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wicked humor

Dark humor radiates from *Vincent D'Onofrio's* complete catalog of work. He first rose to fame as Pvt. Gomer Pyle—the one who shouted 'Sir, Yes, Sir!' as Sgt. Hartman destroyed his soul in *Full Metal Jacket*, not the one who exclaimed 'Shazam!' when Sgt. Carter sent him to peel potatoes on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Today, D'Onofrio is more recognizable as Detective Robert Goren, the Sherlock Holmes-esque homicide investigator he portrayed for eight years on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. And in between, he has portrayed any number of twisted and funny characters in television and on film. With his most recent TV stint done, D'Onofrio is trying out the director's seat, and bringing the black comedy with him. The celebrated actor grew up in Hialeah, so he decided to come to Florida in search of the first commercial audience for his feature-length film *Don't Go In the Woods*. When the movie screened here, audiences at Hollywood 20 found themselves bursting into laughter in the creepiest of moments. D'Onofrio comes up behind the success of movies such as *High School Musical* and the TV show *Glee*, then smacks them in the back of the head with a sledgehammer. *Don't Go* is a musical, but it's the kind where people have to wash that blood out of their fingernails rather than wash that man right out of their hair. He calls it a rock 'n' roll slasher, a genre that at this point may well contain just one film. The movie was cast with musically gifted newcomers, most of whom meet bloody ends before the credits roll. A couple served as extras on *Law and Order: CI*, but most had never acted before. D'Onofrio doesn't have a speaking role, though his voice can be heard in an opening musical number. So why make a directorial debut with a completely inexperienced crew, then build the entire momentum of the film with only a combination of emo riffs and violent zeal? "If you've been in the world of the arts as long as I have, it's a very common thing," he says, "the notion of killing your darlings." The movie follows a rock band during a trip to the woods intended as a songwriting sabbatical but which turns into the retreat from Halloween. The film was shot with two cameras on a wooded property in upstate New York. "Those are my woods," D'Onofrio told an audience after a screening. "Don't go in them." But he hopes the film entices audiences in love of laughter, song and death to take

their loved ones to the theater—and hope the car battery isn't eerily dead when it's time to go home. D'Onofrio spoke with SRQ about the film. **We've never seen something like this before. Why make a horror musical?** It was just an idea I had. I don't want to make it more than that. An idea just came to my head. There were certain ways I wanted to do it. I find the result to be an odd, cerebral experience. I needed to do that in a kind of real way, instead of a 'pretend odd.' I knew I had to have unknown actors, who were totally inexperienced. There couldn't be a lot of fancy camera work. The way the film was laid out, it would have to be built like a slacker movie, with a horror movie kind of feel to it. **This is a modern musical in which there is a legitimate reason people are singing in that you have a rock band writing songs. Was that important to you to make it feel real?** After every song, I wanted to see what you see. And I don't think we do all the time in the film, but sometimes we do. I wanted to see if, like in life, there is a beautiful song, and then after the song, the rhythm falls flat. Can you survive that? I think you can. If we can survive in films with all this flashy schlock that is out there, where something so over-the-top can happen in a movie and the acting is so bad and silly, and then the next moment is great in the same movie, if we can survive that, then we certainly can survive it being really flat, and really raw, and then getting a little flashy. **How long did it take you to create the film?** We did the script first. I came up with the story, and then the three of us wrote just a straight-up B-movie horror film. And then we started to polish that. And then I started to use that script as the blueprint for making the film. **Sam Bisbee wrote all the music. Did you give him much direction about the mood that needed to be conveyed or the action that was happening?** No. I would just tell him if the song worked or not. He would say 'How does this work?' and I would say 'Awesome.' **Was any of the music written before the plot of the film was established?** There were a couple of songs he had written that I knew I wanted in the movie. And then we just sat down and wrote the rest of the music. I did come up with a couple of ideas for songs. But he wrote them all. **We know you directed a short about Orson Welles, but this is your first feature film in the director's seat. How much more work goes into a full-length production like this?** The way I have worked so far, it's the same amount of work, but for a longer period of time. Every day it's the same amount of work, but it goes on much longer. **As an actor directing, is it different on set?** What does it do for the actors? They have total confidence I'm not going to screw them when it comes to their acting. I think that is important from their point of view. **You were talking about needing a lack of experience with actors. When was it good to have fresh, inexperienced actors?** If you set it up and make them feel comfortable where they understand the concept effectively, then as soon as they understood the concept. The fact that they could speak the author's words and not feel inhibited by them, speak the author's words and get away with that as a performance and not have to put on any affect or inflection, that if they know what the scene is about and they just talk, then more than likely, it is going to work. As soon as they understood that concept, it worked. **Did you cast the roles for singing ability first?** That was the only [requirement]. I said to them, 'I don't even care if you can't act.' I didn't want them thinking about that. I didn't care if they weren't considering acting. I don't want you to talk about whether you are nervous or not nervous. I don't even want to talk about it. But you do need to know how to sing. You have to have that talent. **Have you gotten feedback from other people about whether this will go to broad release?** I have actor friends I have gotten close to over the years, and they have loved it when I have shown it to them. It's in the hands of somebody really good and I

made a deal with that person: Jason Blum. We'll have to see what he does with it, but I have all the confidence in the world. **This is the first festival you've taken the film. Why did you want the first commercial audience to be here?** I do trust Florida, for some reason. I lived here when I was a kid. That's why I brought it to Florida State University to do a sneak screening there. I knew that I would never have a sneak screening in LA, even at a university. I am not completely sure, but if I have my way, this will be the only festival it goes to. I don't think it needs to go to festivals. I just wanted it to come and be treated nicely and have an audience. At panels after screenings, D'Onofrio hinted to the audience that more blood may yet be shed on his land. If a sequel can be justified, he already has a name picked out: *I Said, Don't Go In the Woods*. He is also working on other projects that he wants to tackle in the near future. He is in talks with AMC about doing a new television show. And he has a story penned for a new film tentatively titled *Johnny and Me*, another musical but this one featuring the songs of Johnny Cash as sung by a mental patient with severe Asperger Syndrome. When asked about potentially guest-starring on *Law and Order: CI* in the future, he quickly dismissed the possibility. And of course, D'Onofrio has big plans for *Don't Go*, but can't get there alone. He is trusting Jason Blum, the distributor who got *Paranormal Activity* in theaters nationwide, to push forward with a solid commercial release for the film. While in town, D'Onofrio made no secret that the film was his priority. He skipped most of the Night of 1,000 Stars event in favor of sitting through the debut screening. And after the final showing, he seemed willing to take questions from audience members all night until SRQ pointed out that a Patti Smith concert was starting a few blocks away. Typical Hollywood politics could always rear their head, but D'Onofrio is confident his movie won't be contained to limited release and festival screenings. But anyone watching *Don't Go* may leave wondering what happens when a member of D'Onofrio's creative team crosses him. For now, though, the actor-turned director must wait to see what happens. And if the film does go to broad release, he seems anxious to tell as many potential viewers as possible where to go. *by Jacob Ogles*