

'You can choose and you can triumph!'

Exklusive SPIRIT interview with actor GALE HANSEN about cult movie Dead Poets Society

Von Marc Hairapetian

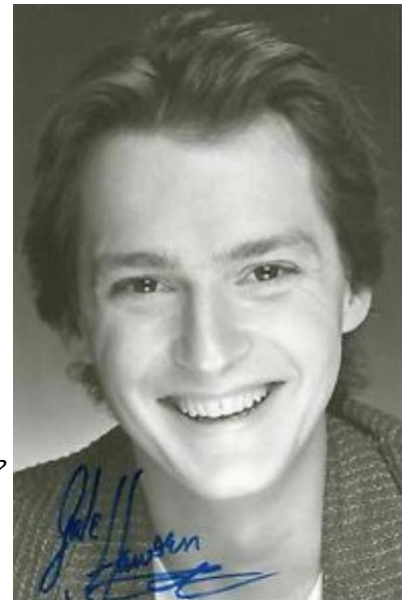


Gale Hansen

What ever happened to Gale Hansen, the secret star in Peter Weir's cult movie Dead Poets Society (1989)? Although Ethan Hawke (in the role of Todd Anderson), Robert Sean Leonard (Neil Perry), Josh Charles (Knox Overstreet) and of course Robin Williams (Teacher John Keating) became much more famous than Gale, his performance as the humorous, but darkly subversive high school student (Charlie Dalton) was memorable. The Internet certainly has its advantages, when you're trying to find somebody to interview: THE SPIRIT found Gale Hansen, at Facebook of all places! These days, he works as a film executive with the company! Gale was kind enough to answer my extensive questions by e-mail, although he makes a secret about his date of birth (at a guess, he was probably born around 1960). Read the exclusive interview on Dead Poets Society, which was both a box office (worldwide gross: \$ 235,860,116) and critically acclaimed, and nominated for four Academy Awards, of which Tom Schulman won one for the Best Original Screenplay).

*Marc Hairapetian: How did you enter the film business? Was it always your plan or was there an alternative career aspiration?*

**Gale Hansen:** I got very lucky in high school when I signed up for introduction to drama as an easy language arts course. The drama teacher was a great man and inspired tens of thousands of young men and women through his career. I performed in the school plays. He also ran a children's theater, which I volunteered at and eventually became part of the ensemble. As high school was ending he told me I was good enough to give the profession a try either in New York or Los Angeles. I opted for NY. Once I was there it became painfully obvious I was not a good actor, so I began searching for classes. This pursuit led me to Uta Hagen, Stella Adler, a protege of Strasberg, and ultimately Sanford Meisner. Each helped but it was working with Sandy that brought everything together for me.



Gale Hansen

*Marc Hairapetian: How did you get the small role as Freshman in Woody Allen's Zelig?*

**Gale Hansen:** I was waiting tables at a deli. Two lovely ladies sat at one of my tables and ordered. We'd run out of something in the kitchen so I had to go back and inform one of the customers. She asked my advice. I gave it to her and they both seemed happy. After they'd eaten and were having coffee, she asked "what else are you doing in town?" I replied studying to be an actor but that my name wouldn't be on a marquee any time soon. She replied, "Stranger things have happened." I took it as a nice encouragement. As they were leaving they both gave me a tiny slip of paper with their contact information on it. They were casting directors. They were elite casting directors. They asked that I send my headshots and resume to their offices. I did and thought, well that's that. Three days later the "stranger things have happened" woman's office called the restaurant and asked for me. The manager wasn't happy about that. The casting director said she hadn't received my photo's yet. I asked if I could drop some off after work. I did, with a bouquet of roses and a thank you card saying, "I can't give these away. Thank you for asking for them." Again, I thought that's that. Done. Two days later they call up saying, "I think we might have something for you." I had no agent and no manager and no way of being submitted to the casting director for anything. It was all luck. She brought me in to meet Woody Allen and it was a brief moment in his presence. A few days

later she called to "offer" me the part. I was thrilled and scared to death. Ha ha ha.

**Marc Hairapetian:** *Your most famous role to date is that of Charlie Dalton aka Nuwanda in Peter Weir's masterpiece Dead Poets Society. You were older than the other young actors like Ethan Hawk, Robert Sean Leonard and Josh Charles. Was there a special casting and why was you selected as "Nuwanda"?*

**Gale Hansen:** Yes, for Dead Poets I was older than every other poet in the cast. I was actually brought in to audition for the role of Pitts and was wrong for that part. I was told after we wrapped that Peter's wonderful wife Wendy was the one to spot me on the vhs tape sent to them after each casting call. She singled me out, "There's your Charlie." They called me back and I auditioned for Peter. Within days I was offered the part. And it changed me life.



*Gale Hansen as Charlie Dalton aka Nuwanda in Dead Poets Society*

**Marc Hairapetian:** *How much of Nuwanda is actually in you?*

**Gale Hansen:** How much Nuwanda is there in me? Wow. I've never really thought about it in those terms. Tom Schulman wrote an incredible story filled with amazing characters and relationships. Peter cast wonderfully talented young actors in every role. He also guided us with such humanity and precision that I was amazed every moment of every day. Along with that guidance came a lot of freedom within the circumstances of the material. Then you add the genius and humanity and generosity of Robin Williams... well, that was a formula that encouraged everyone to dig deep and to connect and give their very best and most true self to the moment. So, I guess there's a lot of me in Nuwanda and a lot of Nuwanda in me.

**Marc Hairapetian:** *How was the cooperation with Weir and the other actors? Did you have a conspiratorial team or was there competition pressure? Perhaps even friendships were formed on the set that still exist today?*

**Gale Hansen:** Zero competition between the actors during Dead Poets. We were a brotherhood. We became friends. And, yes I am still in touch with a few of them. And I am sure if I reached out to the others, they'd respond and we'd likely pick up right where we left off. I was older and during production became friends with Marsha, Robin's wife. I also became friends with producer Steven Haft and his lovely wife Lisa Birnbaum. The six of us would kind of double date sometimes. It was a lot of fun.

**Marc Hairapetian:** *Especially Robin Williams as a nonconfirmist, progressive teacher was fantastic. What impression did you have of him and did you still have contact after the shooting?*

**Gale Hansen:** Robin was such a sweet guy, very giving, very open and helpful. I miss him in this world, as the entire world misses him. I was stunned by the loss of Robin. It had been a long time since we'd seen each other. I was saddened for his family's loss, for the world's loss. I think of him often and my heart goes out to his family every time.

**Marc Hairapetian:** *When the news of his suicide arrived, what did you think and feel? Were you touched that after his death, people worldwide posted photos and videos clambering on the table saying "O Captain! My Captain!"? In Germany, this even made a news anchor on television.*

**Gale Hansen:** I was touched by the world's outpouring of emotion over Robin's passing. I wasn't surprised. He was loved the world over and his good deeds, often out of public view touched and changed so many lives. The man gave everything he had to everyone every time.

**Marc Hairapetian:** *Did you notice during the filming that Dead Poets Society will soon be called a cult movie? What makes the movie so timeless?*

**Gale Hansen:** During production we had no idea how the film would turn out let alone any sense of how it would be received by worldwide audiences. Not a day goes by that someone doesn't reach out or mention the film to me and/or ask something about the making of the movie or its meaning. It is an honor and a responsibility that I do not take for granted. The film means so much to so many people, it's a touchstone for them growing up and while going through difficult times. I think this is something that a great many people have discovered for themselves and a lot of kids have parents and teachers that share it with them. I think this is what perpetuates the message within the film that no matter how bad things are or how much pressure you're under, you can be what you want to be, you can choose and you can triumph!



Gale Hansen as Charlie Dalton aka Nuwanda in *Dead Poets Society*

**Marc Hairapetian:** Did you also meet film composer Maurice Jarre? He was my fatherly friend. I also had the very last interview with him and am also friends with his son Jean-Michel Jarre. See here a link with our picture of my last interview with Maurice. One month later he died...

**Gale Hansen:** I never met Maurice Jarre, but Peter played his soundtracks for other films during production, we all loved his music and were constantly moved emotionally by it. Music is such an effective emotional trigger.

**Marc Hairapetian:** After that, you also worked as a Stroke Dexter in "Class of '96". Why did your acting career suddenly end in 1998?

**Gale Hansen:** Why did my acting career end so suddenly? It was a combination of things. I was bouncing around town going straight to directors/producers and testing for studio jobs and coming very close when I was hit by a car. I won't go into much detail but it took me out of the game for a while. By the time I was returning things had changed.

**Marc Hairapetian:** Your wife Evangeline Quiroz is also an actress. Did your sons go this way too?

**Gale Hansen:** My wife was a modern dancer who danced her way around the world. She dabbled in acting for a while. Our children are not actors.

**Marc Hairapetian:** There are many reasons why you become an actor. Some want to serve art, others speak of self-realization. For some, like Anthony Perkins, it even had self-executive ethics. What was your reason?

**Gale Hansen:** Why did I become an actor? I just fell in love with it, the freedom of inhabiting a character not myself. It allows for an exploration of human truth under elevated and extreme imaginary circumstances that an ordinary life seldom encounters.

**Marc Hairapetian:** To deepen this question: Laurence Olivier said acting would be the mediation of illusions. My favorite actor Oskar Werner (*Decision Before Dawn*, *Jules et Jim*, *"Ship of Fools"*, *Fahrenheit 451*) said this was not right, he wanted to give the audience a dream. What do you think is right and what did you want to convey to the audience?

**Gale Hansen:** For me, I worked towards spontaneous self-revelation in hopes of conjuring moment-to-moment suspension of disbelief by the audience so that they might feel within themselves, "yes, me too, that's me right there, right now." It is a feeling I've experienced with the work of other actors, a feeling of being lured into becoming a voyeur to the point of breathlessly watching and hanging on every moment as I vanish and their truth is everything.

**Marc Hairapetian:** Since 1992 I do a survey in the film and music magazine *Spirit - Ein Lächeln im Sturm*, where I asked artists about their 20 favorite films in 1984 as a 16-year-old. So far I have over 500 lists - including Oliver Stone, Federico Fellini, Klaus Maria Brandauer, Quentin Tarantino, Stanley Kubrick's executive producer Jan Harlan, Oskar Werner's wife Atje Weisgerber and his son Felix - and I want to make a book out of it. Can you also send me your favorite 20 films? Maybe with a short explanation?

**Gale Hansen:** 20 favorite films? Yikes, there's so many to choose from. Please note these are in no particular order! Also I tried not to overthink my responses.

**The Godfather 1 & 2** - So much of this is my longing for the lost code of honor and family. Most quoted in my life.

**Lawrence of Arabia** - It is just so gorgeous, the performances are perfect, and I love that lust for something great from life.

**The Bicycle Thief** - It hits me where I live, how I grew up, the desperation to make good and do what's right, claim what is yours.

**About Time** - The ultimate father/son movie, what time is really worth, that it's all so fleeting, knowing and being

responsible for love.

**Dances With Wolves** - It just pulls me in, this is the moment in America I would go back to and live if I could.

**Tender Mercies** - This is the gold standard for acting for me. Duvall's performance is perfect Meisner on display, moment to moment truth.

**It's a Wonderful Life** - This is also where I live, the sacrifices we make for love of the people in our lives that are really for us.

**Pulp Fiction** - I don't fully understand my fixation on this one, it is just like breathing air to me, everything about it. 2nd most quoted in life.

**Rashomon** - This one movie taught me life. Life is Rashomon, I've never forgotten everyone has a valid POV on everything they experience.

**Sullivan's Travels** - It's easy to get too serious about what we do when it is all about us, but so glorious when we realize what we do means so much to others.

**Schindler's List** - I am part Jewish on my mother's side. The shift from profiteer to savior is so powerful and elegant. The lives saved.

**Cinema Paradiso** - This sums up my love for movies just for entertainment's sake, life elevated to a silver screen just lifts my soul.

**The Deer Hunter** - The American empire, the industrial war machine, the rich man's war, the poor man's fight, the realization that so many lives are lost in the pursuit of profit sold as patriotism.

**Platoon** - same as above.

**Wings of Desire** - I identify with the ones emotionally witnessing the messy wonderfulness of life and sacrificing that remove to experience the chaos and pain of living, giving up immortality to be human - knowing full well it ends.

**Taxi Driver** - A perfect character driven story of madness that is as compelling, scary and relevant today as the day it was released.

**Star Wars** - A New Hope - I love evolution from simple non believer through spiritual awakening, from nobody to hero with the fate of the world hanging in the balance.

**Manon of the Spring/Jean de Flourette** - All the complexities of the human heart, envy, longing and beauty and love.

**Shawshank Redemption** - This is the one film that whenever I come across it while channel surfing, it just stop and watch it to the end. The story, the characters and their relationships, the under-dog triumph over adversity just soothes me.

**Who Am I This Time?** - A short film, Kurt Vonnegut's cut to the bone is what acting is like for me versus what life is like to me.

**My Favorite Year** - What's not to love? The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Family crazy love and embarrassment versus career ambition and remaking oneself to be like our heroes only to realize that our heroes are only human. It just rings true for me.

*Marc Hairapetian interviewed Gale Hansen for SPIRIT - EIN LÄCHELN IM STURM [www.spirit-ein-laecheln-im-sturm.de](http://www.spirit-ein-laecheln-im-sturm.de) / [www.spirit-fanzine.de](http://www.spirit-fanzine.de) / [www.spirit-fanzine.com](http://www.spirit-fanzine.com) on 6 May 2018.*