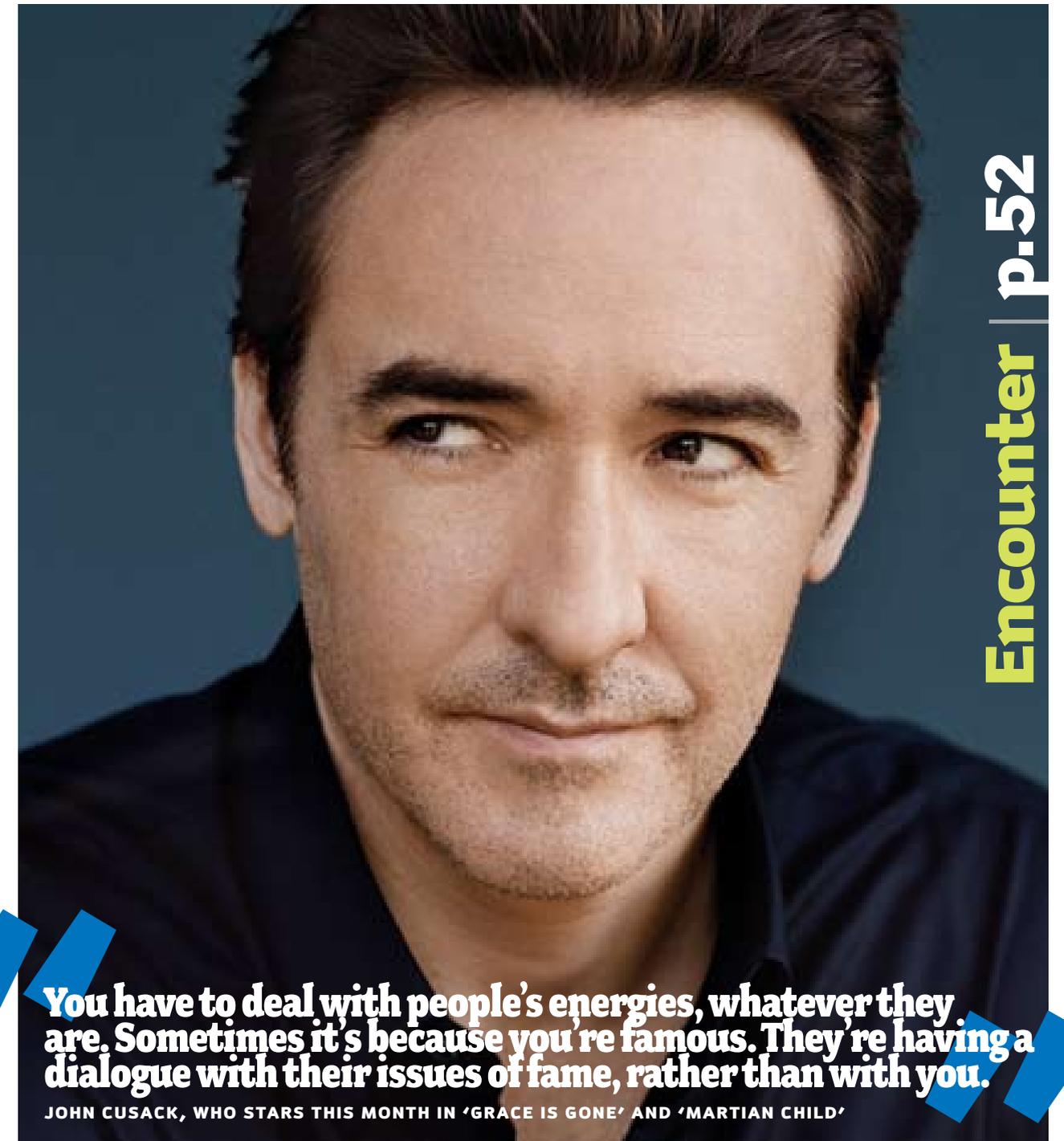


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You have to deal with people's energies, whatever they are. Sometimes it's because you're famous. They're having a dialogue with their issues of fame, rather than with you.

JOHN CUSACK, WHO STARS THIS MONTH IN 'GRACE IS GONE' AND 'MARTIAN CHILD'



THE CHAMP

Going *mano a mano* with his own image, everyone's favorite boyfriend, **John Cusack**, grows into Dad (and has Oscar buzz to boot) in two new films **BY ARIEL SWARTLEY**

[PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF LIPSKY]



John Cusack gets right to the point: “Do you think you can hit the person you’re interviewing?” Given that we’re standing on a mat-covered floor beside a gym bag full of boxing gloves, his question is not theoretical. Outside the practice studio, one of several in the Malibu Performing Arts Center, the sun is shining and drought-resistant shrubs nuzzle the windows.

Inside, Cusack, six foot two, is dressed to pummel in black training pants and a sweatshirt. He and his longtime kickboxing coach, Benny “the Jet” Urquidez, are regulars here. In a few minutes I’ll be joining them for a training session in the dark-ceilinged room Urquidez has nicknamed “the dungeon,” and the actor is trying to be encouraging. “Actually, when you do it, you’ll enjoy it,” he says. “Trust me.”

Cusack, 41, has been winning audiences’ trust for years. However loutish his characters’ behavior, it’s nothing that can’t be redeemed by a candid gaze and a fleeting close-mouthed smile. In a career that has seen him transition gracefully from teen buddy (*Sixteen Candles*) to thinking woman’s leading man (*High Fidelity*, *Must Love Dogs*), he’s developed a strategy that resembles a one-two punch. Films with broad appeal—the recent Stephen King-based horror film *1408*, or the Jan de Bont-directed action feature he’s filming in Germany—alternate with more personal projects. “I’m not smart enough to figure out anything else,” Cusack says, a hint of fight in his otherwise low-key voice. “The only thing people seem to respect is money, so I try to make money at something.”

If this month’s *Grace Is Gone* lives up to the Oscar buzz, he may get both: box-office credibility plus serious praise. With its frank treatment of an unpopular war, the film, which Cusack coproduced, sends a hard left hook to the audience’s comfort zone. Cusack’s anti-Bush sentiments have been well publicized, but in *Grace* he plays a Red State sales manager married to a female soldier. The role is a long step away from the boyish insouciance he’s perfected. Even before his character learns that his wife’s been killed in action, Cusack is almost unrecognizable: lumbering instead of footloose, dogged rather than sharp. Unable to face sharing the bad news with his preteen daughters, he bundles them off on a road trip to a distant theme park. As he gradually rises to the occasion (and seems to get taller and lighter, too), the leafy scenes of heartland normalcy that accompany the journey bring both the costs of war and the unglamorous heroism of parenting into focus.

Fatherhood, albeit the kind that verges on buddyhood, is also the theme of Cusack’s other fall release, *Martian Child*, in which he plays a single science-fiction writer who adopts a

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disturbed boy. Beamed squarely at his female fan base, the film puts forth a pleasing case for the uses and abuses of fantasy in between romps with a baseball and a large dog. Does Cusack see dads becoming the new sex symbol? "I don't want to spin it," he says. "But I'll let you."

As a sparring partner he's probably not so accommodating. The gloves won't go on, though, until we warm up. Urquidez, whom Cusack addresses as "Sensei," is a short, square man with a voice as soothing as sugar syrup. The son of a Basque father and a Native American mother, he holds nine martial arts black belts and has fought onscreen with Jackie Chan. "I teach warfare," he says. "Mental warfare, physical warfare, spiritual warfare, character warfare." Right now he's asking us to imagine a porthole on top of our heads. Through it, our in-drawn breath will chisel out any stagnant energy and drive it to our feet, where we'll exhale it out.

"Aaaaah," he demonstrates. "Good. From right there we're going to start a little jumping jack. Open and cross, and two, and four!"

I'd been imagining more conversation and less heavy breathing. Still, there's a silver lining in this setup. A subsequent exercise, requiring the actor to lie on his side on a white park bench, offers an unparalleled close-up of his well-conditioned butt as Urquidez counts out a set of torso twists. The lining tarnishes some when I realize that I, too, will have to assume the position. Dutifully I put my left hand on my waist and my right on my ear and try to bend on command. "Breathe," Cusack says. "Breathe into it." By the time Urquidez directs the two of us to sit back-to-back on the floor, embarrassment seems superfluous. "Lean on Johnny," the trainer says. "That's it, make him hurt."

Cusack doesn't hide his competitive streak. "If you want to play tennis, play against John McEnroe," he says. (He has.) Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, though, what he did mostly was act. One of five children of a documentary filmmaker father, he and his siblings were members of a local theater workshop, booked commercials, fooled around at home. That sense of family as repertory company has never gone away. His brother and sisters have all appeared with him in film, while sister Joan, a frequent costar, plays his sibling in *Martian Child*. Like his continued cultivation of his Midwestern roots—*Grace Is Gone* was



FATHER KNOWS BEST:
Cusack in *Grace Is Gone* (top) and *Martian Child*

FROM TOP: THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY; ALAN MARKFIELD/NEW LINE CINEMA

filmed in Chicago—working with family is another way of maintaining a protected space. Call it a dojo.

He began training with Urquidez for *Say Anything*, the film that fixed Cusack's reputation as an offbeat hero. That was in 1989, and his character, a high school athlete in love with the class valedictorian, touts kickboxing as the sport of the future. Cusack didn't need convincing. "I've always thought the theater of it was so incredible," he says. "It's about as real time as you can get." We've concluded the joint part of the warm-up, and he's speaking from the floor while Urquidez bends and twists him. "All your emotions are going to come up," Cusack says, warming to his subject. "You're either going to rage out and become a killer or you're going to be a coward, and either one is absolutely normal because you're dealing with the most primal things."

That seems pertinent to acting, I venture. "Uh, I think it is," he says, flexing like a Gumby doll. "There's probably a kind of maturity you need to access that stuff and not let it overwhelm you." Urquidez, now walking on Cusack's back, refers to the power of "breath medicine." A panting Cusack agrees. "If you have to deal with film companies, it's good to release."

Suddenly he's on his feet. "Ready to sling leather?" he asks.

Cusack's politics went real-time last year when he accompanied Arianna Huffington to

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The Wall Street Journal's "D: All Things Digital" conference. When a speaker referred to a "Reality Acquisition Device," Huffington's online *Post* reported, Cusack promptly scribbled "Send a box to the White House!" Talking here about *Grace Is Gone*, the actor echoes the sentiment. "In a country which is so composed of spin and agenda," he says, "just to do a story about grief is a radical act—which in itself is saying something. Not a good thing. It seems like we're in the last throes of some massive public denial.... When the Bush administration banned the photos of coffins coming home—that was one of the worst things I've ever seen. Real, blatant, hideous cowardice and manipulation, and the worst kind of opportunism. So I thought, Okay, let's tell the story of one of those coffins coming home."

My hands are finally in the gloves, but first there's a demonstration of the moves I'll be learning. When Urquidez, playing a French killer, came after Cusack in the hit-man comedy *Grosse Pointe Blank*, the size discrepancy between the two was not so evident. Here in the gym, Cusack is a giant black windmill and Urquidez, chanting combinations and parrying the results with padded baffles, is a benign garden gnome—if gnomes were known for their speed and agility. When it's my turn on the mat, no novice accessing her inner warrior could have more encouraging teachers. Urquidez's murmured "good"s are like a warm blanket, and Cusack never seriously expects me to hit him.

After we've finished and made our bows to Urquidez, the conversation turns reflective. "I have pretty high standards which I don't often meet, but I know what they are," Cusack says. "Part of my fear, my delusion, my ego is, I surround myself with champions. You surround yourself with people who are the best and see if any of it rubs off on you. Those are my good traits."

And his bad ones? "This week? Today?" he feints. "Probably I get too self-involved and, uh, persevere. It's a great word, and I can't ever say it. Anyway, I lose the big picture. I become obsessional about whatever it is I think has to get done. That's where Sensei's mode comes in. You release and do what you can do now."

He's right: Aggression channeled into a left hook feels excellent. ■

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caption: Father Knows Best: Cusack in *Grace Is Gone* (top) and *Martian Child*

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