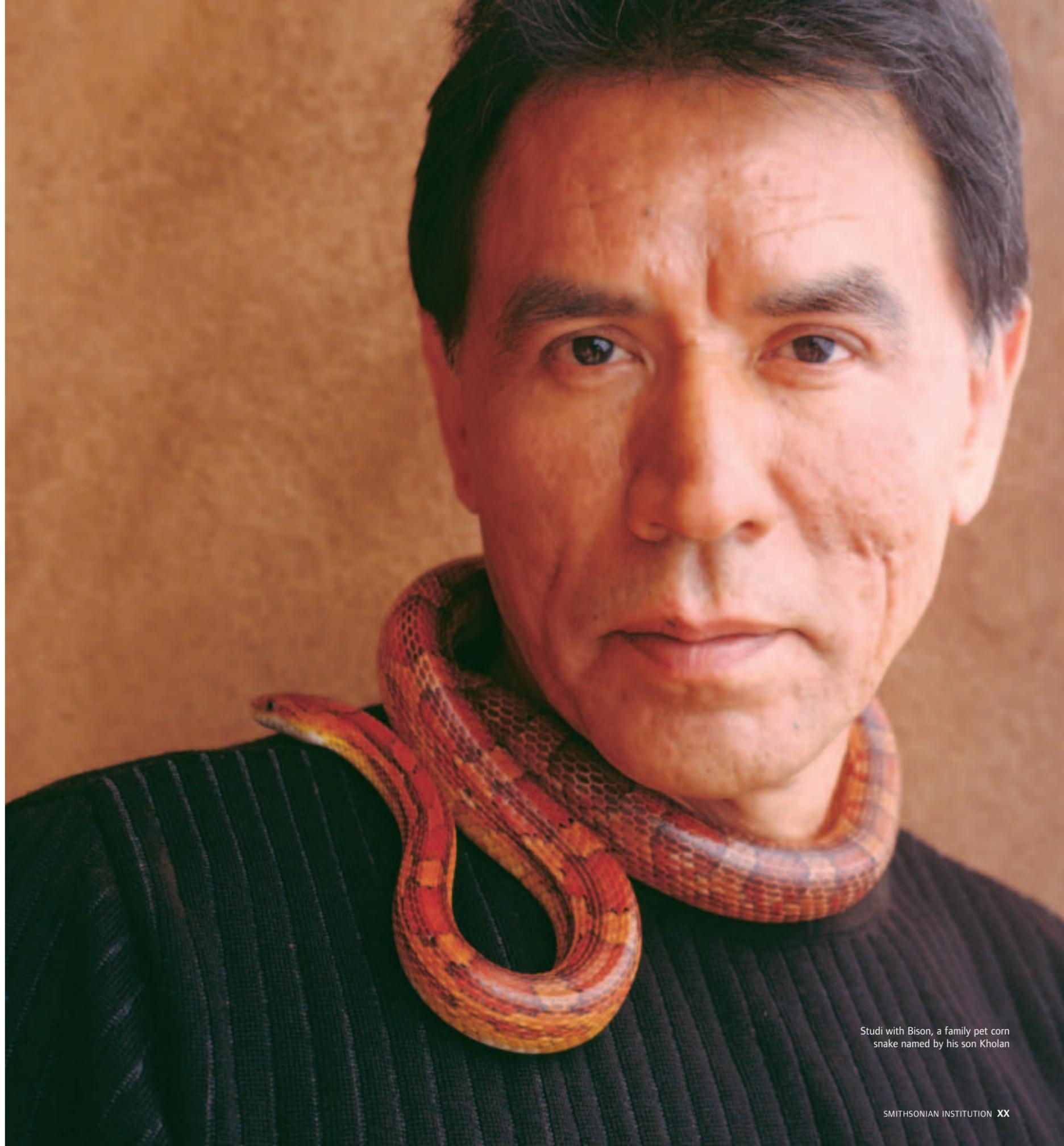


Wes Studi*

In both his prolific acting career and his extraordinary life, Wes Studi has proved to be a perceptive student of both human history and human behavior

BY WENDY BANKS
PHOTOS BY GWENDOLEN CATES



Studi with Bison, a family pet corn snake named by his son Kholan

wes

STUDI (CHEROKEE) IS A BUSY MAN. THIS YEAR ALONE, HE'S been a Los Angeles gangster with Ving Rhames, a Cheyenne/Arapaho leader with Steven Spielberg, and a key figure in the Powhatan Confederacy's struggles with the British in Terrence Malick's *The New World* (scheduled for release in November).

But it's not just this year; over the past decade and a half, he's played troubled heroes, cynical cops, and well-meaning villains opposite Hollywood luminaries from Al Pacino to Ben Stiller. Though varied, his roles have one thing in common: they're all complex and rounded. "I like playing parts that are a little bit of both, good and bad, because I think that's true to what we really are," he says over the phone from his home in Santa Fe. He's soft spoken and unfailingly polite, with a dry sense of humor. "My least favorite role to play is the wise old Indian guy who has all the answers."

On balance, his versatility and complexity make sense. He came to acting relatively late, after stints as a soldier, a rancher, an activist, a journalist, and a teacher. He's seen a lot of situations from both sides, moving back and forth between different worlds: from Cherokee to English, from community to solitude, from enforcer of authority to rebel. "Having lived real life can really help an actor out," he observes.

He's certainly lived his fair share of it. He spent his early years in a multigenerational home, surrounded by relatives in Nofire Hollow,

Okla., a wooded canyon named for his mother's family. At the age of five, on the advice of an aunt, he was sent away to a home for orphans near Muskogee.

"To her mind, the education I would get there was better than any I could hope for at the schools near Nofire Hollow," he says.

"I spoke only Cherokee at the time, but I guess I must have had a crash course in English, because by the time the first year was over, I had been promoted to the second grade. But when I got home, I had forgotten how to speak Cherokee."

It was his first experience of the importance of preserving his first language, but it wouldn't be his last. He relearned Cherokee by the summer's end and entered the second grade fluent in both languages. By the time his second year of school was through, however, his parents had decided to leave Nofire Hollow to seek ranch work.

"We moved away from our family and friends, from other Cherokees," he says. "So I grew up immersed in a small-town Anglo world. I always felt like the outside guy who didn't fit in, so my younger days were made up of a fairly fanciful imaginative life."

The family moved three times in six years, which didn't help his solitude. But things improved when he turned 13 and moved north to board at his father's alma mater, Chilocco Indian School. "It was an adventure. And it was the first time I learned about other Indians." He went to powwows with his friends in the summer and played bass clarinet in the school marching band during the school year. The lonely kid had found his niche.

Back then, he never considered acting. "The closest I came was watching the Lone Ranger and asking my dad if Tonto was played by a real Indian," he says. (It turned out he was—Jay Silverheels, né Smith, of *Six Nations*.) "But Tonto was the only image I saw that might have inspired me—my dad told me you had to be six feet tall and blond to be an actor."

Instead, he took a vocational course in dry cleaning and joined the National Guard. Before he finished his obligation, though, he graduated from high school and found his first job. His Guard duties went by the wayside. As a result, in 1967, he was activated into the Army and sent to Fort Benning, Ga., to a company with a lot of returning Vietnam veterans.

"I sat there listening to these guys telling stories about Vietnam, and I got interested," he recalls. "I wasn't all that socially aware of what was going on in the larger picture. So I started thinking I'd like to find out what I would do in those situations. The upshot is, I volunteered to go to Vietnam, with about one year left in my six-year



obligation. For me, at the time, it was another adventure.”

They shipped out, only to arrive in April 1968, two weeks before phase two of the Tet Offensive. The new recruits had just completed their training when they were urgently required in Saigon. “It was a huge onslaught. We had a heck of a time learning what urban warfare was all about.”

In retrospect, the war had a sinister resonance with his own history. “We would go in and take over entire villages, have them pile all their belongings into these big nets, and helicopters would take them and move them to other places,” he says. “It was an odd position to be in. You know, these are little brown people, and we’re the Army, and not that many years ago, we were the little brown people and they were the Army moving us around from place to place.”

He came back to the United States in 1969 and drifted for a while, readjusting to civilian life and catching up with old friends. Eventually, he took advantage of the GI Bill to go back to school and entered junior college in Tulsa, Okla., where he began studying political science and sociology. Before long, he was swept up in the activist scene on campus, performing acts of civil disobedience with the National Indian Youth Council and the American Indian Movement, ultimately spending a week in jail for participating in the siege of Wounded Knee.

“After that, things began to slow down,” he recalls. “I guess you could say that the government won. So members decided the best thing to do was to go back to the local level, to accomplish things within the tribal structure.” It was through one of these local initiatives that Studi reconnected with his linguistic roots, teaching Cherokee classes at Tahlequah University.

It was a productive time. He married Rebecca Graves and opened a business breeding Morgan horses. At the same time, he helped found a newspaper for the Cherokee Nation called the Cherokee Advocate. His journalism career was brief but colorful. He wrote a column called Anyway, James. “It voiced the gripes people had about the tribal government,” he says. About two years in, after some critical columns that disclosed details of controversial land rights negotiations, they showed him the door.

Shortly after that, he and Rebecca divorced, so he liquidated the horse farm and moved back to Tulsa. There, he discovered that some of his friends had started up a the-



At the age of five, Studi was sent to an orphanage in order to receive an education



Studi was activated into the Army in 1967 and did a tour in Vietnam

“THE CLOSEST I CAME TO ACTING WAS WATCHING THE LONE RANGER AND ASKING MY DAD IF TONTO WAS PLAYED BY A REAL INDIAN.”





Dances With Wolves ▼ Last of the Mohicans ▲



Mystery Men ▲ Street Fighter ▼



SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- The New World (2005)
- Into the West (2005, TV)
- A Thief of Time (2004, TV)
- Coyote Waits (2003, TV)
- The Lone Ranger (2003, TV)
- Skinwalkers (2002, TV)
- Mystery Men (1999)
- Deep Rising (1998)
- Crazy Horse (1996) (TV)
- Lone Justice 2 (1995)
- Street Fighter (1994)
- Geronimo: An American Legend (1993)
- The Last of the Mohicans (1992)
- The Doors (1991)
- Dances with Wolves (1990)
- Powwow Highway (1989)

source: Internet Movie Database

ater company. They invited him to a workshop. “I liked the look of it very much. I was divorced, and the ratio of men to women there was very much higher on the female side. So I joined up.”

After a few shows touring around nursing homes and community centers, the company decided to aim higher. It hired professional actors for the major roles in its next show, but Studi landed several of the smaller parts. The show was a success, and in 1984, in his late thirties, he realized that he had found his calling.

“It was after that that I finally decided that if I wanted to do acting as a career, I’d have to go to L.A.,” he recalls. It was slow going at first—“I moved a lot of furniture,” he says—but in 1988, a few commercials and a western pilot led to a role in a film called Powwow Highway. His next couple of roles were less than inspiring; he played “the Toughest Pawnee” in *Dances with Wolves* and then did a walk-on, as “the Indian in the desert,” in a movie about the *Doors*.

But his persistence paid off. Six years after moving to Los Angeles, he landed Magua, the part in *The Last of the Mohicans* that broke his career wide open. All of his years in the real world were finally starting to pay off. “What I had to do as Magua was relive history in my own mind, which, having been part of the militant movement, wasn’t such a very hard thing to do,” he explains. “It was actually pretty good therapy.”

Good acting, too, and technically demanding. Magua’s dialogue took place in four languages—English, French, Mohawk, and

Huron (which became part Cherokee for want of a Huron translator). The Oscar buzz was deafening, although in the end he didn’t receive a nomination.

Oscar or no Oscar, Magua won the attention of critics and producers. Studi’s next part was the title role in another period drama, Walter Hill’s *Geronimo: An American Legend*. Just as his militant experience had informed his performance in *Mohicans*, his year in Vietnam helped here. “The kind of world that Geronimo grew up in was a world of war,” he says.

Since then, he’s kept busy, acting in 35

“WHAT I HAD TO DO AS MAGUA IN LAST OF THE MOHICANS WAS RELIVE HISTORY IN MY OWN MIND, WHICH, HAVING BEEN PART OF THE MILITANT MOVEMENT, WASN’T SUCH A VERY HARD THING TO DO.”

films and television episodes, playing with his band Firecat, and acting as a spokesperson for the Indigenous Language Institute. Because of the extensive research he does for each part, he’s become something of an expert on Native American history, too.

It shows when he talks about his roles. In Terrence Malick’s upcoming reinterpretation of the Pocahontas story, *The New World*, Studi plays Opechancanough, Pocahontas’s uncle. “It’s about the first encounters that the Powhatan Confederacy had with the Brits. I play the brother of Powhatan, the fellow who, after Powhatan died, was able to wipe out six English villages with simultaneous attacks. I would call it an anthropological study of the Natives as well as an anthropological study of the Brits. It looks at all of the societal as well as political ramifications of these two people beginning to deal with one another.”

To prepare for the part, Studi had to learn a reconstruction of the Powhatan dialect, created by linguistics professor Blair Rudes of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. “I like to think that the fact that I speak two languages, English and Cherokee, gives me an advantage on someone who doesn’t. The tongue, the mouth, the whole organ of speech is geared to accept, or at least attempt, sounds that aren’t used in English. It’s a help.”

English and Cherokee, aggressor and resister, American and Indian—it all helps. Wes Studi uses all the facets of his complex life to construct characters we can believe in. ✪

Wendy Banks is a freelance writer based in Toronto, Ont.