



A DIRECTOR'S VISION MEETS AN ACTOR'S METHOD.(L.A. Life)

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Byline: Phillip Zonkel Staff Writer

Last summer, Vincent D'Onofrio went back to school.

To research his role in the thriller ``The Cell," which topped the box office last weekend, the actor enrolled in an independent study that wasn't the typical reading, writing and arithmetic. It was an in-depth course: How to Be a Sociopath 101.

D'Onofrio plays Carl Stargher, a methodical and menacing creep who stalks, kidnaps, tortures and murders women. For a couple of months, D'Onofrio devoured case studies on infamous serial killers, following the evolution of their lives from childhood to adulthood and understanding their psychology.

``One of my tasks was to define the difference between me and someone that can cross the line so horrifically. I just do it so I can execute a story properly so I can entertain people and scare them. There's no grand, profound reason," says the 41-year-old D'Onofrio, who also has appeared in ``Men in Black," ``Feeling Minnesota" and ``Full Metal Jacket." ``I'm just doing my homework. I'm cramming for a test."

This was one test D'Onofrio didn't want to fail.

``It's nice as an actor to lean back in a chair and say, 'Yeah. I can play that. I can pretend like I'm killing people.' That's not the way I do things," he says.

All of that studying eventually paid off.

``I learned that even if someone had, God forbid, hurt or killed one of my family members or someone I loved dearly, and he was begging for his life, I would not be able to harm them," D'Onofrio says. ``That needed to be defined for me."

What also was defined for D'Onofrio was Stargher's motives. A couple of scenes give a glimpse into his growing-up years, which included abuse at the hands of his father, that influenced his adult atrocities.

“There was a distinct point with (director Tarsem) and I about not wanting to redeem the character. But at the same time, with him as a child, we had an opportunity to define who he was,” D'Onofrio says. “We're not asking the audience to pity him. The two of us constantly reminded each other of that.”

Tarsem adds, “When I see a film with my sister, I always have a problem. My sister and her kids say, 'Who's the bad guy?' There is no bad guy. The bad guy had a bad time. I wanted a certain uneasiness.”

Uneasiness also describes the emotional and mental price D'Onofrio paid for his character study.

“That kind of research gives you nightmares. It's not fun to be researching that stuff. The only way you can dump it off is to play your role and get rid of it; you play the next part,” says D'Onofrio, who also plays Abbie Hoffman in the new “Steal This Movie!” as well as an Irish priest in the upcoming “The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys.”

Marking his feature film directing debut, music video and commercial lensman Tarsem (R.E.M.'s “Losing My Religion”) executes a vivid mind trip. Catherine Deane's (Jennifer Lopez) new chemically and electrically induced therapy lets her enter the unconscious mind of a comatose child. After Stargher falls into a coma - while his latest victim sits alive in a hidden cell that fills with water - FBI agent Peter Novak (Vince Vaughn) solicits Deane's transcendental help.

She enters Stargher's mental minefield hoping to gain his trust and learn the woman's whereabouts. However, his dreamscape world is flooded with a visual arsenal worthy of Hieronymus Bosch.

Conjuring these striking images was just the ticket for Tarsem.

“It's the wrong thing to say, but I was most interested in the visuals,” says the 39-year-old auteur. “I told D'Onofrio in the beginning, 'If you're looking at this and thinking, this is a serial killer film, don't take it on. It's not. ...' ”

“The structure gave me an open canvas to go inside this guy's head.”

With help from wardrobe wizard Eiko Ishioka (who won the 1993 costume design Oscar for Francis Ford Coppola's “Bram Stoker's Dracula”) and her flamboyant fashions of capes and ornate headdresses, D'Onofrio brought to life five grand selmages (including the queen, the king, the

torturer and the selfish jester) that defined Stargher's psychotic behavior. Some of those actions include such macabre sights as the torturer playing Novak's entrails like a jack in the box.

``I don't think this film's violent; I think it's graphic," Tarsem says. ``When I made all the stuff that was really dark, I made it so exaggerated, I didn't think there was a problem. ...

``I'm not making any moral statement. In the end, all I was interested in was theater. When you do something theatrical, you have to go over the top to make a point."

Over-the-top opera aside, Tarsem has another point - don't box him in.

``I do love visual stuff when I'm doing it, but it's a bloody pain in the a--," he says. ``I would love for my next film not to be visual at all. I'd love to do a children's film. I want to do kitschy stuff.

``I love talkie films, but I'm not a writer," Tarsem says. ``I'm not going to have access to that material until I can prove I'm commercially viable."

CAPTION(S):

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Photo: ``The Cell's" Vincent D'Onofrio says of preparing for his role, ``One of my tasks was to define the difference between me and someone that can cross the line so horrifically.

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