



B T G

THINKING

Writer-director-actor-comedian-philosopher-tweeter-foot model: isn't it about time we embraced the complicated genius of Danny DeVito?

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PHOTOGRAPHY **AUSTIN HARGRAVE**

One 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 folks 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 truffle 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 >

immediately drop onto the sticky floor of the theatre and peek through the cracks in the seats. The first one they took me to was The Thing [From Another World], with James Arness. Then there was a real B movie with Lon Chaney, called Dead Man's Eyes. Ho-o-o-ly crap! I've seen it since and it's nothing compared to how I remember."

These traumatic outings instilled in DeVito a lifelong love of chills. He's seen everything by Dario Argento, Mario Bava and David Cronenberg, while his favourite film of 2011 was Joe Cornish's Attack The Block ("Man, I got off on that picture!"). Though he's yet to direct a horror proper himself, he runs a website, The Blood Factory, devoted to churning out grisly shorts. And if you're in doubt about how hands-on he gets, head to YouTube to see a promo reel in which someone peels off his face, pops it in a burger bun and eats it.

"I actually came close to becoming a make-up guy myself," he says. "I used to create my own designs for Halloween — I'd make my buddies up to look like a pumpkin or The Hunchback Of Notre Dame, then go and scare the local priest. I was working at my sister's beauty salon, cutting hair, and at one point she said, 'You know, you should do a proper make-up course.' So she sent me to New York, to the American Academy Of Dramatic Arts. Somewhere deep inside, I always knew I could be an actor, but I never wanted to take the plunge. I was scared people would go, 'You're not Clark Gable — who are you kidding?' But there are a lot of character actors and people who look different. So I decided to jump in. It was a good move, I guess."

Half a century later, DeVito's list of credits makes for an exhausting read. He's acted alongside monkeys (Going Ape!),



penguins (Batman Returns), Bugs Bunny (Space Jam) and Tom Jones (Mars Attacks!). He's appeared in two hit TV shows (Taxi and the ongoing It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia). He's directed such diverse films as Hoffa, Matilda, Duplex and the upcoming St. Sebastian, which he describes as "a dark little ditty". Hell, he's even turned that anecdote about mock-killing his friend into a short, called A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening (it ends with poor Louie slipping off a cliff).

"I just like to do a lot of stuff," he muses, sipping on a gigantic glass of Coke. "Follow my bliss, do what feels good inside. You get to the point where you've achieved a lot, and you could sit back and relax, but you'll have to do that one day anyway. If it's fun getting up in the morning, you might as well keep going. And I don't sleep real well, anyway. The last good night's sleep I had

was when I was about eight. These days I occasionally nap, but I disguise it as meditation!"

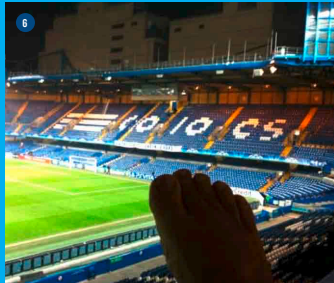
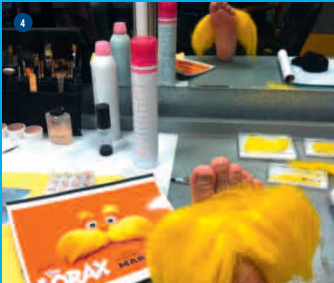
At 67, a stone-cold legend like DeVito could easily coast. But he's maintained the same furious velocity, devouring new information and experiences. After being asked recently to record a promo for the Blu-ray release of Hoffa, he's become an expert on HD lasers, excitedly regaling Empire with data. He's also recorded his own foreign dubs (Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, French) for The Lorax: "It was a trip, a new experience. That's what we're looking for."

Even in his downtime, he's learning. One of the most entertaining, least publicist-leashed celebrities on Twitter ("My first tweet was, 'My balls are on fire'"), he regularly uploads photographs of his right foot, which he calls 'Trollfoot', in various spots around the world (see below). A sci-fi nut, he watches Fringe each week and urges us to check out recent documentary Transcendent Man. "It's all about singularity, which is when machines and the human race meet. That stuff is so cool."

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 sight-unseen (the fact Jules and Vincent share their names with the protagonists of Twins is "probably an in-joke", DeVito says). Today, he raves about his Sunny In Philadelphia cast-mates, as well as the stars of Downton Abbey, which he's more or less obsessed with, and Saoirse Ronan, whom he hopes to direct in a film called The True Confessions Of Charlotte Doyle.

"I almost got to make it a few years ago," he says. "The studio was very skittish because it's about a girl, it's set on a ship and

“Deep **inside** I always knew I could be an actor, but I was **scared** people would say, ‘You’re not Clark Gable — who are you **kidding**?’”



THE ADVENTURES OF TROLLFOOT

Danny's toe's-eye view of the world, as featured on Twitter: @DannyDeVito

- 1 "Trollfoot's drinking pals at Coachella 2011." April 20, 2011
- 2 "What does Trollfoot see when he turns out the light he can't tell you but he knows it's his..." June 6, 2011
- 3 "Trollfoot with Stormtroopers... Send Ben." September 16, 2011
- 4 "Trollfoot tries it on!" November 14, 2011
- 5 "Trollfoot with a very cheeky Jonathan Ross." March 12, 2012
- 6 "Trollfoot lingers after a great match!" March 17, 2012

SHARING THE BILL

With Danny DeVito once cohabiting with Michael Douglas, which other stars have argued over the dishes?



GENE HACKMAN AND DUSTIN HOFFMAN lived together in New York in the early '60s — a time Hoffman calls “the candy store years, because there were drugs, stardom, the pill...” The pair were fond of playing their bongos on the roof (not a euphemism). Hackman later “lent” Hoffman to Robert Duvall and never got him back.



HOLLY HUNTER, FRANCES McDORMAND, SAM RAIMI AND THE COEN BROTHERS all shared a house in Los Angeles in 1984. Raimi recalls complimenting Holly Hunter on her outfit one morning at the breakfast table: “She said, ‘I’ll have you know I’m auditioning for a part as a prostitute and I do not appreciate that!’”



TOMMY LEE JONES AND AL GORE were randomly selected to share rooms at Harvard for their first semester, but ended up being roommates for four years. What cemented their friendship? “We shot pool and watched Star Trek,” Jones recalled, “and Al would challenge me to see who could shoot tin cans from the furthest away. It was usually him.”



GEOFFREY RUSH AND MEL GIBSON shared an apartment in Sydney for four months in 1979, while they were appearing together in a production of *Waiting For Godot*. “It was pretty desperate,” Gibson remembers. “We would sit on the floor and eat dinner and stuff. One of us used to drag in the occasional virgin and sacrifice her on a Friday night.”



KIEFER SUTHERLAND AND ROBERT DOWNEY JR. lived together for three years in LA in the '80s while they were starting out. The pair have been tight-lipped about what must have been a time of legendary debauchery — presumably to protect the guilty — but lurid speculation has led to some truly filthy online fan fiction.

Owen Williams



it’s a period movie. Also, Morgan Freeman was going to be in it and he had a car accident, which threw 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 DeVito’s filmography. Whether it’s vile headmistress Miss Trunchball in *Matilda*, the horrid matriarch in *Throw Momma From The Train* or Robin Williams’ unhinged kids’ entertainer in *Death To Smoochy*, he consistently portrays authority figures as venal and worthless. Why?

“I just feel that kind of irreverence is a must,” he shrugs. “Maybe it comes from my upbringing. It was a big, raucous household — my father had a candy store, my mother had a bunch of girlfriends 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 other 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.”

Inevitably, his bullishness 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 \$33 million, they wanted to make it for 29 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.”

Six months later, we regroup with DeVito in a London hotel room. It’s the start of the British summer (which is a good deal chillier than the LA winter) and the star is wearing a pair of dark glasses. Given that he’s also clutching a mug of black coffee,

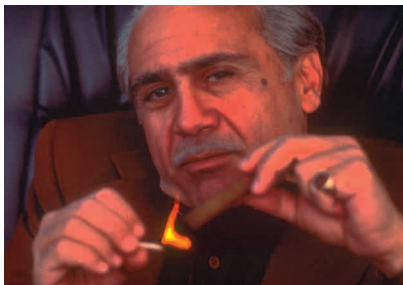
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this could be a tactic to conceal bleary eyes. But though he’s at the end of a long day of talking up *The Lorax* to European press, he’s still warm and engaging. It probably helps that the project he’s promoting was recently a surprise smash in the States.

“It’s beyond your wildest dreams, when the movie does three times better than they anticipated,” he reflects. “It shows that folks are a bit more evolved and thinking about how to repair what we’ve done to the Earth. And *The Lorax* is a wonderful, vibrant creature.” Also, apparently, a creature that moults: DeVito 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.

Since we last saw him, he has shot St. Sebastian and relocated to the UK, having signed on to star in his first-ever stage play, West End show *The Sunshine Boys*. “I like doing stuff with the word ‘sun’ in the title,” he quips. “It’s *Always Sunny In Philadelphia*, *Sunshine Boys*... next up, I’m gonna do *Stick It Where The Sun Don’t Shine*.”

• From top to bottom: As Martini in 1975’s *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*; With Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas in 1985’s *The Jewel Of The Nile*; P-p-p-playing *The Penguin* alongside Michelle Pfeiffer in *Batman Returns* (1992); Director and star of 1992’s biopic *Hoffa*; *Big Fish* (2003). DeVito’s second film with longtime friend Tim Burton; Taking the title role in this month’s Dr. Seuss’ *The Lorax*. Below left: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito as *Twins*’ odd couple.



Although Charlotte Doyle doesn’t appear to be any closer to setting sail, Universal Pictures have announced a sequel to DeVito/ Schwarzenegger ‘classic’ *Twins*, called *Triplets*. In it, Julius and Vincent will discover that they have an even unlikelier sibling, in the form of Eddie Murphy. “We’ve been talking about doing it ever since Arnold went with his political insanity,” says DeVito. “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, stuck 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, Tim Burton, whom he spent much of the Jameson Empire Awards hugging. “I love that guy. He’s put me in three films, and I stuck him in a coffin in *Hoffa*! 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-kart thing the whole time, like a madman.”

DeVito is fiercely loyal. He’s been married to Rhea Perlman for 30 years, and has been Skyping her each 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 ‘60s.

“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 think he’s going to do *Liberace* with Soderbergh, which is the part he was born to play. We had a little piano in our place and he’s pretty damn good. That was a fun time. Michael is so neat he’d iron his boxers, whereas I’m messy to the point where I’ll scrunch my clothes into a ball, throw them in the corner and jump into bed.”

As for what lies ahead for DeVito himself, ever a creature of impulse, he has no idea. And that’s the way he likes it. “Maybe they’ll give me a small part in *Liberace*, delivering the milk. Maybe, if the spirit moves me, I’ll do something new for *The Blood Factory*. I just try to keep mixing it up, and I usually jump into a thing without thinking too much about it.”

He pauses, perhaps flashing back to that lazy summer’s night in New Jersey. “Sometimes it gets me in trouble...”

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THE LORAX IS OUT ON JULY 27 AND WILL BE REVIEWED IN THE NEXT ISSUE.