



## An Actor Stretches Out / Is Vincent D'Onofrio accepting too many roles, or is he testing the limits of his craft?

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By John Anderson. STAFF WRITER

"How are you!? How was it??"

"The screening? Very well. Great. How're your rehearsals?"

"Great! I just came from one. I'm, like, LIVING by your advice..."

"Good. You should."

"...knowing that half of them will--. But it gives you a lot of..."

"Freedom."

"It does, actually."

"I know."

TABLESIDE tutorial, compliments of Vincent D'Onofrio, actor's actor, inside a restaurant near Manhattan's Avenue A ("specializing in the cuisines of Northern Africa..."). The slinkier-than-standard-issue waitress/actress has gotten D'Onofrio's impressions of "The Cell" -just one of three new movies the

actor stars in that open on Friday-and reaffirmed D'Onofrio's earlier advice about rehearsals/auditions.

It's the kind of week actors dream of and publicists justifiably fear. In the aforementioned "The Cell," D'Onofrio plays a serial killer in a coma, whose fevered mind provides the strange terrain of Tarsem Singh's hallucinogenic thriller. In Robert Greenwald's "Steal This Movie!" D'Onofrio is Yippie founder/'60s icon Abbie Hoffman. And in Lodge Kerrigan's "Claire Dolan" he's a New York cabbie who befriends the title character, an Irish immigrant turned prostitute.

All of which promises to perpetuate D'Onofrio's image as an actor who'll do anything-who loves acting perhaps not wisely but too well.

How else do you consider D'Onofrio's several crash-and-burn movies: His blind white-water rafter in "Good Luck"? His mob accountant in "Feeling Minnesota"? His slacker brother in "Stuart Saves His Family"? Even his Los Angeles cop in the voyeur's delight "Strange Days"...Hold on: Waitress departing. Mutter. Mutter. Appreciative assessments made by those at table. Judgments rendered. 10...9.9...9.7...

The Brooklyn-born D'Onofrio has picked this location to talk, because it's near his apartment, where he lives with his Dutch-born wife, son and daughter-and, just as likely, because even the East Village in its mid-gentrification promotes the image of art-as-struggle and an anti-Hollywood attitude.

So why has he shown up with two publicists and a makeup man? Ah, the mysteries of the filmic arts.

D'Onofrio's career does, in fact, contain enough mysterious weirdness for a movie of its own:

He played Lili Taylor's boyfriend in "Mystic Pizza" and then played her father in "Household Saints."

In that latter, Nancy Savoca film, he looked just like Orson Welles in "The Stranger," and then he did a "snapshot" as Welles in Tim Burton's "Ed Wood" ("I still want to really play the guy," D'Onofrio says).

He played Kennedy assassination witness Bill Newman in "JFK"-and then played him again in "Malcolm X."

One of his most respected performances was as Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan the Barbarian, in "The Whole Wide World."

He gained 70 pounds to play the disturbed Private Pyle in Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" (1987) and 40 pounds recently to play a speed dealer named Pooh Bear in "The Salton Sea," (2001) opposite Val Kilmer.

"I'm taking it off now," D'Onofrio says, swallowing a forkful of Greek salad.

Pooh Bear aside, D'Onofrio's role as Edgar, the sugar-water-slurping, skin-stretching alien of "Men in Black" has given him a genuine audience among kids. "I like that," the actor says, looking up from his salad.

And yet, despite this pan-generational popularity, D'Onofrio is usually described as "obscure," "eccentric," "eclectic" and the dreaded "an actor's actor"-the classic euphemism for a guy not as famous as he should be.

"I guess I care," D'Onofrio says, "but the problem with doing film is you never stop having an audience. When you do theater you have an audience for a couple of hours, and then they go home. You do film, you never stop having an audience.

"But whether they hate me or like me is up to them," he says. "I know that a lot of people don't like a lot of my performances. But that's OK, 'cause I know people come up to me on the street and like some of them, too. So that's OK, too. I just consider it part of my job to be acceptant of anything anybody says. I don't think of it on any other level than that, that kind of stuff. I'm an actor, so that's what I get."

D'Onofrio's done his share of theater, including Sam Shepard's "Tooth of Crime." His movie work, obviously, never stops (he seems to have about six more films in various stages of completion). And yet, when he does something like his Emmy-nominated turn on NBC's "Homicide: Life on the Streets"-the celebrated 1993 episode in which he played a dying man caught between a train and the subway platform-the response is even bigger.

"Yeah, it's huge," he admits. "It's kinda nice that I did that; I really appreciated doing it. Very much. It was a really well-written piece, and I don't get a chance to do well-written stuff for television-which is why you don't see me on television a lot. The times that I've done TV, I made a mistake here and there, and I'll never do it again-unless it's well-written and

guaranteed that the writing's going to be protected."

D'Onofrio, a large, imposing figure currently goateed and possibly slimming, has a big man's disregard for propriety, at least concerning lesser-known directors and smaller movies.

"Claire Dolan"?

"Oh God. He [Kerrigan] sent me his film 'Clean, Shaven.' He sent me the script and told me Katrin Cartlidge had agreed to do it, and I always wanted to work with her, so we did it. A horrible experience. Making it was horrible. I didn't get along with anyone but Katrin. But you know, the guy is a---good director. He makes a certain type of film. 'Claire Dolan' is a certain kind of film, not everyone can sit through a film like that. But the guy has a definite style and a definite talent. He was good to work for, in the sense that you knew you were working for a guy with a lot of originality and a real sense of cinema. But I really didn't have much fun doing it."

D'Onofrio is much kinder toward director Robert Greenwald, for whom "Steal This Movie!" was a real labor of love. And Greenwald?

"I have a lot to say, but unfortunately it's all good," Greenwald says from Los Angeles. "I wish he was an egomaniac or a pain in the--, because it would make a better story, but he's an amazingly hardworking actor."

D'Onofrio, born on June 30, 1959, had little memory of Abbie Hoffman or his greatest hits: the Chicago Convention of '68, or the subsequent Chicago Eight/Seven trial (although, the actor says, an older sister got fire-hosed during the '72 Miami Democratic National Convention). But Greenwald had amassed hours and hours of documentary footage and interviews with the likes of Hoffman's widow, Anita. D'Onofrio did his homework.

"He really watched," Greenwald says. "He read the books, he listened to the tapes. And then about four or five weeks before shooting I told him. 'OK, let it go...You gotta fly with it.'" And he did.

"The scariest part of it all," Greenwald adds, "was that Vincent is a shy, quiet guy. And when it came to portraying the crazy, extroverted side of Abbie, the side that always wanted the spotlight, I noticed in rehearsals that he'd started using everybody around him to feed that 'Look at me!' thing. More and more, he demanded the spotlight, from the extras and the casts; during the demonstration and riot scenes he would really work the crowd."

The director says he had been confident that D'Onofrio would get all the other aspects of Hoffman's personality, "but it was wonderful watching him suppress his own character to find that Abbie-ness. So unlike him in life. He was hysterical. And the extras were thrilled."

"I had such a good time," D'Onofrio says. "It was tough, it was a long shoot, but Robert's a great guy. We had a great cinematographer [Denis Lenoir], and our whole crew was amazing. All the actors were so into what we were doing. We were all out there trying to tell this story in the shortest time we could and without spending too much money. It was a great experience. And 'The Cell' was another great experience, 'cause Tarsem is another great guy."

Tarsem Singh is the award-winning, Indian-born video director and commercial maker behind "The Cell"-which involves psychologist Jennifer Lopez traveling through the comatose killer's mind while his victim lies in a booby-trapped cell. D'Onofrio was clearly smitten by Singh and because of their personal chemistry agreed to doing the movie, despite being understandably reluctant to take on another madman role.

"Yeah, I was," he says, "'cause I just figured why should I do one? There are certain parts that you can't touch for a while after somebody like Anthony Hopkins does them, y'know? There's really no take on it. You get a performance like Hopkins, which is so great and so wonderful-why go near it? It's like playing somebody who's mentally impaired right now. Ever since Billy Bob [Thornton] did 'Sling Blade,' you can't touch it. It's like Brando in 'Streetcar.' Can't touch 'Streetcar.' 'Streetcar's' dead. Pffffffftttt. That's it. You know. There are certain things that need to be left alone.

"Plus," D'Onofrio adds, getting worked up, "it's questionable whether the story needs to be told at all. OK? Anything about serial killing. All right? We're all pretty clear in society what that is; we don't need to learn anything more about it. Seriously. So it comes down to the execution of the story. What's going to be new about it, what's going to be profound about it-in a sense of entertainment, not like world-shaking profound? How close can you get to being an original entertainment?"

And the only thing that convinced him to do it, he says, "was Tarsem, 'cause I knew it wouldn't have to rely on my performance. I knew his aesthetic eye, his education in art and film and this personality he has, this filmmaker-trying-to-be-original personality that he has, I knew the movie would be something unique.

"You gotta meet the guy to know," he says. "He's not like [Quentin] Tarantino, who talks really fast and does all this dadada, and you never understand what the--he's saying, but you think you're supposed to like it 'cause he's supposed to be hip. You know what I mean? But you're never really clear on what he's saying. Tarsem is very articulate about what he wants. His vision is very clear. And he's very good at articulating it. When you see the film if you're not convinced he's a filmmaker, you're nuts."

OK, then. And what else is up for Vincent D'Onofrio this summer? How about the third annual Riverrun International Film Festival. Held Labor Day weekend in Brevard, S.C., it's run by D'Onofrio's father, Gene, and sister, Beth, and will open with--what else?--"Steal This Movie!," featuring a personal appearance by--yes!--Vincent D'Onofrio.

"It's their film festival," the actor says, "but they use my name a lot. I told my dad--he used to be an interior designer--that if he wanted to keep himself busy, he should start a film festival. He lives in the perfect town, a small town right near Asheville, the perfect town to do something like that, lots of little shops and stuff. So I said go ahead and do it, and he did. And every year it's gotten better and better. This year they've got 20, 30 films."

And no, in case you're wondering, not all of them star Vincent D'Onofrio.

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