

Douglas Thompson

An Interview with Al Pacino

Al is not easy. It's not easy to get him to commit to a film and when he does it's not easy to work with him because he always wants just one more rehearsal or one more take or one more test screening.

I recall being in the lobby of a grand hotel in Beverly Hills with Al Pacino who was deciding where to go for lunch. His associates hung around aimlessly. The automatic doors opened and closed, swish, swish by the dozen, back and forth and back again, in the time it took one of the most important stars of his generation to make up his mind where to have pasta. A few hours before he began debating lunch he was having a little difficulty with breakfast in a downstairs suite of the hotel.

It was the coffee. You know, regular or decaffeinated? Decisions, decisions, decisions.

Bobby ain't easy either. Flashback to his restaurant in New York 's Tribeca and Robert De Niro, after months of negotiations, is mumbling about one of his string of Oscar worthy performances. Quotable? Forget it. He's inarticulate when he's asked if he would like more to eat. Blueberry pie? Strawberries? That other most important star of his generation took one of those long pauses. It wasn't effective. He still couldn't decide.

Al and Bobby. Bobby and Al. When Michael Mann finally got them together on screen for the first time (they never shared a moment in 'Godfather 2') he, thankfully, had to make the decisions. His movie 'Heat' which is going to be one of the most talked about works of the year already runs for 172 minutes. Just think of the time that Al and Bobby, the marathon minute men, could have added to that.

Mann's stars are back on top form in a cleverly formed crime thriller which pitches good and bad and all the abrasive anomalies associated with cops and robbers into the tarnished tip of Los Angeles .

Pacino is the cop Vincent Hannah. A detective with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) he's as dedicated hunter. De Niro is the clever psycho Neil McCauley who is equally driven. His gig is to commit spectacular hold-ups and if a few guys get blown apart that is just part of the business.

This isn't cat and mouse but a couple of veteran foxes on the loose. Never mind the town -- the world's not big enough for both of them.

Mann who made 'Manhunter' (Scotland's Brian Cox co-starred creating the first cinema version of Hannibal Lecter) and 'The Last of the Mohicans' as well as starting the men's fashion of dressing like after-dinner mints with his hugely successful television series 'Miami Vice' is, by intent and CV, a stylist.

By getting Pacino and De Niro on screen together he has also proved his patience and his talent as a diplomat. The actors have been rivals for major movie roles for a quarter of a century. Pacino won an early contest when he won the lead in the landmark 'Panic in Needle Park ' in 1971.

De Niro won his first Oscar in 1974 as Best Supporting Actor for his young Vito Corleone in 'Godfather 2'. Pacino had to wait until his eighth nomination, for 'Scent of a Woman' three years ago, to take the Best Actor prize.

New Yorkers. The Italian Connection. Big names and similar sized egos. Intense and always, always hesitant.

Michael Mann knew he had the chance to create a mythic moment on screen. Someone said it was like getting Ben Hur to sit down with Spartacus. As the writer as well as director of 'Heat' Mann pondered on how his stars would fill the screen together.

They would have coffee. Regular. Java. In a restaurant in Beverly Hills which has subdued black and white decorations. The script has Pacino's Hannah pulling over De Niro's heist-master McCauley on a freeway. Hannah asks

the man he wants to arrest to have a cup of coffee.

'Where do you stage this? You set it in a place that will disappear as much as possible. You find the most disappearing location you can....'

'The background is as monochromatic and minimalist as I could get because, boy, I did not want anything to take away from what was happening on Al's face and Bobby's face,' says Mann who still seems surprised it happened.

The meeting -- there is only one other in the film -- is vital to the set-up of the characters, the 'heroes', and the film itself which stretches its tension and gnaw at the nerves through the adversaries' duel.

Chicago-born Mann who graduated from the London Film School in 1967 is a research extremist. If he's writing a bank robbery he talks to the police and to the criminals. 'I like to move through a subculture until I feel the colours and the patterns and tones and rhythms of the lives of the people and the place.'

'It's like Vincent Hannah's pursuit of McCauley. It does have a funny sort of Pirandello pattern to it. But that process of taking it on multiple levels, of understanding the complexity of human nature and intelligence, is something detectives are aware of and actors are aware of and directors ought to be aware of.'

During his research Mann visited California's Folsom Prison (as in the Johnny Cash song) as did De Niro and Val 'Batman' Kilmer who plays with scene-stealing panache one of McCauley's shotgun sharp cohorts.

Mann, like Pacino and De Niro, expects involvement.: 'I'm very ambitious and "Heat" is a very artistically ambitious project. The people I work with are dead serious. If people find themselves on the wrong movie, there are lots of other movies to go to.'

Mann is involved. He wrote the first treatment of 'Heat' in 1980. The real Neil McCauley was killed in Chicago by a detective in 1963: 'McCauley was a good thief and for a detective it's more challenging to work on a good thief than the recidivist. I heard that the detective had some sort of rapport with McCauley and that was the kernel of the movie.'

'It would be trite to say that they were the flip side of the same coin. McCauley and Hannah share a singularity of intelligence and drive but everything else about their lives is different.'

Like Pacino and De Niro. They also are not the flip side of each other. Pacino is 56 and De Niro four years younger.

Next month there is another helping of the man who won his Best Actor Oscar for 'Raging Bull' in 1980 when he reunites again with Martin Scorsese for another insightful look at the Mob. With 'Casino' we are in Las Vegas where De Niro's Ace Ronstein is a casino runner, Sharon Stone is his falling-apart wife (drink, drunks and Joe Pesci doing his perfect psycho turn) and life, you so terribly know, is going to go so dreadfully wrong with the bad guys watching the bad guys checking on the bad guys.

De Niro, busier than ever, also has the title role of 'The Fan' in which he becomes obsessed with Wesley Snipes playing a baseball star. With age he seems to want to do more. He's turning on the heat.

As is Pacino who once waited several years between movies. He has two films -- 'Two Bits' and 'City Hall' -- planned for later this year and is at present in post-production on 'Looking for Richard.' It is a focus on Shakespeare's 'Richard 111' which Pacino directs and stars in. *another version

Al Pacino's was considering the question which sometimes take longer than his movies but then he thought of one of his own: 'Do you mind if I smoke this? It is a health cigarette. There's no nicotine in them. It smells like grass, but it's really good. When you're working on movies where you have to smoke a lot, I recommend them.'

Holding his pack of Honey Rose herbal cigarettes ('I've given up, giving up properly') the superstar also known as Al Cappuccino because of his coffee habit explains: 'I need them when I get nervous.'

Al Pacino nervous?

Pacino has played many characters who operate through a haze of smoke and vice and is responsible for one of the cinema's most chilling moments: at the conclusion of 'Godfather 2' we saw him sitting alone in his Family compound having had his brother and his enemies executed and dismissed his wife from his life. It was dark and eerie. This was a man who peed iced water.

In 'Godfather 3' he took on a world of rival bad guys including those cloaked in the purple of the Vatican. It was operatic tragedy but with plans for 'Godfather 4' there is always the power of the Hollywood resurrection -- or the flashback.

Pacino, nerves or not, may return as Michael Corleone. Since his debut in the 1969's 'Me, Natalie.' ('All I remember about that film is that Patty Duke was very nice to me') he's made twenty six films, had eight Oscar nominations and one win (1993's 'Scent of a Woman') but will be forever linked to the Corleone Family.

But he almost never got the job. The sort of Hollywood executive who thought Astaire could 'only dance a little' and Bogart was 'not tough' argued that Pacino, at 5ft 7ins in height, was too short and -- astonishingly -- too Italian for Michael Corleone. He never considered Pacino's passion or director Francis Coppola's support for his star.

Now, with 'Godfather' mastermind Coppola this summer planning another chapter he may be involved again: 'Francis is the visionary. If he has a definite idea of doing another one, I know that I would be interested.'

Pacino had never seen the original 1972 'Godfather' on the big screen until a 25th anniversary party in San Francisco ('I went, but I didn't stay. I was too nervous. It's like looking at an old photograph of yourself. You just wonder. You say: "I can't quite relate.'). It brought back memories of a young actor so overwhelmed that he was expecting to be fired:

'I thought the role was impossible to do. I didn't know how I was going to go from being a nonentity to this guy who runs the whole show. Where was that? I remember staying really close to the story in my mind and heart and feeling that somehow I would chart out this character. I spent a lot of time doing that, and I spent a lot of time praying. Literally, I went and sat in churches and prayed.'

He lights another Honey Rose and leans back deep into a stuffed leather armchair in a hotel suite across from New York's Central Park. He's dressed in standard Manhattan artistic chic, black shirt, black pants, black leather overcoat. Only a casually knotted red tie indicates he might like to get noticed.

His big numbers are coming up. This year marks three decades as a movie star and the Millennium sees him turn sixty on April 25.

At this landmark time he is reflective and, for him, almost talkative. In his last movie, 'The Devil's Advocate', he played Satan who repeated his favourite sin was vanity. But that is not for the slightly built star who considers his sinful preferences gazing over his reading glasses: 'Omission. Sins of omission.'

Grinning he relishes the memory of playing Old Nick: 'What was gratifying was being able to play a character you could do almost anything with. Anything goes. Our idea was to make him a more tempting devil, to take it to an almost Faustian level.'

The connection between 'Devil's Advocate' and the films of the 1970s other than 'Godfather' that made Pacino famous -- 'Serpico', 'Dog Day Afternoon' -- is a thread of social consciousness. Pacino says he took Devil role because it was a satirical thriller about greed, vanity and the contemporary conscience.

'Movies are not bad now -- they're different,' he says talking like the rather hip film school professor he could be. 'In the '70s we seemed to be addressing the sociopolitical issues of the day. Now TV and the media in general have filled that gap. "Dog Day Afternoon" was maybe the first time you ever saw the media dealing with a real-life situation.

'Today, something like that is just run of the mill. You see it all the time on TV.'

Being a legend, he says, is hard to compute. Pacino says he prefers to keep looking forward, not to the past. He has never lost certain professional insecurities: 'I always think, the next thing I do had better be good -- it just never changed for me.

On what drives him, Pacino makes several attempts to explain that while ambition is not a bad thing, just wanting to work is his motivation: 'My grandfather was a plasterer, and the thing about him, because he raised me, was his love of what he did. And he went away and did that for eight hours every day, and you felt he really wanted to go back and do that again.

'When David Mamet was asked how he could write, write, write his plays and books and movies all the time, Mamet responded: "It beats thinking." I kind of agree.

'The work is reality. That other stuff is fantasy. What is fame? It can be a pain. Once in Paris I was hounded endlessly. When you're in a public-enterprise thing, that's what you have to expect. But it's the persistence that causes you to react. But the good stuff outweighs most of that. I remember in East Berlin before the Wall came down they knew me at Checkpoint Charlie. That was great.

'My first language was shy. It's only by having been thrust into the limelight that I have learned to cope with my shyness. I once glued on a beard to go to a baseball game but that just got me noticed and I was with (still steady date, actress Beverly D'Angelo) so that beard is in the museum of mistakes now.'

There is an unusual sound. Al Pacino is giggling. Throughout, Pacino plays the modest superstar, being charming and often self-deprecating, teasing himself for rambling answers which derail his train of thought. 'It takes me half an hour to answer a question. I'm becoming verbose.

'Over the years, I've become far more interested in film. That's why I've been doing so many movies back-to-back Also, to give a year to doing a play at my age is a very big commitment.

'Looking back, I was far too selective at the beginning of my film career. An actor acts, and I wasn't acting because I was waiting to be inspired by the material.

'As you get older, you realise your time is running out, so you take the best of what is offered to you and do everything in your power to make it work. '

Which he is doing at present with 'The Insider' a powerful drama about the American tobacco industry. Based on a real story Pacino plays television producer Lowell Berman of 'Sixty Minutes' (America's 'Panorama') when the show gets deeply involved in a scandal provoked by cigarette executive Jeffrey Wigand played by Russell Crowe.

This remind Pacino that it is time for another herbal inhalation or two. He is relaxed and smiling. And still reflective of other things that have gone up in smoke:

'No one ever asked me to play "Hamlet."

'I don't think I'm right for the part, but it would have been nice to be asked.'

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