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02.13.2006 6:00 AM EST

Vincent D'Onofrio Digs Into A Western, Laughs It Up With Vince Vaughn

'Law & Order: Criminal Intent' star balances sidekick roles with passion projects.

Vincent D'Onofrio

An actor and a bit of an enigma, Vincent D'Onofrio has long navigated Hollywood's roads less traveled, carving out one of the more distinctive careers of the last few decades. An iconic early performance in the Stanley Kubrick classic "Full Metal Jacket" should have done for him what "Tigerland" did for Colin Farrell or "Romper Stomper" did for Russell Crowe. Decades of scene-stealing roles from "Men in Black" to "The Salton Sea" should have at least made him a famed second-banana along the lines of William H. Macy or Don Cheadle. But even now, after several seasons on the hit TV show "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," the number of people who can connect the name and face of this self-described chameleon may be as infinitesimal as the audience that paid to see his forgotten gem "Happy Accidents."

"Hopefully in the summer I'll be making a Western; I'm writing one now, and I'm going to direct one," D'Onofrio mumbled during a call from his native New York. "I have a title, yeah. ... But I'm not gonna tell you."

It is exactly that mindset that D'Onofrio's die-hard fans have come to embrace over the years: a bit of give, a bit of take, and a whole lot of frustration. He's one of the most talented actors of his generation and, like De Niro, Pacino, Gary Oldman or John Malkovich, to love him is to appreciate that you'll never be able to predict what he's going to do next.

"It's Vince's project, and Vince and I are friends. We've done three films together," D'Onofrio reported on his next unexpected detour as a comedic sidekick in "The Break Up," Vince Vaughn-Jennifer Aniston flick due in June. "They only had a certain amount of time to shoot me, and we did it. We finished early, actually. So it was a very good experience."

An interview with D'Onofrio is much more like an interrogation. Similar to Pacino, Oldman and others of their ilk, he'd much rather give a performance than talk about it. Nevertheless, he is willing to engage in this rare, squirm-inducing interview for the DVD release of the critically acclaimed "Thumbsucker," an insta-

Photos, audio and video from this story



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classic that the actor squeezed in between his hit crime show, his blockbuster screwball comedy and whatever this Western script is that he's working on.

D'Onofrio is so fond of "Thumbsucker" that when the conversation turns to the irreverent flick (which also featured Vaughn), the burly thespian unexpectedly transforms himself into a Chatty Patty doll. "The story was good. I read it, and I liked the story, and I liked the director," he said of music-video veteran Mike Mills, making his feature debut. "Mike is extraordinary. He's an artist, really. He has an incredible eye." For D'Onofrio, every project is an opportunity to hone his craft, and such learning experiences constantly presented themselves within the low-budget production about a teenage kid (Lou Pucci) whose digit-devouring habit earns him an unwanted diet of prescription pills (see **"Keanu Reeves Gets 'Thumbsucker' Role Thanks To Director's Dog"**). "[Mills] took us through a process of improvisation that was intuitive for him to do it," he continued. "It was something that artists have been doing for a long time to approach films, but it's not done often."

D'Onofrio and fellow veteran Tilda Swinton, cast as Pucci's overly concerned parents, embraced such opportunities to create a true family dynamic. "He put us through this two-week period of improvisations every day with just the family, and he would group other people off together and do it with them as well," D'Onofrio remembered, his voice warming. "The emotional tone of the film comes from those improvisations. ... We approached it as a family thing. Everybody, within the first day, was right into discussing how they feel about how they relate their lives to the character's lives, and how the characters might feel at a given moment, before the story of the film starts and after the film — their education, their politics, their social surroundings, their social environments."

Such an exercise may seem like overkill to many, but D'Onofrio (who gained 45 pounds for "Sea," 70 pounds for "Jacket" and radically alters his appearance even for mainstream fare like "Adventures in Babysitting") saw it as a welcomed opportunity to not just portray his character, but to actually give him life, a lesson his young co-star heeds. "He was smart and funny and like a sponge," the actor says of Pucci, a first-time actor whose talents impressed D'Onofrio. "He's really raw, really ready to just give it all, no matter what. ... My generation of actors, if I can pat myself on the back for a second, the guys that I grew up with [embrace a challenge]. That's the way he approached it. He's a very good actor."

Pucci's first role put him alongside Swinton, Vaughn, Keanu Reeves, Benjamin Bratt and Kelli Garner, and D'Onofrio advised his teenage co-star to never stop learning from those around him. "Every time you work with somebody, it doesn't matter how old they are, you learn," he said, insisting that it's a motto that continues to serve him as he approaches his 50s. "[Acting] is just a good game. Somebody's hitting the ball back, and if they're really good, that's so nice."

With that, D'Onofrio has one last passionate project to discuss before he drops out of sight once again: a 30-minute, highly speculative black-and-white film detailing one of the most famous quotations in movie history. "I did a short last year that's touring the festivals called 'Five Minutes, Mr. Welles,'" he said of the little-seen film that he also directed. "It takes place during the shooting of 'The Third Man.' I took that monologue, the fact that an easy life can give you a cuckoo clock, but war and terror, murder and bloodshed give you Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, and the Renaissance. I took the structure of that, and I put Orson Welles in his dressing room during the shooting of 'The Third Man,' right before that scene. [He's arguing] with his secretary and the two of them, male versus female, battle it out. And it's that battle that births the monologue that Orson Welles actually wrote for that scene."

To movie buffs who applauded the American Film Institute's selection of Welles' "Third Man" character as the 37th greatest villain of all time, the flick is mandatory viewing. For D'Onofrio, it is a rare second chance after his performance as Welles in "Ed Wood" resulted in an unhappy Tim Burton overdubbing his voice. "I didn't make it to make money," he said of the project, which the self-described Welles nut isn't even sure will ever be available on DVD. "I made it to do a story that I wanted to get out of my system."

For this tight-lipped, gruff chameleon, an impressive mix of dramas, comedies, TV shows and short and full-length films have similarly earned worthiness of expulsion from his system — and it is that guiding force that has charted his unpredictable path. With this interview concluded, he's all too happy to return to relative obscurity — and get back to the game.

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— Larry Carroll

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