

# STAHL AND SUBSTANCE

## Nick Stahl Profile

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Nick Stahl's voice crawls tentatively out of the phone receiver from Los Angeles — sad, laconic, dripping with uncertainty. Is this the only young actor of his generation not intent upon hustling himself with the aw-shucks maneuvers of golden-boy confections like the sculpted-from-cream cheese Freddie Prinze Jr.?

While it might seem obvious from his lazy phone demeanor (and lanky good looks) that 21-year-old Stahl would excel in the role of stoned-and-stupid Shaggy in next spring's live-action *Scooby Doo* rehash, the doe-eyed Dallas transplant quietly closes out his tenth and most fruitful year in the business with smart, smoldering performances in two wildly divergent films: Larry Clark's brash, brooding *Bully* and Todd Field's domestic drama *In the Bedroom*, in which Stahl stars opposite Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson as the exemplary only child of an American Gothic-like Maine couple. A young actor couldn't have nabbed two more disparate roles in the same year — a sadist and a saint — and Stahl nails both characters with equal aplomb, making him a likely candidate to follow in Christian Bale's unconventional, uncompromising footsteps as the thinking person's Hollywood actor.

"*Bully* was the most challenging role I've ever attempted, and it's definitely the furthest from myself," Stahl admits of his role as Bobby Kent, the boorish Florida teen who meets a grisly fate at the hands of his bored, zonked-out, oversexed circle of friends. "I saw a picture of the real Bobby Kent — he was a monster, this giant Stallone-looking character. I wish I hadn't seen a picture of him. I'm pretty much the physical opposite of this guy. I knew facts about him but at the same time there comes a point when you have to work from your own experience, your own knowledge, the experiences you've had."

Raised by a single mom, Stahl honed his acting chops in children's community theater, which led to his first "grown-up" role at age ten in a production of *Medea*, in which he played a slain son (the role seems to have become Stahl's stock in trade). Shakespeare beckoned: "*Henry VI* parts I, II, III — any play that was going on in town, I tried to go up for it." Four years ago, Stahl landed the role of Puck in Benjamin Britton's avant-garde production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Metropolitan Opera. "Everyone was singing opera around me and I had a speaking part. In a house of about 3,000 people every night, I got to fly."

But it was his performance in Mel Gibson's 1993 directorial debut *The Man Without a Face* that sparked Stahl's movie career and led to recurring appearances in teeny-bop rags. Hand-picked by Gibson after submitting a video-taped audition, the then 12-year-old Stahl got an agent, relocated to Los Angeles, and went on to appear in Terrence Malick's war epic *The Thin Red Line*, in a small, blink-and-you'll-miss-it role. "Most of my scenes got cut because Terry had this huge six-hour movie on his hands," Stahl says. "But I got to go through boot camp in Australia for three months." He also got to work alongside such heroes as Sean Penn, Nick Nolte and Elias Koteas. "It was such an impressive group of people, I really tried to spend as much time as possible with them as I could, to listen to their stories." The inevitable ensemble horror flick followed — 1998's disposable *Disturbing Behavior* — in which Stahl played a brooding metal-head who falls in love with a creepy crowd of Stepford-like teens.

*In the Bedroom* proved a healthy respite from the predictable slew of teen horror and coming-of-age fare that could have easily waylaid Stahl into the faceless, frat-jawed under-25 Hollywood set. Stahl's quiet, grounded performance opposite Marisa Tomei in the film establishes the young actor as a cut above the competition — and it places Stahl in the enviable position of acting in an ensemble of previous Oscar winners (Spacek and Tomei) who will likely help *In the Bedroom* garner more Oscar attention next year.

Stahl next appears in another grown-up role opposite Jacqueline Bisset, in auteur Christopher Munch's *The Sleepy-Time Gal*, as a young gay photographer caring for his dying mother. Again, it's about as far from Young Hollywood as an up-and-coming actor can get, but it's these sort of left-field choices that bode well for Stahl's future. He'll continue to balance these roles with more youthful fare — like the MTV feature film *Wasted*, debuting on cable television in November, in which Stahl appears opposite Summer Phoenix as a straight-laced high-school athlete who becomes addicted to heroin. Given his choice, Stahl prefers to stick to more challenging, less obvious roles. "I'm not really attracted to pop culture films — teen movies," Stahl confesses. "I'm never fighting to get these parts but I'm usually asked to read for them anyway. It's kind of a waste of my time. So it works out well for both parties." ■