



HOFFMAN ROLE STEALS D'ONOFRIO'S HEART. (ENTERTAINMENT)

The Morning Call (Allentown, PA); 8/19/2000

Vincent D'Onofrio couldn't be nicer as he strides into a cramped hotel suite in midtown Manhattan, carrying a plate of fresh fruit and a bottle of spring water. `Oh boy, we get to sit so close,` he teases, grinning as he surveys the tight quarters.

Seconds later, the actor is living up to his reputation as one of Hollywood's most outspoken interviews by bashing the industry's current crop of movies. `There's nothing but crap out there,` he says definitively.

Never mind that the very busy actor has just finished five movies. `The Cell` opened Aug. 11, and `Steal This Movie,` opened Friday in New York and Los Angeles (it may hit the Lehigh Valley in the next few weeks). The other three -- `The Salton Sea` with Val Kilmer, `The Imposter` with Madeleine Stowe and `The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys` with Jodie Foster -- are in the can.

Regardless of how D'Onofrio feels about some of his forthcoming films, `Steal This Movie` apparently struck a deep chord in him. Not only did the actor produce the low-budget biopic about '60s activist Abbie Hoffman, but he took the role to heart.

`Every once in a while you get a part that hurts you,` he says. `And Abbie Hoffman hurt. When I was younger, I used to take characters home with me. I was this angry young actor who took everything too seriously. I don't do that anymore, at least not until I played Abbie. He had a rough life and it was a tough part.`

`Steal This Movie,` which was directed by award-winning TV director Robert Greenwald (`The Burning Bed`) and given a special advance screening at The County Theater in Doylestown a couple of months ago, aims to be both a snapshot of the '60s and an examination of the counter-culture hero. Janeane Garofalo, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Kevin Pollak and Kevin Corrigan co-star in the film, which is based on two books, `To America With Love: Letter from the Underground` by Abbie and Anita Hoffman and `Abbie Hoffman: American Rebel` by Marty Jezer.

Although D'Onofrio never met Hoffman -- the activist died of an apparent suicide in 1989 --the

actor was aware of Hoffman's many accomplishments. When he was preparing to play Hoffman, D'Onofrio consulted with Hoffman's ex-wife, Anita, as well as '60s activist Tom Hayden and Gerry Lefcourt, Hoffman's attorney. D'Onofrio also watched news footage and read books by and about Hoffman.

In D'Onofrio's opinion, Hoffman's greatest achievement was his pioneering use of political theater. The activist once burned money outside the New York Stock Exchange. He draped himself in an American flag when he testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee. And he ran a pig for president in 1968, in protest of the Democratic Party's support of the war in Vietnam.

“It was brilliant how he would stage some kind of charade, confuse everyone, and then split having left behind a message,” marvels the actor, who lives in the East Village. “He and his gang were way ahead of their time, as far as being conscious of what the media can do. These were regular kids out there causing enough of a ruckus to galvanize a nation. Can you imagine that happening today? I mean, kids today are all home watching MTV, singing along to N' Sync and Britney Spears.”

When he was a teen-ager, D'Onofrio was anything but a couch potato. After high school, the Brooklyn native studied at both the American Stanislavsky Theatre and the Actor's Studio, both in New York. Six years later, he landed a starring role in the Broadway production of “Open Admission.” At the same time, he was asked to submit a videotape to Stanley Kubrick, who wanted an unknown actor for the role of an overweight army recruit in “Full Metal Jacket.”

After gaining 50 pounds and auditioning on tape again, D'Onofrio snagged the coveted role. The actor didn't meet the legendary filmmaker until the first day of rehearsals.

“I'll be forever grateful to Stanley because he gave me my first film role in a movie that wasn't some 'Goonies' or 'Gremlins' type film,” says D'Onofrio, who has an 8-year-old daughter with his ex-wife and “Player” co-star, Greta Scacchi. “He helped me establish myself as a serious character actor. He also told me something I've never forgotten. He said that being real is one thing, but being interesting is better.”

D'Onofrio seems to have taken Kubrick's advice to heart. Whether he's playing an alien-possessed farmer in “Men in Black,” or a tortured pulp-fiction writer in “The Whole Wide World,” or a gay hustler in “The Velocity of Gary,” or a serial killer in “The Cell,” the actor is never less than interesting.

Initially, D'Onofrio turned down the role in “The Cell,” just as he's turned down roles in such diverse movies as “The Rocketeer,” “The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas” and “X-Men.”

“The absolute truth is that I was reluctant to do 'The Cell,’” says the actor. “It was a good script, but

it wasn't anything that I thought needed to be done again. But then I was suckered in by the director, Tarsem. He had such a strong vision. He's more like an avant-garde painter than a director.

Ironically, the actor followed up his role as a serial killer in `The Cell` with a turn as a kindly priest in `The Dangerous Life of Altar Boys.`

Merry prankster Hoffman would have been proud of D'Onofrio's continuing irreverence.

`One day on the set I got this idea that my character needed a panama hat, so I went out in Charlotte, N.C., dressed in my priest costume,` recalls D'Onofrio. `I got a lot of 'Hello fathers' and women opening doors for me, which is really strange.

`It was really quite interesting, and it's against the law, actually. So please write about it.`

COPYRIGHT 2000 The Morning Call. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of the Dialog Corporation by Gale Group.

HighBeam Research, LLC. © Copyright 2004. All rights reserved.