

Seeing John Malkovich

Room 214 of the Savoy Hotel was the venue for a brief encounter with one of Hollywood's most recognisable faces. Alastair Thain tells **Keith Wilson** how he framed the very punctual Mr Malkovich

The time November, 2002

The place Room 214, Savoy Hotel, London

The event To promote his new film, *The Dancer Upstairs*, John Malkovich flies to London for interviews and photocalls. Freelance photographer Alastair Thain, is commissioned by The Times to provide a portrait for its forthcoming feature. An everyday straightforward request, but Malkovich has given the photographer just 15 minutes to get his picture...

ALASTAIR THAIN is a photographer who likes to work with a big negative. For the past 12 years his favoured format has been 5x8in, using a twin lens reflex camera he made himself. Clad in aluminium cut from sheetmetal, his custom-made camera sports two Rodenstock 300mm lenses, with bellows attached to sliding metal rails for focusing. As this description suggests, his camera is a heavy beast and not for handholding.

Arriving with his assistant well ahead of the scheduled sitting, he had the camera set up and waiting for Malkovich's entrance in room 214 at London's Savoy hotel.

'He was very punctual,' Alastair remembers. 'He arrived bang on time and left on time. Fifteen minutes. That was it.' Working with such a large negative means focusing is





critical, even when stopped down to f/32. Alastair also likes working with mapping and satellite film for the incredible detail it renders. 'For Malkovich I used Agfa mapping film,' he says. 'It's designed for use in aerial surveillance from two miles up and can pick up anything. The detail is amazing.' This can be seen in his portrait of Malkovich. Every hair, crease and pore is perfectly rendered. The only problem is the speed of the

film – often ISO 12 or 15. With such slow film and narrow depth of field, Alastair has developed a high speed flash system to deliver exposures at the speed he requires. With all technical considerations taken care of he can concentrate solely on his sitter, essential when there's just 15 minutes to get a different angle on one of the world's most photographed stars.

In that precious quarter of an hour, 91 exposures were made of the sitter

upstairs. The contact sheet reproduced here shows only nine of those frames.

'I shot a whole range of stuff but you never quite know what's going to work,' Alastair says. 'Looking at the contacts I could see there were a couple of frames that were materially better.'

The chosen image wasn't published entirely unaltered. Alastair decided to crop in on the right side of the actor's face, channelling the effect of his direct gaze to camera to just one eye. ○