



## Character Life.(Interview)

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Vincent D'Onofrio has no interest in movie stardom, even if he is the star of a movie.

It's strange that Vincent D'Onofrio's career hasn't skyrocketed. He is, after all, one of the most versatile actors working in film. Remaining a non-celebrity is fine with D'Onofrio, who prefers to consider himself a character actor who goes from job to job, immersing himself in each part he creates.

Part of the reason this 41-year-old thesp has remained on the fringes of movie stardom is that it's virtually impossible to label him. He defies categorization by the fact that he's managed to pull off such a diverse range of parts--all the while bringing a signature intensity to the work--no matter if it's a lead or a supporting role.

This month, he can be seen in two films in which his characters could not be more different--the thriller *The Cell*, in which he portrays a serial killer opposite Jennifer Lopez, and *Steal This Movie!*, a biopic on the late radical activist/outlaw Abbie Hoffman. The latter film, which D'Onofrio also executive-produced, is a rare treat for his fans. He successfully tackles the challenge of bringing to the screen the brilliant but troubled Hoffman, and by doing so tells a crucial part of American history and culture. It's a superb performance by D'Onofrio, one that is supported by equally talented actors, including Janeane Garofalo, Jeanne Tripplehorn, and Kevin Pollak.

D'Onofrio's wide range of screen credits also include *Men in Black*, in which he was almost unrecognizable as the psychotic farmer-turned-alien; *The Whole Wide World*, a wonderful low-budget film he produced and starred in as real-life pulp novelist Robert E. Howard; Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*, in which D'Onofrio turned himself into a young Orson Welles; Robert Altman's *The Player*, Richard Linklater's *The Newton Boys*; *Good Luck*; *Feeling Minnesota*; Nancy Savoca's *Household Saints*; *Mystic Pizza*, and his first film, Stanley Kubrick's *Fall Metal Jacket*, in which the actor gave an unforgettable performance as the suicidal Private Pyle.

The New York-based performer received an Emmy Award nomination two years ago for his guest appearance in an episode of NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. His most recent stage appearance was in Sam Shepard's Off-Broadway play, *Tooth of Crime*, which ran from the end of 1996 through

February of 1997.

In the interview that follows, D'Onofrio talks about his foundations as an actor (he studied at the Stanislavsky Theatre in New York and later at the Actors Studio), his particular method for building characters, and advice on staying in the game.

Back Stage West: I've read that you consider yourself a character actor. How so?

Vincent D'Onofrio: It's just because that's what I play--I play characters. The kinds of parts that I get when I get leads are not that kind of "leading man" thing. There may be romance in it. There may be heroic parts, if and when I do leads, but I always consider them full characters. There's always something that divides them from just that kind of heroic, leading man type of thing. So I approach everything as a character actor.

BSW: You're so good at transforming yourself, physically, from role to role. However, I imagine that it goes much deeper than the physical surface when you're developing a character. Am I right?

D'Onofrio: I don't think that anyone can ever completely leave themselves behind. If you're playing a part, you're playing it as you. This is another reason why I call myself a character actor, because the way I learned at the American Stanislavski Theatre, or with this teacher Sharon Chapman from Actors Studio, is to always be yourself--to speak in your own voice and rely on yourself. Put yourself in the character's circumstance. Never try to pretend to be anything or pretend anything. So that you can always live the moment.

Once you learn to do that, you can start layering character on top of yourself. You can change the tone in your voice; you can go high or go low, considering what suits the character. You can change your posture; you figure out what posture suits this character. And then the aesthetics--the lines of your character, the way the body is shaped. What suits the posture that you've come up with? What suits the voice? What suits the story?

So all of these are just layers of character that you put on top of yourself. You never go away from yourself; you layer the character. And some roles need one character layer and some need four or five. But rarely do they need nothing. You know, Strasberg always said that all this technique is good if you need it, but if you can just walk out onstage and do the part, God bless you. But when you're doing a play, one night you might not have it and all this technique is for you to fall back on.

BSW: Were you able to find a meeting point between the two different schools of acting you came out of--Stanislavski and Strasberg?

D'Onofrio: There is a root of it all. The Method comes from the first 10 years of Stanislavski's

studies, and then Stanislavki gave up those 10 years and changed his system of acting. But Method acting comes from those first 10 years. What I learned with Stanislavski was about postures, about physical work. I'm putting this in very general terms. And what I learned from the Method--I hate that word "method"---but what I learned from Strasberg's sense memory stuff was how to do internal work.

So I learned exterior and internal [approaches] from what I consider the best sources, and then ! combined them and came up with my own deal, which is easiest for me. I think this is how most actors work. I don't think I'm any different than most. Musicians do the same thing. They're influenced by so many sources outside themselves and then they take what they've gathered and they make it their own.

BSW: What led you to acting in the first place?

D'Onofrio: I guess my dad. My dad, as a hobby, used to produce and direct plays in whatever town he was in. He was an interior designer by trade and he always had a community theatre going wherever he lived. I lived with my mom [in Miami], but I'd visit my dad and I'd build sets and run sound and stuff like that.

My first holy communion was when ! saw A Streetcar Named Desire. I was like 11. I think that was it. But I didn't act in high school. I thought it was kind of silly. It wasn't until I tried college out for a while and basically [doodled] during classes--I'm not much of an academic type. I started acting in plays with my dad. And then one day I just decided to go to New York and start studying--to try to figure it out.

BSW: Do you think that actors have to get stage experience, as you did, before working on camera?

D'Onofrio: Yeah, you have to. You have to, because the humiliation factor is so high in theatre. Every night you're humiliated in some way. It's the best way to learn. I have a lot of confidence as an actor--a lot of confidence. And the actors that I know--men or women--the ones with the most confidence are the best actors.

You learn that confidence from humiliation. If you can basically do a bad job in front of 1,500 people, you learn from that. Every night, when you're doing a play, something goes wrong. Sometimes every, night something goes great, too, but you really don't learn from that. That feeling of "I'm wonderful" lasts about 10 seconds and then you have to try again.

When things go really bad, they stay with you. You feel like you've fallen on your ass and you have to get back up, having learned something. This builds confidence and it keeps your attention on the work, because from the minute you start that play--when you walk out on that stage with your

script during rehearsal--you're being watched. You're out there and nobody's going to say "cut" to you. You can't do it again. You're out there for the duration.

BSW: So many actors move to Los Angeles to find work, but they don't necessarily come here to do theatre--even though there's plenty of reputable theatrical work going on here. Does it really matter, in your opinion, where you get your stage training--in LA., New York, or elsewhere?

D'Onofrio: The truth is if you want to be an actor, do theatre and do it in New York, because there's no feeling like going up onstage in New York. There's no feeling equal to that, except for maybe the West End in London. But if you want to be a film star, go to Los Angeles. It's that general, really. But there are exceptions. My best friend, who I grew up with in New York, is now living here, and he's in plays all the time here. There's a lot of theatre out here. I'd love to do a play here in Los Angeles.

BSW: How'd you get cast in your first film, Full Metal Jacket?

D'Onofrio: Matthew Modine was doing it and he was a friend of mine. We had studied together for a little while. We were talking on the phone one day and he said, "You know, I'm doing this Kubrick film and there's this other part that I don't know much about, but you should send a tape over." So I sent a tape over.

BSW: Did you go through an agent for that?

D'Onofrio: No. I just had a theatre agent. I was on Broadway at the time. I was doing Open Admissions, a play about street kids going to college. So I sent a tape over [to the casting office] and then I started talking to Stanley on the phone and then I ended up sending about three more tapes and then I got the job. I gained all the weight [70 lbs.] and I was working on the film for 13 months.

BSW: Did you have any trouble shaking off that image of a big, mentally disturbed guy after Full Metal Jacket came out?

D'Onofrio: Well, I actually didn't work for a year after I did that. One of the reasons was because I wanted to take all the weight off that I put on for the part. I mean, I did a couple of television things to pay the rent in between, because I figured they were little parts and I needed the money then. Once I decided that the weight was off and to start doing auditions again for films, luckily, I got work right away and it was a completely different part than Full Metal Jacket. I did Mystic Pizza. I didn't have concern, really, about being typecast after that point.

BSW: What attracts you to certain roles or projects now?

D'Onofrio: It changes. You know, this business is so screwy. It's a screwy, dishonest business to be in. So you have to put things into categories. Like, if I get a script that's a huge-budget film with movie stars in it--I read it and realize that it's not that well written, but there's a good director attached to it that gives it potential. Hopefully, there are good actors that give it potential. Hopefully, in the rehearsal period and in the process of making the film we'll improve the words and the story. So although it doesn't start out to be legitimate, you hope to make it legitimate by the end.

And sometimes when you make a choice to do a big film like that, it doesn't work and the actors that were put on the film are not trying to make it better. The director is not trying to make it better. So you have to be careful. When I make choices to do films like that, I like to do them because the money is really good. I've made films like that before and I've been either bored or really unhappy for four months doing them. So I've learned to be more careful. Again and again I've learned, by the way. It's hard because the money is so good.

So that's one category. Then you'll get a smaller script and the writing is fantastic. They've got no money to make it, but they've got good actors, and you get involved in the project. Basically, they don't change a word in it, and you just go and do it and you work your ass off. You don't get paid very well for it and hardly anybody sees it when it's done. But it's a good piece of work.

So these days, I pick things for what's best for me as an actor. I get lots of independent film scripts all the time and I have to be careful which ones I pick because I don't want to be committed to something and some other one comes along and it's even better.

Basically, I'm a happy actor when the story is really good, regardless of the size of my part. I'm also a happy actor when I'm getting a big fat paycheck. So there are two sides to it. Either way, I have to like the character, and if I can see myself being able to do it and I like the story, then I'm in.

BSW: Are you ever truly satisfied with your performance?

D'Onofrio: No. However, it's not hard to watch myself. I'm really kind to myself, in that respect. Also, I've been producing films, so I can't be afraid to watch myself. I have to know when things are good and when they're not good and not working. And, sometimes, when you're doing really full characters with lots of layers, it's good to look at dailies because you can fine-tune your work. If you want to be over the top, you can see if you're sufficiently over the top. If you don't want to be, you can see how to bring it back.

So I'm not scared to look at myself, but it's true that I'm never happy, because then you're dead. I'm never quite finished with what I'm doing. But the thing about film is that you can't go back. When you do a play, you can give it another go. With film, you can't do that.

BSW: I read that you were not at all satisfied with your performance in *Ed Wood*, that you did not feel that you had enough time to prepare for it, and that you want to play Orson Welles again.

D'Onofrio: Yes. I do want to do it again.

BSW: Is that part of the reason why you're producing films now, because you want to have more control over the roles you play and how much time you have to prepare?

D'Onofrio: Yeah, and it's just a natural progression for me. You know, a lot of actors produce films and a lot of actors direct films and a lot of actors like to put their nose into everything. Well, I'm just like them. I'm an artist, and it took me a long time to believe that I was one. I finally have the confidence to have convinced myself that I am an artist, and now I want to be an artist and do anything that I'm allowed to do. If that's developing scripts and producing them and getting them financed, if that's acting in them, if that's directing--whatever the hell it is--that's what I'm going to do.

BSW: What drew you to make a film about Abbie Hoffman?

D'Onofrio: I guess it was [director] Robert Greenwald and [producer] John Avnet's idea. Then I got involved in it. My partner, Ken Christmas, and I joined in as producers so that we could personally bring it up to another level. Then I considered playing the part of Abbie, and if I was going to do it, certain things needed to be done, like casting it right. Getting people like Janeane Garofalo to play my wife.

BSW: How do you go about preparing for a character like Abbie?

D'Onofrio: First, I have to see myself playing it when I'm reading it. Then, once I decide that I'm going to do it, basically it's just figuring out--well, in this case the aesthetics had to be right. I don't normally look like him and I didn't want to wear too much makeup. So we had to get that right. During that time I was also studying his voice and his mannerisms and trying to figure out the secret. There's always a secret to each character, something that you don't just come right out and say, but you carry it the whole time. And then there's the script work--the emotional life and where he is emotionally throughout the film, in whatever scene you're in at the time. You have to know the structure of the film, so everybody's making the same film. You have to really understand the structure of it--how it works, scene by scene--and a lot of that stuff you do with the director in rehearsal.

BSW: What do you love most about acting?

D'Onofrio: When the camera's rolling, when nobody's telling you what to do, everybody leaves you

alone, and nobody's touching you. There are a couple of actors in the room and they're doing their job and nobody's bothering us. That's nice.

**BSW:** What advice can you offer your fellow actors?

**D'Onofrio:** If you want to be an actor, you need perseverance. You have to learn how to be turned down and you have to learn how to live the life of an actor. It's the hardest thing to learn. It's the hardest thing to get comfortable in, because it's tough. You're not always going to get the jobs that you want. You're not always going to do the kind of work you want to do, and even if you get the work that you want, it's not always going to be seen the way you want it to be seen. You're not always going to get paid what you want to get paid. You're not always going to be working with other actors that are good. You're not always going to be working with nice people. You've got to get used to all that. It's a difficult life to get comfortable in and you have to have perseverance.

Or you can just become some kind of celebrity--some kind of movie star--and nobody will tell you the truth. You can do that, too. But I'm just talking to actors. That other thing is something that is foreign to me. I don't know what [movie stardom] is. I just know that with a lot of that celebrity crap, people stop telling you the truth and you live in this false world where everybody lies to you, because you're just a dollar sign to them. It's another life.

The other thing I would say to actors out there is to just do what they think they're the best at. If they think that they would make a hell of a celebrity, then that's what they should go for, because there's a good chance they'll get it. And if they think that they'll make a hell of an actor, then that's what they should do, because there's a good chance they'll get that, too. But it takes a long time. Regardless of what anybody thinks, it doesn't happen overnight.

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