

The Hot List: Ryan Phillippe

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"I've made twenty-five movies, and I probably liked four of them, but I don't have any professional regrets," says Ryan Phillippe. "You know, they're just movies."

It's one of those hot-as-hell Texas days, where you think the sun might actually be trying to kill you (even at 6 p.m.), and Phillippe sits calmly in his under-air-conditioned, overcarpeted trailer on the set in an ungentrified neighborhood in Austin. He's wearing a gray T-shirt, jeans, brown cowboy boots and last week's five o'clock shadow.

Currently, he's shooting an untitled film by Kimberly Pierce (*Boys Don't Cry*), in which he plays an American soldier who refuses to return to duty in Iraq. But it's his portrayal of Navy corpsman John Bradley in the World War II epic *Flags of Our Fathers* that has Hollywood talking, Phillippe, people are saying, could be this year's Heath Ledger, a lightweight pretty boy who breaks through as a serious actor.

Even more: The role might bury the label of "Mr. Reese Witherspoon" – one that has dogged Phillippe ever since he married the preternaturally perky higher-profile actress in 1999 – once and for all.

Flags follows the true story of the six soldiers who raised the flag at Iwo Jima, and is helmed by the ultimate Academy Award trifecta – directed by Clint Eastwood, produced by Steven Spielberg and written by Paul Haggis. Still, Phillippe shrugs off an Oscar in his future.

"I don't need to go there," he insists. "I don't want to *arrive*. When people that are close to me win, it means so much more. I'm just awkward with that stuff, so it's probably better if it never happens to me."

Whether he likes it or not, 2006 is angling itself to be the best professional year of Phillippe's life. Born in Delaware, at age fifteen he was discovered while getting snipped in a barber's chair. In the late Nineties, Phillippe was on the heartthrob track, with roles in mainstream films like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Cruel Intentions*.

"There were jobs I did take for a paycheck," he admits. "I grew up poor and wanted to buy my parents a house."

So he stopped. He stopped doing interviews, he began taking supporting roles in films like *Gosford Park*, *Igby Goes Down* and *Crash*. He went from leading man to second banana, and though the gossip mill said his career was foundering, he claims that the move was strategic. He wanted to be an actor, not a movie star.

"I don't care about being loved, as much as I do being able to live with myself," he says.

Playing soldiers in two straight war dramas has packed his five-foot-ten frame with muscle. But nothing emasculates a guy like working alongside Clint Eastwood. "Just being in his presence makes you feel like less of a man," Phillippe says.

Both of Phillippe's grandfathers fought in World War II, and his father and uncles served in Vietnam. Phillippe speaks wistfully about laying down life-for-country but draws the line at Iraq.

"Not for this," he says. "In World War II there were clearly dangerous movements led by fascist regimes."

Phillippe may not want to be a movie star, but he says he is comfortable being married to one. Witherspoon is America's sweetheart, the red-carpet darling from a wealthy background. Her mainstream appeal acts as a foil for Phillippe's bad boy, who grew up poor, has been caught by the paparazzi allegedly smoking pot, and who chooses to act in the kinds of movies that give him lines like, "Shut that cunt's mouth, or I'll come over there and fuckstart her head!"

Any tabloid reader knows their story: how Phillippe crashed Witherspoon's twenty-first birthday party in 1997, and at the end of the night she said to him, "I think *you're* my present"; how they starred opposite each other in *Cruel Intentions*, and when they married two years later, she was already pregnant with their first child.

Since then, the couple's marriage has been chronicled on a weekly basis by the paparazzi that trail them and their daughter, Ava, 7, and son Deacon, 2, all over L.A.

In 2003, a photographer shot Phillippe smoking *something* in a California parking lot, a photo that made the cover of *Star* magazine. "It was one of my *high* moments," he says. "You know, shit happens."

So he doesn't smoke pot anymore? "You won't see pictures anywhere," he stresses. That said, he has been known to imbibe.

"At the Golden Globes I was plastered!" He laughs. "Shirley MacClaine and I drank like crazy, just putting away bottles of wine and making fun of everyone."

He adds, "Reese is great with the press and public, and I'm not. We're different."

Soon he'll be flying home for Ava's birthday. He's not sure if he'll have more kids. "Maybe yes, maybe no," he says. "Reese is the planner. I just let the chips fall."

That's not to say he's completely without a retirement plan.

"The ultimate twenty-year plan is to be living in the Caribbean, writing, living off the land, eating from the ocean and probably smoking herb," he says.

Just don't expect any pictures.