

Interview: Vincent D'Onofrio on Directorial Debut of 'Don't Go in the Woods'

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CHICAGO – Vincent D'Onofrio has had a career that is rich and diverse. He has worked with directors as distinct as Stanley Kubrick ("Full Metal Jacket") and Tim Burton ("Ed Wood"), and has starred in the legendary TV franchise "Law & Order: Criminal Intent." He presents his directorial debut, "Don't Go in the Woods," on November 12th in Chicago at the "Tribeca Film Festival on the Road."

Vincent D'Onofrio began his career in the early 1980s, and quickly built an impressive resume from there. He played opposite Julia Roberts in "Dying Young" (1991), had character parts in "JFK" (1991) and "The Player" (1992), and famously played Orson Welles in "Ed Wood" (1994). He practically stole the showy film, "Men in Black" (1997) as Edgar, and portrayed Abbie Hoffman in "Steal This Movie" (2000). From 2001-2011, he also made waves on television, memorably taking on the persona of Detective Robert Goren in "Law & Order: Criminal Intent."



The Title Card for 'Don't Go in the Woods,' Directed by Vincent D'Onofrio
Photo credit: Tribeca Film

D'Onofrio is in Chicago this weekend, presenting his debut as a director, "Don't Go in the Woods." Described as a "slasher musical," the film explores the mysteries and fears associated with the deep, dark woods. Vincent D'Onofrio talked about that film experience, as well as his various career paths with HollywoodChicago.com.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the genesis for the inspiration behind your story of 'Don't Go in the Woods?'

Vincent D'Onofrio:.. My friends and I were in the middle of another project, waiting for the rights for that, and it was taking too long. I was anxious about making something. My wife and I have a house in upstate New York and I was driving home from there, and I mentioned to my wife that I wanted to do something now. I told her what I had available – one of my best friends is a composer, I've got writer friends and a shooting crew ready to go whenever I want. And we have woods in upstate New York. Honestly, that's how it happened. I just turned to my wife and said, 'why don't I make a slasher musical.' We shot it for a 100 grand in 12 days – two months after I had the idea we were shooting.

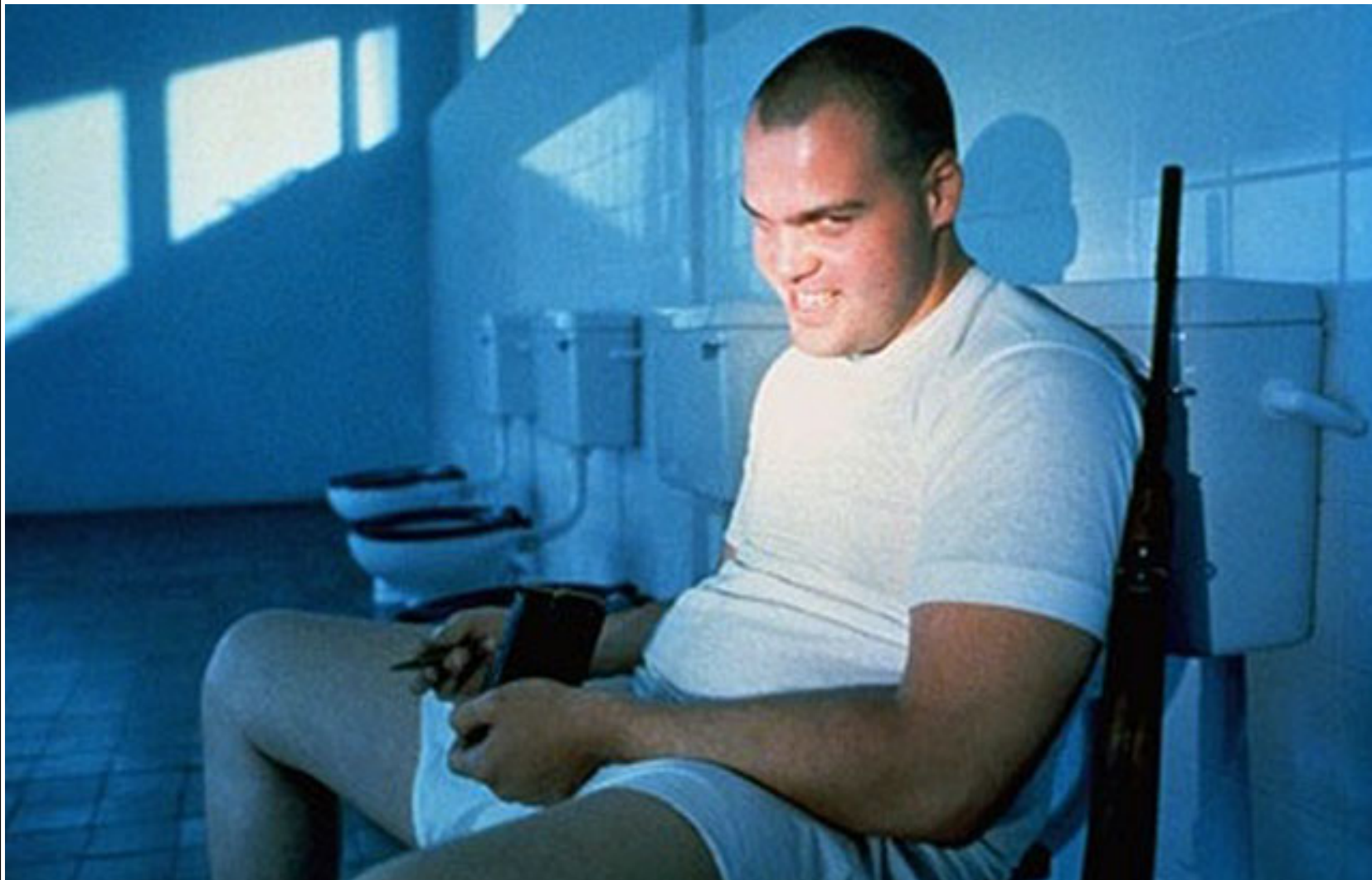
HollywoodChicago.com: How important was it for you to get the right people to play the musicians in the film, and how did Matt Sbeglia embody the proper feel for the lead singer?

D'Onofrio: It was just casting. I knew in my mind what kind of person it needed to be, and Matt was just perfect. He was actually a friend of my nephew, and I had heard his band. Three of the band members are in the movie. I auditioned their songs on MySpace. I had them come over and listen to composer Sam Bisbee's songs, and they were great. Matt isn't the lead singer of the band, but the more I got to know him he seemed like the right person to play Nick in the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What characteristics has most impressed you in the directors you have worked with, and how did you honor those impressions when you stepped behind the camera?

D'Onofrio: The best directors I've worked with never went off course. They always stayed on course and had control of the camera crew, the production crew and had their nose in all of it. I could always tell with the great directors, because even though sometimes I didn't know what they were doing, I was confident that their intuition would be correct in the end, because they were consumed with what they're were trying to do.

I don't know if I actually did that on my set. I used the script as a blueprint, we purposely wrote this 'B-movie' structure, and made it into a musical. Basically that was the plan, and that is what we achieved.



Vincent D'Onofrio as Pvt. Leonard 'Gomer Pyle' Lawrence in Stanley Kubrick's 'Full Metal Jacket'
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com: You've played the ultimate director, Orson Welles, twice as an actor ['Ed Woods' and the short film "Five Minutes, Mr. Welles"]) What do you think the business never understood about Welles, and do you honor him at all within the composition of your feature directorial debut?

D'Onofrio: I also directed 'Five Minutes, Mr. Welles.' I honor him a lot in that one, as I play him at the age he was shooting 'The Third Man.' That whole film is very Wellsian. It was very thought out, we constructed the set four feet off the ground and split it into quadrants, so we could shoot from the floor up, like Welles did.

This film is different. We had two cameras in the woods for 12 days, and we just had to get it done. Most of the shots we took are in the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is it about our general fears as human beings that makes for a mystery 'the woods' as a location that enhances our fears, and how were you trying to communicate that in your new film?

D'Onofrio: It's a lot like a large body of water, like the ocean, the mystery is just so intense. When you're in the woods, the trees create a canopy, and only spots of sunlight penetrate this canopy. And it creates this world of its own, because it's like this place that is a giant span of acreage with an umbrella over it. It's very singular in a way, it's like a capsule. If there are a lot of obstacles around, as human beings we need to find our bearings, and we become more vulnerable. Those are the places that are scary.

The woods in the dark is a whole other level. One of the things that was interesting for me in the process of making this film, is that I took the writer and the composer – Joe Vinciguerra and Sam Bisbee – up to the woods, because they had never been in such dense woods before, like I have. We went into the middle of the woods, with flashlights, and I had them stand about 15 feet from me. When I counted to three, we all turned our flashlights off together. After it was completely dark, I went toward them as quickly and silently as I could and got right up next to them, and turned my light on. For the two city boys, at that moment, they realized how dark the woods really are. And most of the film takes place in the woods after dark.



Vincent D'Onofrio in Chicago, November 9th, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Your collaboration with Stanley Kubrick in 'Full Metal Jacket' was the stuff of movie legend. What would you tell your younger self now about interpreting that role now, or are you satisfied that it's all there back then?

D'Onofrio: I think I knew what I had to know at the time to do that correctly. I don't think I'm suited for that role anymore, but it was just perfect for me at the time. I knew so little about filmmaking, that I can't imagine doing it differently. I haven't seen the film in 15 years, but my memories of it is that I was the right age and had the right amount of experience as an actor to do it at the time.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've famously have played Detective Robert Goren for the last ten years on 'Law & Order.' What has that character taught you about yourself, and where do you think Vincent and Robert best intersect?

D'Onofrio: It was a very difficult part to play, it wasn't easy for me all the time. I never really thought about the evolution of the character, I just played it on a daily basis as things came at me. I created postures, his voice cadence and certain thought processes that he had. His single mindedness, his stubbornness and his cerebral approach is similar to mine, but other than that I don't think we have much else in common. I'm not the kind of guy that would run into a building when other people are running out. But according to law enforcement officers, men and women, I created a guy who was like that, and that makes me very proud. As an actor, I'm a better actor than when I started the show. That ten years definitely improved my acting chops.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you understand about Abbie Hoffman that you think the social order in the United States never understood?

D'Onofrio: Well, they're getting it now. [laughs] Any activist back then that was using theater as a way to get their message across was way ahead of their time, even ahead of the media. The media didn't get it at the time, but now they get it perfectly. They have shows, like on MSNBC, that are doing exactly the same thing – creating theater for politics. It's the same as what Hoffman was doing, but he was doing it in a grassroots way, because it was all just beginning.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, do you think you've played your dream role, or do you feel the journey has something out there that will become your dream role, either as a director or actor?

D'Onofrio: I've had some really great opportunities. If it all stopped now, I think I would be pretty happy with my body of work, I've been so f**king lucky. Anything that comes along for me now is just a gift, an extra bonus.

"Don't Go Into the Woods," directed by Vincent D'Onofrio, makes its Chicago debut at the "Tribeca Film Festival on the Road" on November 12th. [Click here for details.](#) [15] To watch Vincent D'Onofrio's short film, "Five Minutes, Mr. Welles" [Click here.](#) [16]



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