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YIPPIE YI YAY!



In his upcoming role as '60s activist Abbie Hoffman, the happily overworked Vincent D'Onofrio fights for truth, justice and the antiestablishment way

By Gia Kourlas
Photograph by Kareem Black

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Domesticity rules Vincent D'Onofrio's life, and he couldn't be happier. Still, it's a bit surreal to be trapped in his East Village apartment, surrounded by one Egyptian and two Abyssinian cats. As one squirms in my lap, another sprawls on my notes, cooing like a pigeon into my tape recorder, while the third straddles my shoulders, hell-bent on licking my nose. "Are you okay?" D'Onofrio asks, slightly embarrassed. "They're very affectionate. Everybody in this house is very affectionate."

This is not what I expected from the man who played the suicidal Private Pyle in Stanley Kubrick's gritty *Full Metal Jacket*. D'Onofrio, polite and gentle, apologizes a half dozen more times about the commotion. A precocious and talkative young relative is visiting, and the actor's seven-month-old son is shown off to his best advantage—sitting on his father's lap. This family scene is a relatively recent development for D'Onofrio, whose own childhood was split between Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, and Miami. When we are interrupted yet again by a call from his eight-year-old daughter (she lives in Italy with her mother, actor Greta Scaachi), he passes the baby to his wife, Carin Van Der Donk, who can no longer contain her amusement. She bursts into laughter. "This is my thing," D'Onofrio admits with a happy shrug. "I'd much rather do this than act. When you act, you have to talk to adults, and I hate talking to adults."

D'Onofrio, 41, is not as antisocial as he professes, although he's clearly shy. More an observer of life than a social butterfly, he possesses an uncanny ability to dig beneath the surface, fleshing out his roles with intense



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believability, no matter how subtle or over-the-top the characters. He's a true chameleon: Think Orson Welles in *Ed Wood*, the morphing alien in *Men in Black* and Kennedy assassination witness Bill Newman in both *JFK* and *Malcolm X*.

Currently, you can see more faces of D'Onofrio, as no fewer than three movies featuring him opened Friday 18. He plays supporting roles in two of them—a Jersey cabdriver in Lodge Kerrigan's dark indie film *Claire Dolan*, and a twisted serial killer opposite Jennifer Lopez in award-winning video director Tarsem's feature debut, *The Cell*. But in *Steal This Movie!* he makes off with the lead role, '60s counterculture activist Abbie Hoffman. It's a tour de force, in which D'Onofrio embodies Hoffman from the '60s—looking quite sexy as the man who cofounded the radical Yippies and stormed the Democratic National Convention to protest the Vietnam War—through the '80s, when his revolutionary spirit was battered by depression and drug abuse, but no less passionate. "It's my favorite of the three films, probably because it's *about* something," he says. "These days, you rarely do or see a film that's *about* anything. Stories are told so badly."

His acting choices aren't the only thing that sets D'Onofrio apart from most Hollywood types. He's not very adept at bullshitting, and he's more than a little reluctant to become a recognizable celebrity. He's performed in dozens of films, but it wasn't until after his harsh Emmy-nominated 1993 portrayal of a man trapped under a subway car in *Homicide: Life on the Street* that he began to realize he couldn't count on anonymity forever. "I have this fear of the celebrity I might become, because I'd have less of a chance to get away with some of the parts I like to do," he says. "I do press to support the films I believe in, not to sell myself. And I *don't* do it for the ones I don't believe in. It gets me into trouble."

At the moment, D'Onofrio looks nothing like Abbie Hoffman, nor the vicious killer from *The Cell*. He's overweight, his hair is dyed blond, and his roots are showing. In 1987, he gained 70 pounds for *Full Metal Jacket*; after slimming down, he recently added 30 pounds for his role as a drug dealer named Pooh Bear in the forthcoming *The Salton Sea*. But this, he vows, is the end of his weight swings.

"It doesn't come off as easily, but I had to do it," he says. "Wait until you see Pooh Bear—it's just so perfect. But the timing's all wrong, because now I have to do press and photo shoots looking like this. The business end isn't very clever. Everybody has to look exactly the same in our world so there's no risk of ugliness. Ugliness is the biggest sin there is."

His portrayal of a serial killer in *The Cell* isn't merely ugly, it's gruesome. As Carl Stargher, D'Onofrio is a psycho who locks women in a secret room. When the FBI catches him, he's lying on the floor in a coma while his latest victim languishes, her whereabouts unknown; to find and save her, the agents call in psychologist Lopez, who specializes in a new transcendental science that enables her to enter another person's subconscious mind. Don't laugh—D'Onofrio is in awe of his experience with Lopez.

"The thing with Jennifer was that we hardly said two words to each other the whole time," he says. "When she came on set, she would always be extremely quiet, and I would just watch her. It created this really fragile energy between us." Director Tarsem says their chemistry was correct because Lopez was scared as hell. "There's one point when they're together—he's sitting in front of a body in a tub," he says. "He makes a small movement toward her, and I swear—I see it every time—Jennifer's knees tremble. I could tell that she wasn't acting. She was *terrified* of his character! There is no halfway with Vincent. You do the whole thing or you go home."

There are two things D'Onofrio won't do for a part—play scenes with frontal nudity and portray racist characters (he turned down a role in John Singleton's 1997 *Rosewood*). Up until now, he had also been reluctant to take on serial killers. Tarsem helped change his mind. "He's such a visual

artist," D'Onofrio says. "I thought, Well, okay, it'll be another serial-killer movie, but who cares? I haven't worked for an amazing visual artist in a long time. I knew it would be worthwhile just for the operatic value."

Steal This Movie! director Robert Greenwald saw D'Onofrio as the only actor who could carry off the demands the role required. "He's one of the best actors of his generation," Greenwald says. "He's the real thing. He's in pursuit of the truth of the character instead of the pursuit of building up his part, getting a bigger motor home or torturing the director about the blocking."

Still, being respected in Hollywood doesn't mean he gets his pick of prime roles. "There's a script going around right now that's one of the best things I've read in ten years, and they're never in a million years going to let me do it," D'Onofrio says. "It's Spike Jonze's next film, and I think he's got his eye on somebody else. When one of those comes around, everybody wants to do it. The one who gets to is lucky as hell."

D'Onofrio isn't too distraught. That brand of luck no longer seems as critical as it once did. "Now that I'm in my forties, I've become a man," he says. "My brain is thinking instead of my dick. I'm responsible now, and I feel like important things make me happy. Like putting my son in his backpack and taking him for a walk. That's what makes me truly happy."

The Cell, *Claire Dolan* and *Steal This Movie!* are now playing.

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