

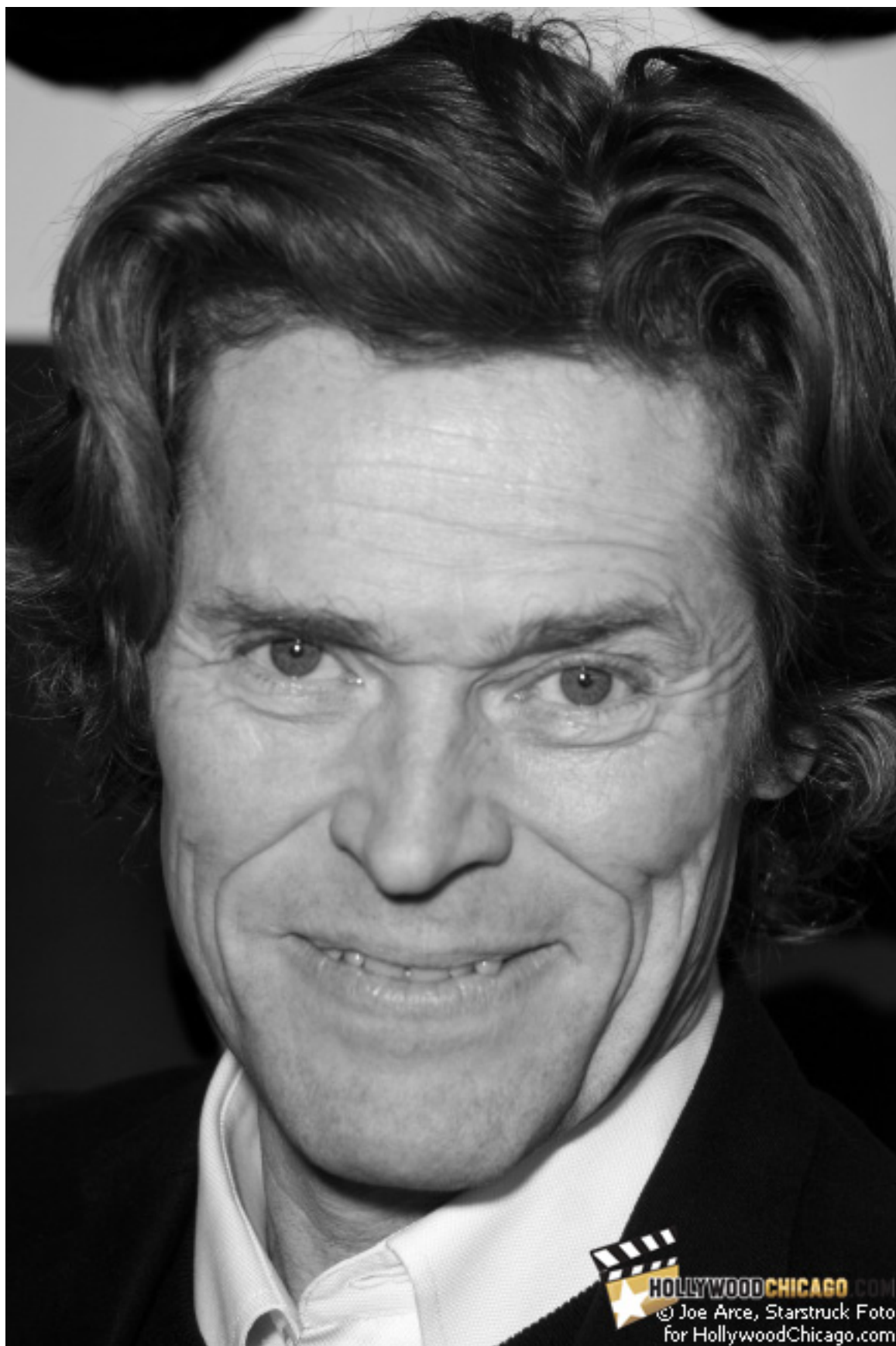
## Interview: Willem Dafoe on Lars von Trier's Controversial 'Antichrist'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 21, 2009 - 5:32pm

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CHICAGO – The legendary Willem Dafoe, star of modern classics like “Platoon” and “Shadow of the Vampire,” is still one of the hardest working men in Hollywood. He has two films opening this week, a cameo role in “Cirque du Freak: The Vampire’s Assistant” and a lead in the controversial “Antichrist,” which he brought to the 45th Chicago International Film Festival and took time for an interview with HollywoodChicago.com.

Lars von Trier’s “Antichrist” has been stirring up controversy since it premiered at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year. With graphic violence, nudity, and themes not often seen in movies, “Antichrist” has been polarizing audiences. One thing commonly agreed upon is the quality of the performances at the center of the piece. Gainsbourg won an acting award at Cannes and Dafoe has been receiving unanimous praise.



Willem Dafoe on the red carpet for the Chicago International Film Festival premiere of Antichrist.

Photo credit: Joe Arce/HollywoodChicago.com

Dafoe stars as “He” to Gainsbourg’s “She”. The unnamed pair are the only characters in a dark drama about a couple suffering through unimaginable grief after their child falls out a window. They retreat to a cabin the woods to analyze their depression and end up traveling deeper down the rabbit hole of obsession, pain, and, ultimately violence.



Antichrist.  
Photo credit: IFC Films

The more graphic elements of “Antichrist” have provoked walk-outs in some markets and even at the CIFF screening. To Dafoe, it’s not just the horror elements of the piece that is dividing audiences.

“It’s a film that’s hard to account for,” says Dafoe. “And there are some very extreme things that you’re not used to seeing in films. People react to that and sometimes they’re very literal. They think the movie is about that. I think the strong reaction is people hanging their hat on the extremeness of it. When they’re lazy, they put very simple politics on it. I think what makes it difficult is the unrelenting examination of depression, despair, guilt. People really have a hard time with, although they admire Charlotte’s performance, they have a hard time accepting what she’s thinking.”

With a film so deep in symbolism and subtext, one might think that getting under the skin of these characters might be difficult, but Dafoe describes the process of making “Antichrist” as something closer to therapy.

Dafoe says, “For me, I had a very specific task. It was scripted. This wasn’t true improvisation. But we weren’t rehearsed. So, we would learn our dialogue and, because the shooting style is very loose and we weren’t rehearsed, it felt a little like improvisation. You only have your task and this dialogue as a way to get you to your task but there were so many things that you couldn’t factor in because they weren’t figured out in rehearsal. It sounds simple. Conventionally, in a scene like those early scenes that are quite talky, you knew where they started and where they ended, but how you got from point A to point C was a big question mark.

As part of the preparation, I studied and sat in on behavioral therapy sessions. So, I knew some of the language because has Lars has taken that therapy and knew some of the language. So, some of the situation, we knew the structure. When you say, “Is it difficult to be real?” No. Because I had real things to do. And, also, the terrifying and the vulnerable part is that, in rehearsal, you haven’t blocked out movement, set expectation, tone.



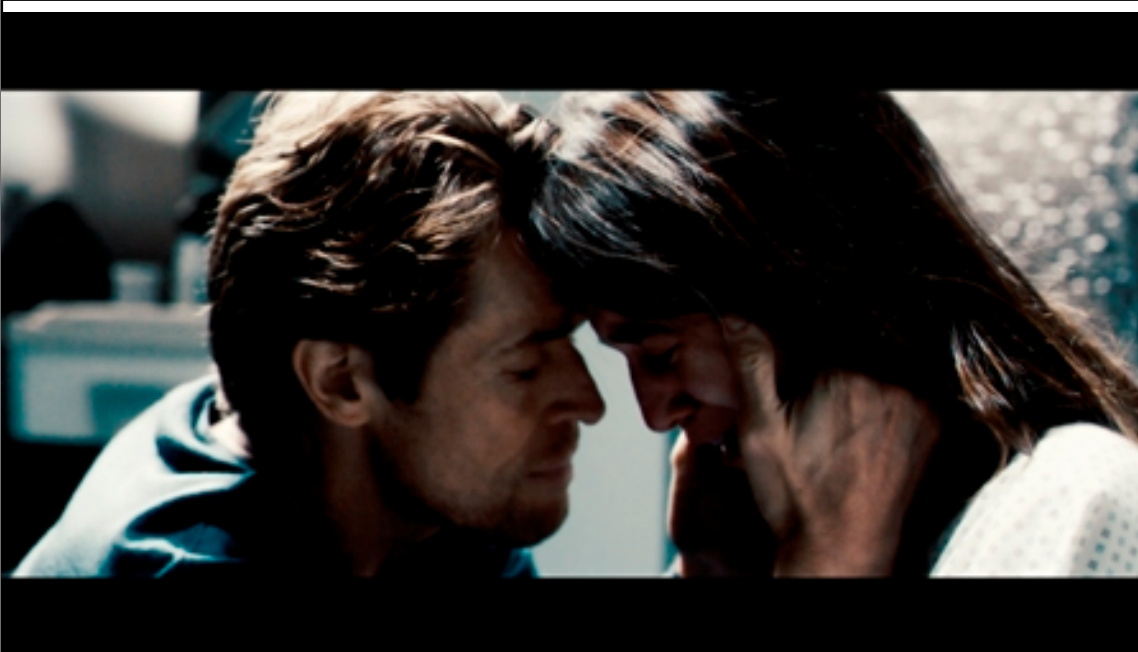
Antichrist.  
Photo credit: IFC Films

So, on one hand, you’re scared to death and feel very insecure because you have nothing to root for. On the other hand, because you don’t and because the camera is very fluid and the lights are set with very few technical obligations...he doesn’t work with a traditional cutting pattern. He believes anything can cut to anything. You’re not doing coverage in a traditional way. So, you’re also very free. What you’re doing is what’s happening.”

Naturally, something this dark can be hard for an actor to leave behind on the set. Dafoe has long objected to the theory, saying that he often thought that the camera "activated" the character and that when it was off, the character was left there. But "Antichrist," a film that the actor has seen three times himself, And he admits, "As I get older, I find that when I do a role like this and I have a lot of responsibility, it becomes harder and harder to shake."

He later expands on the idea - "I never think of what I do as therapy but what I do is very personal, so how can you not take it *personally*. That's the only way you don't become cynical about what you do. It has to stay personal. You're exploring how you feel, seeing how your brain works, your relationship to other people, challenge what you think about who you are, the myth of personality, etc. You're playing with a lot of things that aren't intended as therapy but bringing your life into your work. These are things I think about anyway but they're focused in a constructive way."

When von Trier approached Dafoe with "Antichrist," even he wasn't sure what the final product would look like. He says, "I read a script and some of it is so shocking that I think "How are we going to do these things?" I mean literally. "Lars, do you REALLY mean this? Am I gonna do this? Are we gonna do this? How are you going to shoot it?" So, I knew. But he's considered...look, his movies are always arthouse movies. Having said that, it had horror film elements that kind of made it more popular obviously and I still think that's a possibility, but it's not really a horror film. It borrows from horror language. But it doesn't satisfy if you go into it expecting a horror film. I think it's too demanding. Horror films are usually about titillation and playing a game with the audience. This film is a little too demanding for your average horror film."



Antichrist.  
Photo credit: IFC Films

Dafoe goes in-depth about what "Antichrist" means to him and what it could mean to you when he says, "It gets under your skin and it's very much....When I see a movie like this, it gets me in touch with certain dark parts of me that allow me to kind of embrace a bottom line. If you can embrace that darkness, it can be kind of exhilarating. It's when we can't think about those things that we feel the repression; we feel the boredom; we feel the tedium. This film is very rough but in its more lyrical moments I feel oddly exhilarated. Like the very enigmatic epilogue. I feel inexplicably moved by that."

A good place to see demanding film is at a film festival and Dafoe recognizes the importance of events like the 45th Chicago International Film Festival, noting, "I just think it's a broader thing about film and an exchange of ideas and taking stuff, particularly international elements, and bringing them locally. It's very important. It's a quality of life thing. Americans have always entrusted the marketplace to give them their culture. That works for the most part. Because of that we have very strong popular culture."

But the entertainment and art that is a little more difficult or a little more cutting edge can't be sustained economically by itself and so it needs a little help. And one of the ways that you give films a good forum and allow people to speak about them and get people interested in something they may be unfamiliar with is a film festival. At its best, it represents an exchange of ideas and also just a cross-fertilization."

Hopefully, you experienced the cross-fertilization of the 45th Chicago International Film Festival. If not, check out our [extensive coverage](#) [5] and don't miss "Antichrist," opening in theaters this Friday, October 23rd, 2009.

Before you go, check out the preview for "Antichrist," courtesy of IFC Films:



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