

THE TRANSFORMER

Hurst native Vincent D'Onofrio juggles movie and TV roles



Bensonhurst native Vincent D'Onofrio as Mike Cobb (with Chase Offerle as Joel Cobb and Tilda Swinton as Audrey Cobb) in Mike Mills' debut film "Thumbsucker."

Todd Cole / Sony Pictures Classics

By Karen Butler

for The Brooklyn Papers

Starring on a TV show like "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" is the ideal gig for an actor with Vincent D'Onofrio's chameleon-like powers of transformation. While working on the popular crime drama allows the Bensonhurst native time to explore and develop a single character, the series' annual hiatus offers him the freedom to explore a variety of new personas on the big screen, like the worried father in Mike Mills' new film, "Thumbsucker."

"It's perfect, actually," D'Onofrio told GO Brooklyn in a telephone interview Thursday. "You get a lot of things done."

The well-respected character actor, with more than 20 years of experience, told the Associated Press this summer that he now has "the cushiest job on television," because he'll star in half of this season's "Law & Order: CI" episodes with Kathryn Erbe while the other 11 episodes will feature "Sex and the City" actor Chris Noth (reprising his decade-old "Law & Order" role as Det. Mike Logan) opposite Annabella Sciorra.

D'Onofrio has amassed more than 50 acting credits, including five seasons on "Law & Order: CI," and appearances in every kind of movie imaginable from warm-hearted romantic comedies like "Mystic Pizza" and "Mr. Wonderful" to surreal thrillers like "The Salton Sea" and "The Cell" to big-budget, Hollywood pictures like "Men in Black," "Full Metal Jacket" and the upcoming Jennifer Aniston laffer "The Break Up."

Later this month, the 46-year-old performer will be seen in the independent film "Thumbsucker." Based on Walter Kirn's novel and co-starring Tilda Swinton ("Constantine"), Keanu Reeves ("The Matrix") and Vince Vaughn ("Wedding Crashers"), it is the story of a family coping with the teenage son's disturbing oral fixation. Newcomer Lou Taylor Pucci has won awards at the Berlin and Sundance film festivals for his role as Justin, the titular character, while Swinton and D'Onofrio portray his confused parents, middle-aged people dealing with their own fears and regrets. (Reeves plays the guru orthodontist to whom Justin turns for help in overcoming his problem, while Vaughn plays the debate coach whose friendship isn't always in the boy's best interest.)

"They sent me the script, and I met Mike Mills for just about a half an hour or so and we just liked each other a lot," D'Onofrio recalled. "I liked what he was trying to tell."

Admitting he wasn't familiar with the book before reading the screenplay, the actor said he was immediately drawn to Mills' version of the story, which was both funny and sad.

"When I read the script, I saw that it was about every member in a family trying to figure out who they are and that's what really goes on, and it was a nice way to tell that kind of story," he explained. "To be involved in it, especially to play a father in that kind of story, was a really interesting role."

D'Onofrio said he could relate to his character in almost every way.

"I have two kids [Leila, 13, with actress Greta Scacchi and Elias, 5, with Carin van der Donk] and I've got my eyes on them at all times. But at the same time I have my eyes on my own life and how it's evolving," said D'Onofrio, who spent most of his childhood and teen years shuttling between divorced parents in Brooklyn and Florida. "So, it's the balance of the two to make sure that you have your eyes on your kids all the time and then still take in yourself and everyone else around you. It's a huge task, but it's what life is - a struggle to keep trying to get it right and don't quit."

The actor said he had a wonderful time making this movie because the people involved were so talented and creative.

"I had a great time," D'Onofrio remarked. "Tilda and I went straight into improvisations for a couple of weeks and the time I spent in that house with those actors and Mike was a great experience. They're really good actors and we searched really deep, and it shows in the movie, I think."

Although "Thumbsucker" is the first full-length movie for Mills, D'Onofrio described the director of countless commercials, music videos and short films as a consummate professional, one who was open to new ideas and who encouraged actors to offer their input.

"He's an artist," D'Onofrio said simply. "He knows how to collaborate. Everybody on the set, no matter who you were, was listened to. And the best thing about him is that he can direct. He knows how to guide. He knows the story he's trying to tell and he gets you there."

The ability to work quickly and often affords D'Onofrio the opportunity to constantly pursue new and exciting projects.

"I'm never bored. I enjoy what I do so much. There's no grand plan, I just want to do what I want to do when I want to do it."

So, does that mean D'Onofrio doesn't try to stagger his film choices, like following up a

heavy drama with a comedy so as not to repeat himself?

"Not if there is another heavy drama that I like," he said. "I've been in over 50 films. I've been in the business for half of my life. I've had really good luck, and I've worked with some incredible people, and I've never been out of work. And so every time I see an opportunity, like making a film, especially now, I'm going to try to take advantage of it."

Although he has started making short films himself - his 32-minute "Five Minutes, Mr. Welles," about Orson Welles, was shown out of competition at the Venice International Film Festival earlier this month - D'Onofrio said he has no intention of giving up acting to go behind the camera full-time.

"Everything about acting still excites me!" said the actor, who played Welles in Tim Burton's 1994 film, "Ed Wood."

"The storytelling. That's what's exciting about it; the storytelling part. To help tell a story whether you are in a film for five minutes or two hours, I don't care. To help tell a story is a cool thing. That's why I became an actor."

"Thumbsucker" opens in New York and Los Angeles on Sept. 16. The season premiere of "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" will be aired Sept. 25 on NBC.