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### Married to his Method

For Vincent D'Onofrio, a.k.a. The Human Chameleon, it's pretty simple; if he likes the script, as he did with *Thumbsucker*, he's willing basically to play any of the parts.

By Christina Radish

Despite his reputation as an intimidating screen presence, Vincent D'Onofrio is considered one of the greatest actors of his generation. Celebrated for his chameleon-like abilities, the 46-year-old Brooklyn, New York native is an admitted method actor whose intensity is part and parcel of his approach.

"I'm a method actor, but I'm also a film actor," he clarifies during a recent interview with *FilmStew*. "Because I'm a method actor, I know the humility in myself and how that is going to make me more relatable. All characters, in every aspect of what we do, should have humility."

"Characters that don't have humility, whether they're heroes or villains, are hard to relate to," he continues. "If they don't have humility, then they're a cartoon character. I know, during actual performance scenes, what I need to trigger myself off, so it will trigger you off, which will also influence how you feel when I'm expressionless."

In his latest release, *Thumbsucker*, D'Onofrio portrays Mike Cobb, father to a suburban teenager trying to overcome a thumbsucking addiction. D'Onofrio says that finding the character wasn't particularly difficult for him since he can understand what it's like to deal with complex family issues.

"I am still trying to figure out who I am, and I'm still trying to live with the parts that I have figured out," he reveals. "[This character] is not a far stretch from that. All everybody is doing in this movie is searching for who they are. Whatever they find out, they're trying to learn to

live with it.”

“There are things in my life that are very hard to deal with, as they are for this character,” he continues. “When you have children, you have to make sure you’re raising them correctly, but you make so many mistakes that it can make you start to rate yourself as a parent, which is not a very good thing to do.”

In order to feed this cinematic family, first-time feature director Mike Mills brought D’Onofrio and co-stars Tilda Swinton and Lou Pucci together for two weeks of rehearsal. He also encouraged improvisation. “We hardly did the script,” Mills confirms. “We mostly did things like, ‘What were Mike Cobb’s parents like?’ and ‘What were Audrey Cobb’s parents like?’”

“Lou and Tilda would play their parents, and we would just explore things, like why the Cobb’s made their decision to be together,” he adds. “We would just do all of their backgrounds, so that they had a world together, and they all really liked that. I think Vincent and Tilda, especially, were excited that I was giving them that room.”

As the father of a 13-year-old and a 5-year-old, D’Onofrio found it particularly easy to speak to Lou, like he would one of his own children. “We got to know each other through those improvisations,” he says. “There were times where, when the camera was rolling, I would look at Lou and there would be no difference between him and my daughter.”

“There would be no difference between how I listened to him and how I listened to my own daughter,” D’Onofrio recalls. “There would be no difference in what I knew I had to come up with as an answer, and how important that was. It wasn’t hard to go there.”

Because of D’Onofrio’s reputation for intensity, Mills admits didn’t really know what to expect. But in the end, he says he was most pleasantly surprised. “You’re scared before you meet Vincent D’Onofrio,” he insists. “He’s big, he’s got this history, he’s got the whole method thing behind him, and you know he’s an intense dude.”

“But as soon as you meet him, he’s this big-hearted guy who is such a craftsman,” Mills continues. “He is so efficient at what he does. He’s like a sniper. He just comes in and kills it, and goes away. He gets into things like, ‘How am I going to cut my nails?’ Mike Cobb cut his nails a lot, and so he started doing that way before.”

Pucci confesses he was also nervous at the prospect of working with D’Onofrio, partly because he is also his favorite actor. “Somehow, sickly, I got to work with him, and that’s amazing,” he declares. “He really is the epitome of what I think a great actor is because he can’t let himself lie.”

“He only tells the complete truth,” Pucci maintains. “He gets himself to some extremely scary places and he also scares the crap out of you, if he wants to, but he has to scare himself. He told me, ‘Just keep looking for the parts that scare the sh\*t out of you.’ And, that’s exactly what I tell everybody that I do. All I want to do are the parts that scare the crap out of me.”

Adds D’Onofrio of the advice he gave Pucci: “It’s something that I’ve been saying for years, when people ask me how I pick the things that I do. I pick stuff because I like the story, and then I’ll play any part in it. But, I’m not going to play a part that doesn’t instill some kind of fear in me. If I read a part and, suddenly, I’m thinking, ‘I’m not sure if I can get away with this. This is kind of silly. This is humiliating. I’m not good enough. Aesthetically, I’m not right. I see somebody else in it,’ then that’s the one I should do. That’s what I told Lou.”

The star of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* says that he was quite impressed with Mills, as both a filmmaker and a person. "The fact that Mike was able to let us have the freedom, and let us be brave and open and go all these places, and yet still have the ability to direct us, I don't know where he learned it," he raves. "He also has such an endearing quality, as a man. He's just one of those guys that's very rare. I would do anything for him; and there's few people in this business that I'd do anything for."

"The only other director that he reminds me of, that I've worked with, is Brad Anderson, who I did *Happy Accidents* with. He's got the same kind of persona. There are certain artists that you meet where, whatever they do, you would do anything for them, either as a friend or in work. It's not often when that happens. Not a lot of favors happen in this business."

Another individual that D'Onofrio admits he would do anything for is Vince Vaughn, with whom he's just completed his third film, *The Break Up*, also starring Jennifer Aniston, about a couple forced to co-habitate while going through a divorce. Says D'Onofrio, "Would I have gone out and searched for a film like *The Break Up*? No, I wouldn't. But, because it's Vince, and the opportunities were there to be had, I showed up."

"Cole Hauser and I play his brothers, and it is some funny sh\*t," he concludes. "We own a bus tour company in Chicago. There is a dinner scene in the movie with Ann-Margaret, Michael Higgins, Vince's dad, Vince, Jennifer, me and Cole. It is ridiculous."

That is, only as ridiculous as the Method allows for.