

Shift Magazine

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When you think of Vincent D'Onofrio, presuming you think of him at all, you will think of heft. Of the lurching, grunting heavy he played in Men in Black. Or Stanley Kubrick's fat, hapless Private Pyle loading his gun, reciting the mantra "7-6-2 milliliter full metal jacket."

You will describe his face as round, indelicate and almost languid in character, defined by leaden cheekbones, an abbreviated, sucker-punched nose, and lips that at once pout and tighten. Arms and hands like these, you think, are not normal. Not for actors, anyway. They look like a construction worker's, or, to romanticize the notion, a roll-up-the-sleeves union tough. You won't quibble with him when he says, "I tend to come across negatively." Or that, "In person, I tend to be... I can be at times imposing." In 20 years as an actor, Vincent D'Onofrio has never been what you'd call a 'cross your legs on the sofa and relate' type. That behavior is for 'adoration junkies', as he calls them. Pretty boys. "I've always believed that when you talk about things too much, they cease to have meaning. Especially when you talk about acting. It always sounds like bullshit."

Still, talk is exactly what he's doing between takes in suburban Toronto, as he reclines on his side in the early fall sun, picking at blades of grass. Though his answers are almost expressionistic and his personal revelations sketchy, we wind up talking the whole day, about acting and family and trivia.

It's not that he's exactly contradictory. There is an air of consistency about him, of steely self-assurance. Let's just

say that D'Onofrio feels the pull of conflicting desires between money and fame on the one hand (stardom achieved by 'relating' to interviewers on cue), and the thing he's always placed above that - work. He's often said that 'the minute I become a celebrity is the minute I stop being a character actor.' But he also says, 'Hey, let's face it, it could happen, it's happened to a lot of actors'. Few, by the way, as startling a talent as D'Onofrio.

The other divide in him, the nice guy, intense guy duality, is evident the moment we meet, as he's making his way toward a bank of trailers to strip for a wardrobe change. Much skinnier in real life than on screen, he walks the way tall people do: hunched over slightly, with his head lolling in time to his lean strides. He's in the last days of production on a film about the late revolutionary Abbie Hoffman, and the half-unzipped white-pleated number is something Abbie once wore: an angel's outfit. A pair of wings dangle on his back as he begins to talk in a warm, unmistakably subdued voice that offsets his big, commanding presence. Adjusting a shock of wild Abbie hair (a wig), he glances at his feet. Big feet stuffed into big white socks and flip-flops. He grins a big, boyish grin. And in his deep-set, skeptical eyes - here he gets complicated. Devilish.

What do you do when you're not working?

Fuck.

You mean 'fuck all'?

No, fuck. (smiling) I like to fuck.

"The thing about Vincent," says Ken Christmas, D'Onofrio's former lawyer and current business partner (their as-yet-unnamed company is co-producing Abbie), "is he's a big guy. He's six foot four. He's intense, and he can give people the wrong idea. In real life he's just never wanted to walk into a room and be the focus of attention. What he

is is a listener, something that a lot of actors are too self-centered to be. Vincent wants to understand you before he makes himself understood."

Critics described D'Onofrio's portrayal of Orson Wells in *Ed Wood* as flawless. He says it left him dissatisfied: 'Tim Burton only gave me three weeks to prepare. I mean, to get all of the mannerisms and voice down? Forget it.'

If D'Onofrio likes you, he is very sweet. He holds doors open. He listens, yes, intently. He hugs and kisses (platonically) Janeane Garofalo and Jeanne Tripplehorn (the actresses on the *Abbie* set), an odd conflation of reckless big brother and concerned dad. When Tripplehorn arrives for work feeling ill, he plays interference on her behalf.

"Why did they call you in?" he says, knotting his eyebrows consolingly.

"Oh, I don't know. You might not want to come near me," she says, as he puts an arm around her shoulder.

"I think you should go home," he tells her, on his way to asking the director, Robert Greenwald, why "the fuck" she was brought here in the first place. "I mean," he shakes his head, "what's going on here? What would happen if I got sick?" This is pragmatism. Never mind that he's co-producing (and on a tight budget), D'Onofrio is the lead, requiring his presence in nearly every scene. He can't afford the expense of delays.

His work ethic is notorious, and makes fans of his colleagues. In fact, they gush. The burly Donal Logue, an emerging character actor with a supporting role in *Abbie*, falls happily into cliché. He calls D'Onofrio "the coolest." He points to his belly. "What he has builds from here", jab jab. "He finds the art in himself, not himself in the art."

These words are poignant given that

D'Onofrio has never broken through the fringes of fame. On set he is a transcendent presence. He dominates, as if a light bulb were hanging over him. When Garofalo, who plays Abbie's wife, Anita, says, "This is so corny. I'm kind of embarrassed to say it," she says it anyway. "Before I met him, I did have this feeling of 'Oh God, it's Vincent D'Onofrio.' But all that vanished rapidly. I can tell you that, hands down, he is the best actor I've ever worked with - someone who treats me and others as he would like to be treated. He's serious, but it's never a drag in between takes. He'll surprise you with how funny and totally engaging he is. He sets the tone."

Why do people who don't know you think you're intimidating?

Because I don't have a lot of patience. Because I'm tall. Because on screen, a lot of parts I play are not weird but on the edge.

Are you a sociable person?

Mostly, but in the wrong circumstances I can become paralyzed.

What circumstances?

Any place where I would immediately need social grace.

So what happens? You don't talk?

I won't talk. Or else I'll say things very quickly and usually get into trouble. It's my...I guess that's my problem.

You mean you're brutally honest?

I can be. Unless I want to lie.

When do you lie?

It's rare.

At 39, Vincent D'Onofrio has the mettle of a drill sergeant: fearless, guileless, with a mouth to match. But apparently,

and as actor-esque as it sounds, he used to be shy. "Painfully shy," he says. "And awkward. I spent my sixth birthday hiding under my bed. All my aunts and uncles came into my room and put their presents on the floor. If they wanted to talk to me, they had to lie down and tilt their heads sideways." When he's finished the story, he scowls. Happy now? the eyes say.

He was born in Brooklyn, the son of Phyllis and Gene, and brother to three older sisters. Gene was, as far as I can tell, an interior designer who moved the family around. (Half-formed sketches of his past are all D'Onofrio will give up.) Wherever the D'Onofrios settled - Vincent was raised mostly in Florida - they became involved in community theatre. Gene organized the company. Vincent helped out, building sets, stringing lights.

When filming *The Newton Boys*, D'Onofrio was asked to drop a quote into the press kit. "They asked me to say what I thought the film was about. I said, 'It's about a movie star and his three brothers.' It was a stab at a pretty boy named McConaughey.

His first real acting job came at age 18, in New York, in two one-act plays at the Nameless Theatre on West 22nd Street. "I sucked," he grins. Soon after, he hooked up with the American Stanislavsky Theatre and toured for a little more than three years. Studying was important to him, but he was kicked out for being a "smart-ass."

When he moved to Actor's Studio, his focus shifted to "the other side, the interior side." On his way to finding that self-exposing, burning fuel factor he's known for, he took his first steps on Broadway at 24, as a speech-impaired kid from the Bronx in *Open Admissions*, a play about cracks in the school system. He would return to stage work after his entry into the movies, most recently in Sam Shepard's 1996 retelling of the 1972 play 'The Tooth of Crime'. A Lear story, as D'Onofrio

describes it, it's the almost impenetrable tale of Hoss, a rock-star king on his way to being dethroned.

"We had a rough start," he says of his rapport with Shepard. "It was kind of a... I'm not big on the cowboy thing. But when he finally came back after rehearsal and saw that the play was in trouble - when he reached in and shook it up - everything he said, every word that came out of his mouth helped. He said, 'Don't respect the words too much. Go in there, go all the way inside yourself and find it.' I thought I had but realized I hadn't. Not that I ever fully got there in the end." The reviews were not terrific, and enduring two hours of constant physical exertion every night - of singing rock tunes and snaking his way through poetic and disjointed dialogue - broke his stamina. "One night, I just went down. I had a fucking 102 fever and I had to go up there. Before the second act ended I lost my legs, completely blacked out and had to be dragged off stage. We didn't finish the play."

A few points of clarification about Vincent D'Onofrio's life and career. His debut in front of the camera was not Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket, as most people assume, but a "weird, horrible" 1983 teenexploitation flick called The First Turn-On! His character's name was Lobotomy.

Contrary to popular belief, he did not meet his former inamorata Greta Scacchi while shooting The Player (he was the murdered screenwriter, she his lover), but earlier, on the set of Fires Within. The acrimony of their split in 1993 is mended now. "Though we definitely did not intend to be," he says, "we are friends." The reason is their six year old daughter Leila, who is "long and lanky. Very smart. Manipulates the shit out of me, like all women. And looks more like her mother, thank God." Leila stays regularly with D'Onofrio in New York's East Village, where he lives with his wife, former model and photographer Carin Van Der Donk.

Some trivia: He is left-handed. In his teens, he wanted to be a veterinarian. He smokes the requisite actors' Marlboros far less at home than he does on set. He was baptized Catholic but is not religious. He naps during lunch breaks. He will give advice to extras, many of whom feel they must return the favour with a gift, which baffles him. He spent five years in his 20's living in Los Angeles and surprisingly found Hollywood decadence irresistible.

He considers the 1996 film *The Whole Wide World* (his first producing gig) to be among his greatest achievements. Same goes for his early experience with Kubrick ("It was like 13 months of film school") and his depiction of John Lange, the man dying in the wreck of a subway train in *Homicide: Life on the Street*. That guest spot last year won him an Emmy nomination. Predictably, he was given the part at the last minute, when NBC had given up its search for a more bankable name. The treatment of pain - the tone of Lange's anger, the way he reacts, springs backwards, even the way he sweats - is absolute D'Onofrio.

He says it's this kind of part that feeds the perception of him as menacing. In fact, he is just as apt to play an innocent, which he did as the pulp-fiction writer Robert E. Howard in *The Whole Wide World*. Howard was the ultimate misfit, a doomed soul consumed by the fantasy characters he dreamt up. The part proved D'Onofrio could play childlike, pure. Almost, if you squinted, angelic.

Do you expect your films to succeed?

I have no expectations.

Ever?

None. In no way I used to. It's like going to the bank now. I make my deposit and go home [Pause] That makes it sound cold. But it's not. It's in and out. You get the character out. You do it. You do it, you do it, you do it. You

do it until someone says stop. And it's over.

But you want it to be good.

I want it to work on a story level, not an audience or money level.

This part, the money part, is where things get murky. Because if there is one subject D'Onofrio will return to, unsolicited, it's that. He'll say, "I am not paid much by actor's standards." Or, "Money makes the world go round." Or, "Money funds the movies I want to do." And the movies he wants to do he must produce himself.

These are films that are not seen by many. *Guy*, in which his character is pursued by a stalker, was reviewed favourably last year, but came and went unnoticed. This year's *The Velocity of Gary*, in which he plays an ex-porn star, toured a few festivals before being stalled by distribution snags. And, as of early November, *Abbie* had no distributor. It all comes down to this: D'Onofrio doesn't have the right nose. In movie-making currency, he is the sum of imperfect physical features.

When D'Onofrio came to Toronto this fall, it was the middle of a celebrity orgy, the film festival. In one night, he toasted Holly Hunter at a cocktail reception, then followed Janeane Garofalo to a party for her movie *Clay Pigeons*, also starring the pretty boy of the moment, Vince Vaughn.

"I don't know," D'Onofrio will tell me later. "I don't know about those people who depend on their looks until they get *Older* and then try to become character actors. It's not...real."

The night of the party, the spotlight that hovered above D'Onofrio on set is gone. He's blending into a sweaty, airless room, but he's not, as model Helena Christensen is doing in the corner, keeping his head down, huddling from gawkers. He doesn't have gawkers. Elsewhere, an actress in a

sheer blue dress with arms as brittle as bent back paperclips sips a martini through a straw, looking around expectantly. A trio in push-up bras - members of the English choral group Medieval Baebes - are looping through the crowd sideways, joined at the baby fingers. There is a feeling of hustling, selling, deal-making. There are a half-dozen cameras, double the number of reporters, tenfold the number of average Joes who somehow, through some string pulled, wrangled an invitation.

There are twinkles of recognition as Vincent D'Onofrio passes by, but little more reaction than quiet mumbling. ('Oh, yeah. That guy. Him.') He ambles over to the bar. He waits until Garofalo has finished with an interviewer, then sits down with her in front of the faux-chalet fireplace. Joaquin Phoenix, River's brother, casually wanders up. They embrace, pay each other compliments. D'Onofrio is, as is usually the case when other actors are around, clearly in the presence of an admirer.

Somewhere else, Vince Vaughn is making his entrance, through a staircase lined with bodies. The camera lights flick on. Mikes and notebooks appear. There is a noticeable whoosh, the weight of the room moving toward him. Magnetized. Like the floor is tilting.

Vaughn is the star, you see.

But who's the lucky one here?

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