A lazy summer’s night, as a teenager living in New Jersey, Danny DeVito murdered his friend. “It was a terrible thing to do,” he admits. “There were four or five of us, bored in the pool hall. One had his father’s car, a big chunk of a Buick. Another had a starter’s pistol. We noticed all these folk hanging around outside a soft-ice-cream place. So we staged a mock fight, like street theatre. We all chased my buddy Louie, whacking pool cues near his head. Then the guy with the pistol pulled it out and shot him. We threw Louie in the back of the Buick and sped off. Everyone watching was stunned, man.”

The forum for this macabre confession is an unlikely one. DeVito and Empire are meeting at the tail end of 2011, in a barn-sized Hollywood studio that’s been transformed into the setting for his latest movie, rainbow-hued eco-animation Dr. Seuss’ The Lorax. A lush, artificial meadow stretches from wall to wall, while co-stars Betty White and Zac Efron stand dwarfed by fluoro-pink truffula trees (think a candy cane with Toby Jones’ Hunger Games wig plonked on the end).

It’s about the most G-rated locale you could imagine. But even here, the man behind such devilishly dark comedies as The War Of The Roses and Throw Momma From The Train has morbidity on the mind. As DeVito thinks back to his own childhood, it’s clear that the movies that gripped him weren’t exactly Seussy. “I have two older sisters and they’ve scared the hell out of me all my life,” he grins. “They’d bring me to horror movies, even when I was a little boy. I’d >
DeVito’s enthusiasm extends to supporting young talent. Famously, he was so impressed by Reservoir Dogs that he bought Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction script—the man is a fan—and invited the cast to his house to read it. “It was a trip,” he says. “The studio was very skittish about making a movie. I was just so impressed.” When he bought Reservoir Dogs, he also asked for a promo reel in which someone peels off his face, pops it in a burger bun and eats it. DeVito’s enthusiasm extends to supporting young talent. Famously, he was so impressed by Reservoir Dogs that he bought Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction script—the man is a fan—and invited the cast to his house to read it. “It was a trip,” he says. “The studio was very skittish about making a movie. I was just so impressed.” When he bought Reservoir Dogs, he also asked for a promo reel in which someone peels off his face, pops it in a burger bun and eats it.}

DeVito has directed several films himself, including Zapped (a comedy about a high school that turns into a time machine), and the recent Brooklyn, starring Jennifer Lawrence and Joel Edgerton. He was also a producer on the 2014 film American Ultra, which he co-wrote with his wife, actress and comedian Assessment. DeVito has directed several films himself, including Zapped (a comedy about a high school that turns into a time machine), and the recent Brooklyn, starring Jennifer Lawrence and Joel Edgerton. He was also a producer on the 2014 film American Ultra, which he co-wrote with his wife, actress and comedian Assessment.}

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it’s a period movie. Also, Morgan Freeman was going to be in it and he’s great. I thought it was going to cost $13 million, they wanted to make it for 25 and it came in at 35. The movie’s out there forever, so it was a good fight to fight. Death To Smoochy wasn’t fun either — they hardly released it. What you desire is autonomy, which you only get if you keep the costs down. That’s what I’m trying to do now with Charlotte Doyle. I’m going to shoot it on greenscreen, not the ocean, but I still wish I had the money to make it myself, instead of dancing with the beast.”

He pauses, perhaps flashing back to time, like a madman.”

“I love that guy. He’s put me in three films, and I stuck him in a room and put him in a coffee shop in New York. He’s a wonderful, vibrant creature.” Also, apparently, a creature that misfits De Vito has just returned from a Leicester Square photocall where he hugged a chap in a Lorax costume, and now has bits of orange fur all over his shirt.

Although Charlotte Doyle doesn’t appear to be any closer to setting sail, Universal Pictures have announced a sequel to De Vito’s Schaezenegger ‘classic’ Twins, called Triplets. In it, Julia and Vincent will discover that they have an even unluckier sibling, in the form of Eddie Murphy. “We’ve been talking about doing it ever since Arnold went with his political insanity,” says De Vito. “Even though we’re a Republican and a Democrat, we have a great rapport. We’re both, in our way, creatures. If you took 50 people randomly out of any airport, stack them in a room and put Arnold and I in there, they wouldn’t have a tough time finding us. Even if our backs were turned and we were covered with white sheets.”

While in London, he’s enjoying catching up with another close pal, Tom Burton, whom he spent much of the Jameson Empire Awards buging: “Hope that guy. He’s put me in three films, and I stuck him in a coffee shop in New York! He’s my link to the art world and such a fun-loving person. Making Big Fish in Alabama was particularly great — Tim would ride around on this go-cart the whole time, like a madman.”

De Vito is fiercely loyal. He’s been married to Rhea Perlman for 30 years, and has been skipping her day from the UK. He’s in only slightly less regular contact with old buddies Jack Nicholson (“He’s good. He’s looking for a job”) and Michael Douglas, with whom he shared an apartment in the 70s. “I saw Michael recently — he’s gaining weight and looking great,” he says of his friend, who last year went through a serious cancer scare. “I tease him a lot, which thrills us all off track. But it’s a wonderful story about independence and freedom and not putting all your faith in the people who are meant to be your leaders. Which is a really strong theme.”

A theme that can be traced all the way through De Vito’s filmography. Whether it’s his headstrong Miss Trumblad in Matilda, the horrid matron in Throw Momma From The Train or Robin Williams’ unhinged kids’ entertainer in Death To Smoochy, he consistently portrays authority figures as sexual and worthless. Why?

“You just feel that kind of inversion is a must,” he shrugs. “May it be it comes from my upbringing. It was a big, raucous household — my father had a candy store, my upbringing. It was a big, raucous household — my father had a candy store, my mother had a bunch of friends who would hang around and drink coffee — and everybody broke everybody else’s chops. I’ve never pulled any punches. I try to be respectful of people’s feelings, but I can be gruff. The thing that bothers me now is the exhibition of thick-headedness on the part of our leaders, the so-called champions of our populace. In the United States and all over the world, there is so much stupidity.”

Irresistibly, his bullshitting has led to clashes with those who bankroll his films. “There was a lot of friction with the studio on Matilda. Money… it’s always about money. I thought it was going to cost $13 million, they wanted to make it for 25 and it came in at 35. The movie’s out there forever, so it was a good fight to fight. Death To Smoochy wasn’t fun either — they hardly released it. What you desire is autonomy, which you only get if you keep the costs down. That’s what I’m trying to do now with Charlotte Doyle. I’m going to shoot it on greenscreen, not the ocean, but I still wish I had the money to make it myself, instead of dancing with the beast.”

“Maybe they’ll give me a small part in a sequel to The Twilight Saga: Eclipse. That’s what I’m trying to do now with Charlotte Doyle. I’m going to shoot it on greenscreen, not the ocean, but I still wish I had the money to make it myself, instead of dancing with the beast.”

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