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## Full metal Kubrick

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Unlike many celebrities who would rather forget their fumbling, formative experiences in the business, the best way to get TV's man-of-the-moment Vincent D'Onofrio on the phone is by asking him to talk about exactly that.

Despite the prickly actor's reluctance to do the publicity rounds and a bout of illness that forced production of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, in which D'Onofrio plays oddball detective Bobby Goren, to close down for several days, here he is at the end of a day on the set talking with ease and candour about his auspicious film debut 17 years earlier in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (we'll forget his role before that as Lobotomy in the Troma teen sex comedy *The First Turn-On*).

D'Onofrio's unforgettable role as the deeply troubled Private Pyle in Kubrick's Vietnam war film is a topic that is close to his heart, as is the iconic director himself, whose obsessive and idiosyncratic working methods are now part of movie lore.

D'Onofrio was a greenhorn when he first got wind of a still vacant role in Kubrick's film. He was 18, performing in off-Broadway plays and moonlighting as a bouncer. Matthew Modine, who had already been cast to play Private Joker, suggested his friend for the role.

"I couldn't believe it," D'Onofrio recalls of the telephone call he received from Kubrick two weeks after sending him a crudely shot audition video. "He said he'd send me some words and to put those on tape without any direction. I did that, and next thing I knew I was called to come out there.

"The words he sent me, there wasn't a lot of punctuation, no descriptions, mainly longwinded answers to a drill instructor. What I got from it was that he (Private Pyle) was a weak-minded guy who was going to have to go through some kind of transformation. At the time I had no idea what kind of transformation that was. I had no idea that he was going to become a killing machine."

Before heading off to England, D'Onofrio gained 13 kilograms for the role. When he got there, however, "I looked like I could kick everyone's arse, so I had to put on about another 40 pounds (18 kilograms) before I looked obese. I'm a big dude, I'm six foot four (193 centimetres) and my natural weight is like 210 (95 kilograms)."

As made patently clear by the three-part documentary *Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures*, which was made by Kubrick's brother-in-law Jan Harlan and has just finished its run on SBS, Kubrick had a formidable reputation as an unforgiving taskmaster. Shelley Duvall proclaimed she would never work with Kubrick again after making *The Shining*. D'Onofrio didn't witness the fireworks that prompted Duvall's reaction.

"I didn't see that kind of behaviour. There was one actor on the set - it wasn't Matthew and I won't tell you who it was - who tried to challenge Stanley and he lost the battle. My perception is that Stanley expected people to work like he did, just do the f---ing job and don't talk about it.

"He wasn't into talking much. I thank the Lord for that because I'm not the most socially adept person in the world myself, so it suited me at the time.

"The first six months weren't the most comfortable because I was gaining the weight, learning how to be a soldier, to load a f---ing gun and trying to figure out this part, so I was just doing my homework, showing up and doing as best I could."

On set, Kubrick said little about story or acting. "I think he was one of those directors who did his job in the casting," says D'Onofrio. But he recalls one thing Kubrick did say: "Real is one thing, interesting is another".

Kubrick would leave D'Onofrio and Modine, whose Private Joker is a sympathetic foil to Pyle, to their own devices.

"Matthew and I would make that s--t up, like tying the laces, making the bed, the conversation about needing to try harder. Stanley would stand there watching, let Matthew and I improvise and then after a while, when he was happy, he'd shoot it. He allowed us to invent that stuff. He'd send us away, tell us to make it better, to make it more interesting. In a way it was a documentary record of what we were doing, in another way it was performance."

The gut-wrenching scene that ends D'Onofrio's role in the film was the last scene he shot, after 13 months on the set.

He has fond memories of weekends at Kubrick's house. "The most social I ever got was on weekends when he'd invite Matthew and me to his house to watch films in his projection room. Occasionally I'd ask questions about a film. I've always been interested in cameras and he loved to talk about that stuff."

After Kubrick's death in 1999, D'Onofrio was invited to talk at a wake in Los Angeles organised by the Directors Guild of America. The ceremony began with a tape Kubrick had made of himself accepting the D. W. Griffith award a few years earlier. "That was the first time I'd seen him since *Full Metal Jacket* and I could see how much he'd aged already and that was a few years before he died."

***Full Metal Jacket* screens on Sunday at 9.30pm on SBS.**

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/30/1088488014026.html>*