up and we reached out to him to see if he would be on the cover of my first book, *Glory* – immediately, he said yes. It was so exciting, but nerve racking. He broke the ice; he drove up in his limousine and came out playing magic tricks, and everybody laughed. He was a joy to be around. We created, for me, some of my iconic images."
Far right: Nelson Mandela.

As we spoke, Corman was in his studio working on two documentaries, proving that he is engaging and evolving with his vision of the future. "In my world, it's always about 'the next'. Because when you finish one, you can never rest on your creative laurels, you continue to move forward and continue to redefine, and push."

In the first of the two self-funded films, he follows "a guy who's really fighting for the LGBT community. But what makes him interesting is that he's a very straight male, a professional American football player, and he stood up at a time when he risked everything – it's really a civil rights issue; it's not an LGBT rights issue, and that's why I find it so moving, that in this day and age we can't be with the people we decide we wanna be with."

The second film takes us back to the day Corman approached Madonna's apartment in 1983. One of the boys standing outside, 14 at the time, has reached out to him after 30 years. "He's now 43 and he's been in prison for 17 years. And his story, as it relates to one photograph that I took, is mind boggling. When somebody is incarcerated for armed robbery and is in jail for 17 years, you step back a little bit and say 'do I really want to get involved?' But he's genuine and I know he's got a good heart – he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's really not about Madonna, it's about him and how it relates to that day – he told me things that I didn't even know; that I put myself into harm's way by just walking into that building, because they were all drug dealers and protecting their neighbourhood. So, to hear that 30 years later is like, 'really?'"

Learning about this diverse journey of photographic success, it's hard not to wonder how Corman feels when you Google his name and the search results, rather than pointing to his expansive charity work or portraits depicting many iconic thinkers and artists of the modern age, instead scream 'Madonna', in almost every result. "I'm cool with it," he says. "I think I'm a photographer that has kind of flown under the radar. A lot of it has to do with the way I've approached my life and my business. My wife always says to me 'you just sit in this corner and do your thing.' But I always just wanted the work to speak for itself – back in the day I wasn't one of those people that was out promoting myself and I think that hurt me. I can't wait to do a retrospective because I think there are some beautiful things that have never been seen. I don't know what the future will hold, but I can assure you that it drives me. At the end of the day, my aim is just to remain relevant, to evolve and to continue the journey that, as an artist, never, ever ends." 📷

www.richardcorman.com

Left: Robert De Niro.

Right: "There was a grand piano that, for weeks, sat directly under the Brooklyn Bridge. I thought of my friend, Misty Copeland, a soloist with American Ballet Theatre, sent her a picture of the piano and said 'we gotta be there at 5am in the morning'. She replied 'I'm totally down for this'. If we were to recreate this shoot for *Vogue*, it would cost tens of thousands of dollars to bring a piano, a dancer and hair and make-up and stylists – we did it so low-key and it became one of the most exciting things I've ever done."



KIT LIST

Camera: Canon 5D Mk III, but for certain shoots I use Hasselblad.
Favourite lens: The new Canon 24-70mm zoom lens is gorgeous, and the 85mm f/1.2 lens is just exquisite. Zoom lenses now are as sharp as prime lenses – back in the day I would never shoot with a zoom lens.





“EVERYTHING ABOUT HIS BODY LANGUAGE JUST REEKED OF CAPOTE”

Richard Corman recalls how he summoned the spirit of Avedon to shoot Philip Seymour Hoffman for the *Capote* poster

Richard Corman is responsible for photographing some of the world's most recognisable faces of the last 30 years, including Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Robert De Niro, Meryl Streep, Michael Jordan, Ralph Lauren, Muhammad Ali, Kurt Vonnegut and Madonna. In 2005, he created what is perhaps one of his most celebrated and seminal images to date; a shot of actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, in character as the novelist, screenwriter, playwright and actor Truman Capote.



[Left] The aim was to recreate the feel of Avedon's 1960s shoots
[Above] Actor Philip Seymour Hoffman spent the whole shoot in character as Truman Capote



[Above] Corman shot the actor in character as Capote for the film poster

Corman's picture of Hoffman was commissioned for the poster for multi-award winning biopic *Capote*, and was shot in the style of his mentor Richard Avedon, who had photographed the real Truman Capote during the 1960s.

The movie, set in 1959, follows Capote as he researches the murder of a Kansas family for his novel *In Cold Blood* and delves into the relationship he forms with one of the killers, Perry Smith, who is

a white background. "I knew all the details in terms of where the light should be placed, the lens that was used at the time, the camera that was being used and the sensibility," he points out. Staying loyal to Avedon's MO, Corman used

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on death row. The film was universally lauded, catapulting Hoffman to the pinnacle of his career, scooping a bounty of best actor gongs including an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, a BAFTA, and a Screen Actors Guild Award.

AVEDON'S MO

"The film's director Bennett Miller came to me, because they knew that I had apprenticed Avedon for a couple of years and wanted me to do something that was really reminiscent of that time when Dick [Avedon] was photographing Capote during the 1960s," explains Corman.

Charged with mimicking his late mentor's style, Corman decided to take the photograph in a studio shot against

an 8 x 10 Deardorff, raised to eye level, alongside a Twin lens Rolleiflex. He lit as he'd once assisted Avedon in his studio, with an umbrella and fill card.

Of course, none of this would have worked unless the subject was able to deliver on his side of the bargain. But the actor was more than ready for the challenge.





[Above] Seymour Hoffman made the shoot “effortless” for Corman

“When Philip Seymour Hoffman walked in, he was Capote, and he was Capote for every moment of that shoot: the voice, the mannerisms, the attitude,” Corman recalls. “He brought his performance from the film to my camera. In some way, we were able to capture Capote because of him.”

But Corman’s role cannot be underestimated – he too played his part. “One of the things Dick always did was to stand to the side of the camera. So I made sure I was there, not looking under the dark cloth at

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the back of the camera,” Corman remembers. “I made sure everything was focussed, my assistant was loading the film, and I was literally by the side of the lens talking to ‘Truman’, who was absolutely in character. We talked about the film, we talked about his character.”

ALL IN THE EYES

“Every shoot is different; sometimes there a lot of chatter going on and in this case I was almost a voyeur, because he was able to physically perform and bring Capote’s essence into the camera and thus allow me to really see behind his eyes. Because

for Dick, the most important thing for him was the eyes: that was what made his photos so alluring. I think these pictures are all about that and the body language.”

The value of learning from Avedon – “one of the visionaries of modern photography” – is hard to put a price on for Corman.

“The way he approached things intellectually, emotionally and artistically was just dumbfounding,” he says. “I will never forget it – it was priceless and absolutely changed my life and perspective.” The advice gleaned from his mentor was simple: ‘You’re always as good as the people around you.’

“When you’re working with a group of people who are all in it for the same reason,” he explains, “whether it’s to make somebody look beautiful, to light something in an edgy way, the makeup or the location – it makes the photograph. I saw that sense of teamwork with Dick all the time and, other than his intellectual gift, that made his pictures stronger – I think he would say the same thing.”

Demonstrating this sense of teamwork, Philip Seymour Hoffman made it easy for Corman to capture the essence of Capote, he says: “From head to toe, he had it down – the way he held his hands, the way his mouth was pursed, the way his head just floated to the side.

“There were a couple of times where it was a little over the top and I said, ‘Let’s just bring it down a little bit,’ but most of the time he was spot on. The way he was groomed, what he was dressed in; everything about his body language just reeked of Capote as far as I could see. So all I had to do was plant him on the spot, light him correctly and keep him engaged.”

The knowledge of how Avedon thought and worked allowed the team to recreate a historically accurate shoot, but Corman is keen to defer the praise. “I always feel so responsible for the people in front of the camera but in this case he made it,” Corman says. “I mean, I wouldn’t say he made it effortless for me... but he made it effortless for me! He was so seamless and so poignant. He just brought it.” ✕

Natalie Denton