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RAY LIOTTA

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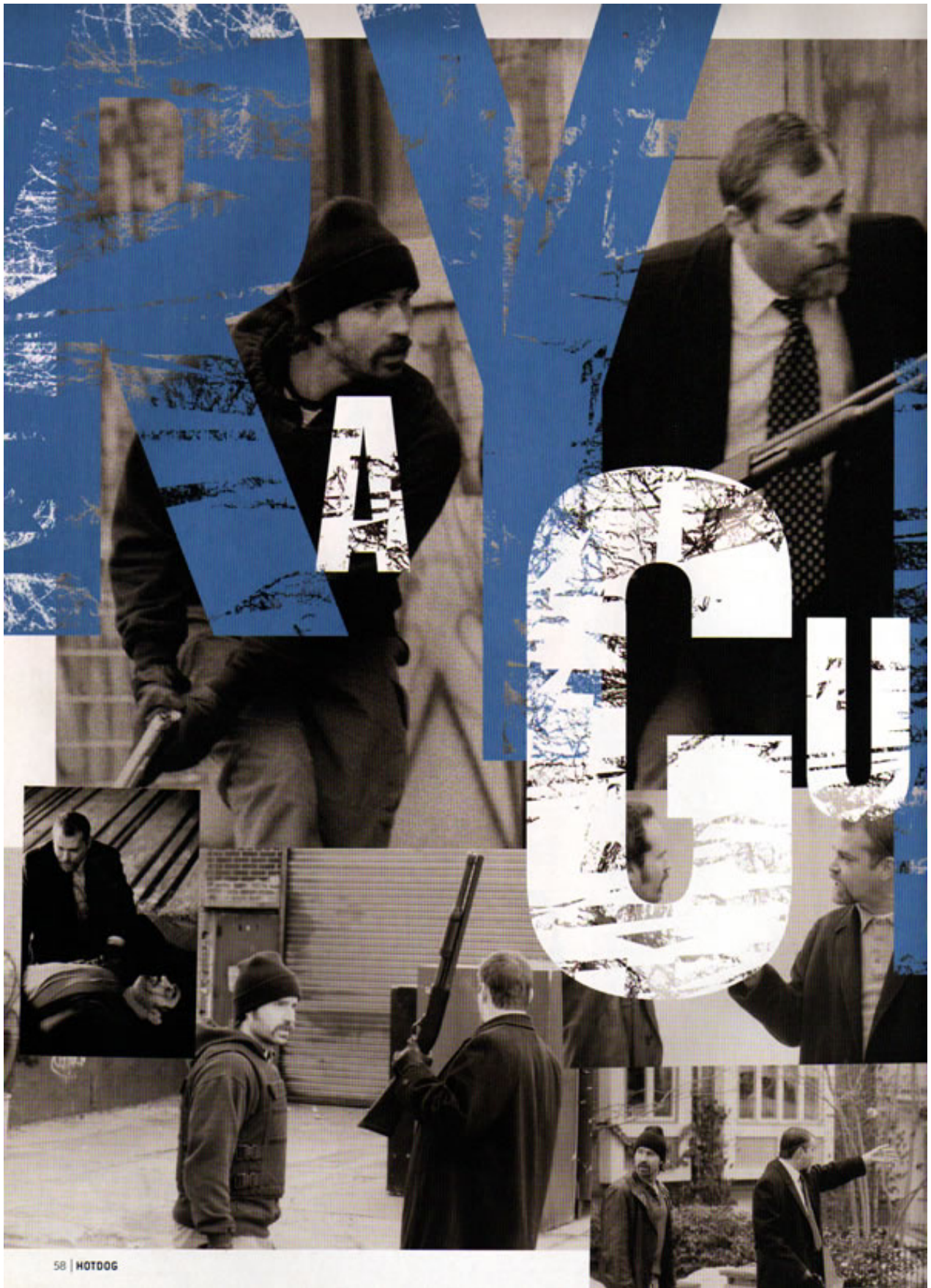
Interviewed the highly narc-ed
Ray Liotta

Favourite film *Secretary*

Jack Nicholson should have
played... Gandhi

Local cinema The Arclight,
Sunset Blvd, LA

Also appearing in *Independent*
On Sunday, She, FHM,
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YOU REMEMBER HIM AS MELANIE GRIFFITH'S PSYCHO BOYFRIEND FROM SOMETHING WILD AND HENRY HILL FROM GOODFELLAS. NOW RAY LIOTTA'S GOT ANOTHER ROLE THAT'LL BURN ITS WAY INTO YOUR MIND

STORY: TIFFANY ROSE

RAY LIOTTA KNOWS HOW TO PLEASE HIS FANS. We like to see him portraying the tough 'you fuckin' tell me who did it or I'll blow your brains out' crazy. The one with the veins popping out of his thick neck and with blood dripping down his face. You know what we're talking about, the guy who's so badly deranged that he's angelically good.

But Ray Liotta also knows how to upset his fans. We don't like watching the 47-year-old actor being upstaged by an elephant, as in *Operation Dumbo Drop*, or worse still, by a furry pink puppet pig in *Muppets From Space*.

His blood-soaked new film *Narc*, however, makes *Reservoir Dogs* look like a garden party. Playing homage to the classic *The French Connection*, the maestro, who also dons the producer's hat (along with his business partner wife Michelle Grace), is back in truly great form.

But right from the start, *Narc*, the brainchild of Hollywood's latest white-hot commodity, director/writer Joe Carnahan (*Blood, Guts, Bullets And Octane*), very nearly didn't get made. Carnahan and Liotta have one fella to thank for their worldwide distribution deal with studio heavies Paramount. The man with the Midas touch - Tom Cruise.

What Tom Hanks did for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (after his actress wife Rita Wilson watched a play off-Broadway about an eccentric Greek family and decided to turn it into a movie), Cruise had high hopes of doing for *Narc*. This emotionally raw and gritty film, which also stars Jason Patric (in case you were wondering which rock he had climbed under), has been shrouded in such Oscar buzz that Paramount is putting Liotta forward in the Best Supporting Actor category.

SET IN THE DEAD OF WINTER in areas of Detroit so tough that even Eminem's nearby *8 Mile* posse wouldn't dare tread, *Narc* tells the story of two burned-out cops, Tellis (Patric) and Oak (Liotta), who attempt to solve the brutal slaying of an undercover narcotics officer. It's a terse and downbeat affair that reveals more twists than a yoga instructor as they unravel the case in the dark underbelly of the drug world. Nearly every line of dialogue is either shouted or spoken through clenched teeth, and every punch - and we're talking triple digits here - sounds like a baseball bat hitting a brick.

A particular performance to note is from Busta Rhymes, who under interrogation from Oak is butchered beyond belief. Having learned at the

heels of hothead master Joe Pesci - who can forget the "Do you find me funny?" scene from *Goodfellas*? - Liotta goes off on one with so much rage that he makes the rapper his whimpering be'yatch.

Carnahan, a burly six foot two 32-year-old, states, "I wanted to make a movie as a Cassavetes meets *French Connection* kind of thing, but for a while everybody saw this as a glorified episode of *NYPD Blue*."

Liotta, who recently changed his agent in a bid to boost his slumping career, was on the lookout for a movie with bite. After an introduction to Carnahan, who has the same agent, it didn't take him long to commit to star in and produce *Narc*.

Carnahan offers, "Sure, a few production companies didn't want to throw money at a violent Ray Liotta cop movie. But," he adds with a characteristic chuckle, "I remember hearing someone mention a Baldwin brother. If you get this guy, you'll get three shelves at Blockbuster." I just wanted to put a gun to my head!"

Cutting Edge Entertainment came to the rescue and agreed to a \$5 million budget, (considered peanuts in Tinseltown talk). Finance began to dry up throughout the grueling 28-day shoot in Toronto, and Carnahan and his stars were forced to defer their salaries.

Sitting comfortably in an armchair at the plush Regency hotel in New York, Liotta recalls, "That's when our producer's skills really kicked in.

"After an intense 14-hour day on the set, Joe and I would have to spend time chasing down the money, because we had to make sure the crew were being paid. That takes a lot out of you, so by the time the next day came I was so exhausted I would wake up and automatically go back to playing pretend again. I was practically in my angry character the whole time," he quips.

Lion's Gate, who had secured the film's domestic rights, submitted their baby to Sundance, where it garnered great accolades, but didn't win any awards. Jason Patric justifies walking away trophy-less: "The Sundance crowd tends to favour movies about lesbian ex-nuns who hand out pamphlets in the ghetto, shot on digital video. And basically, we were a cop drama."

With no wide distribution deal, it looked as if the only people who would watch *Narc* would be over-enthusiastic film buffs with a 'rent one, get one free' coupon to Blockbuster. In perfect Hollywood timing, this was when the Great Oz (Mr Cruise, of course) stepped in.

A poker-faced Liotta pipes up, "There's this joke. Two studio executives are walking down the hall, talking business. One turns to the other and asks, 'What did you think of that script that came in?' 'I don't know,' the other one replies with a shrug. 'I'm the only one who read it.'"

"Basically, there are few people in Hollywood with vision," Liotta winces. "This business is based on what other people say and how other people react."

Post Sundance, private screenings of the film took place among Hollywood's elite, (commonly referred to as the Bel Air circuit), and the *Narc*rum was born. ▶



"If anyone mentions *Turbulence* again they're fucking dead!"



JASON PATRIC

He was in *The Lost Boys* and *Sleepers*. Then *Speed 2* bombed like a B-52. What's the square-jawed actor been up to between then and *Narc*?



We don't see you often. Is it because you're choosy with roles, or you just can't find the right parts?

Yeah, I don't find the right parts, I don't think they're interesting enough. I want to move forward in some direction. The last movie I did was *Your Friends And Neighbors*, which I produced and put together, and it was a great experience. It launched a new filmmaker [Neil LaBute]. I wasn't just going to play a part that I knew I could be good in and the movie may not be up to snuff.

I'm confused, how can you afford to turn down roles?

Like anything, when you make a decision in your life you have to live with those means and sacrifices. I'm just smart about it. If I were really into *Maverick* and *Lincoln*, then I'd have to have a lifestyle that satisfied that, but I'm living a really good life. I can fly whenever I want and eat whatever I want, and go to ballgames and see my friends. If I need some money, I guess I can find some.

So you live a low pressure kind of life, then?

From the time I was 19, I didn't want to buy a house that I would have to work to support. But at the same time, I would still like more of a stability in my career that would go hand in hand with the choices I'd like to make. So basically, I've been trying to walk that tightrope.

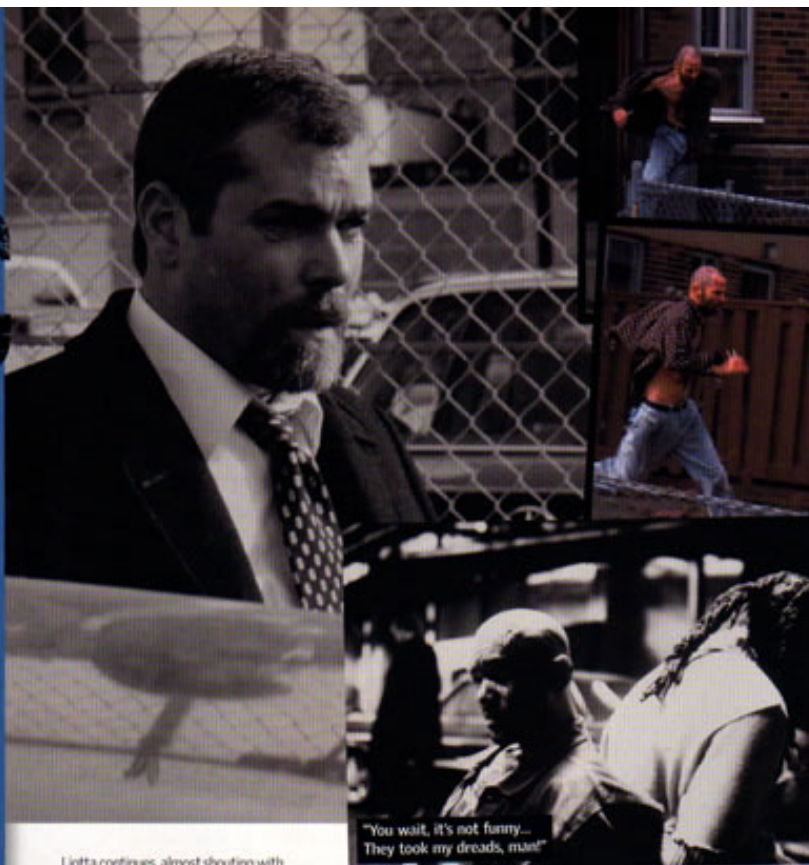
Okay, what clearly doesn't fit into your credit list is *Speed 2*. What were you thinking?

[Smiles] These are the things I'm talking about - the business changed radically from when I got into it. A lot of my movies did really well, I guess, critically, but they didn't play in foreign markets and that drive became incredibly important. You literally put your name into formulas that go into a computer and it tells you what you're worth in these areas so it made it difficult to produce and make the kind of movies I wanted to be in. I made movies for 18 years and one year out of that I made three movies. *Speed 2* being one of them, and I was just miserable doing that, so I succumbed to everybody's pressures and just wasn't happy about it.

***Narc* has shockingly graphic material, was this why you decided to come out of semi-retirement?**

Yeah, that's the idea. I wanted something to be real. You have to watch movies, this is your life. How boring does it get? It's boring for me looking at scripts, I'm sure it's got to be boring to actually have to sit through a lot of these movies. And to have something different and embracing, reminiscent of another time, but not copying it - all those elements were in *Narc*. Working with a good actor like Ray, it's exciting, you don't want to pull any punches. I have a lot of movies where I'm happy I've been able to do that, and this one does it in an extreme sense.

60 | HOTDOG



"You wait, it's not funny... They took my dreads, man"

Liotta continues, almost shouting with excitement, "We were getting calls from Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty, telling us what an unbelievable movie we had made. Then we hear someone had given the film to Sherry Lansing, a big-wig at Paramount, and it really blew her mind. As soon as her husband, who happens to be William Friedkin - director of *The French Connection*, came home, he put the tape in and just went nuts."

Word continued to spread like wildfire, and with Hollywood being like one degree of separation for Tom Cruise, his producing partner, Paula Wagner (the pair have a production deal with Paramount), was desperate to see what all the hoopla was about.

"Paula gave the tape to Tom," Liotta chimes in, with a crooked grin, "and he called me right away, flipping out over it. Tom talked to Sherry and now Paramount is going big on the release."

This couldn't have been sweeter news for Liotta, as he had gained 30 pounds of blubber for his role by inhaling cartons of Chinese food. 18 months on and looking more like Ray Liotta Lite, he explains of his character, "I just don't think he was the kind of guy who would go home and make a salad. He would have picked up a pizza or a burger. So for a few months I put as much soy sauce on my Chinese food as possible. The salt helps you retain water."

THE NEW JERSEY NATIVE fell into acting after a fellow classmate he fancied asked him if he was trying out for the college play at the University of Miami in the Seventies. Success came fairly easy to the handsome actor, who landed a slot on

the American daytime soap *Another World*. His big screen acting break came playing a psychopath in Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild*, and a few years later as Henry Hill, the reluctant mobster, in Scorsese's classic *Goodfellas*.

So Ray, was there a role that got away?

Without skipping a beat, Liotta nods emphatically. "There was one part that I really, really wanted, but Russell Crowe got it; in *LA Confidential* I really campaigned for that part, but the director Curtis Hanson wanted an unknown. Russell did a really good job, so there's not much I can say. If he had sucked, it would have been disappointing."

Okay, Mr. Tough Guy, now can you explain the Miss Piggy movie? Evidently he can. "It's the same reason why I did *Operation Dumbo Drop*." We didn't want to bring that dud up, but go ahead. "There was a point when everyone was thinking I was this tough guy and I thought what I needed was a Disney movie. Sure enough one came along.

Dumbo Drop That was exactly what I needed; to do a movie with an elephant. I've gotta tell you, it was a really good movie, but it just has this horrible, stupid title. Disney didn't get behind it at all, so it didn't do that well. But the kids love it, and to this day I have kids coming up to me all the time."

And *Ms. Pork Chops*?

"I'm goofy and silly in real life, so I was intrigued with the Muppet movie. I asked who are my scenes with? They said, 'Well, you've got a big scene with Miss Piggy.' Oh gosh, I'm in, how could you not want to do it? [Belly laughs] It was great." Well, at least one person thought so.

Narc is released on 31 January ■



Close