

film

Leo vs. Leo

Leonardo DiCaprio returns to the spotlight with two year-end movies

INTERVIEW BY STEVE RAMOS

The first question one has to ask Leonardo DiCaprio is about survival. Basically, how does he cope with the constant scrutiny and the daily gossip columns about his personal life?

DiCaprio answers matter-of-factly but quietly: "I don't deal with it. Who I am is spoken for up on the screen. I can't get on the podium and declare who I am to the rest of the world. It's a waste of time and a no-win battle. I want my work to speak for itself."

It's been nine years since DiCaprio, infamous womanizer, night-crawler and acclaimed actor, starred in the drama *This Boy's Life*, playing the role of Tobias Wolff in the film adaptation of Wolff's autobiographical story. He acted opposite Robert DeNiro and Ellen Barkin, playing a boy who learns to endure his stepfather's abuse. DiCaprio surprised audiences by holding his own against his veteran costars. What people didn't realize was that his best was still to come. Since then, DiCaprio has starred in various films like Jim Carroll's autobiographical drama *The Basketball Diaries*, playing a teen-age drug addict and director Baz Luhrmann's street-smart adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1997, DiCaprio became one of Hollywood's leading men thanks to his co-starring role in the phenomenon *Titanic*. Since then, life has become admittedly surreal.

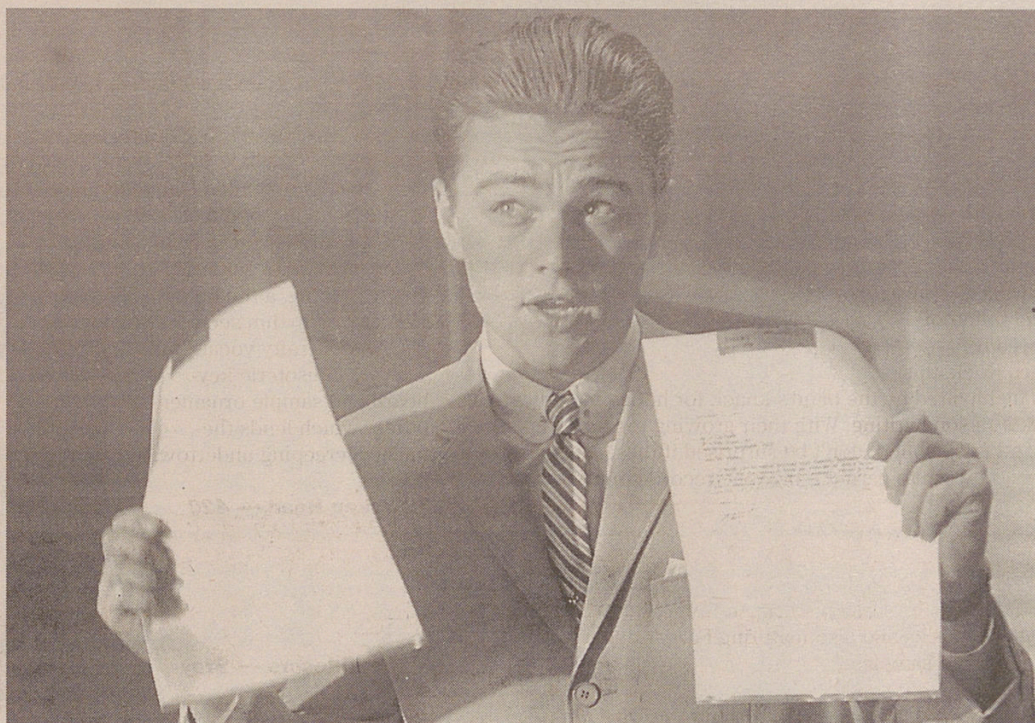
"The purpose of being out in the public eye for an actor is to promote a film. Other than doing something for charitable reasons, there is no other reason for it. I think it gets harder and harder through the course of time to get people to believe you in different roles and believe you as an actor."

DiCaprio's most significant roles revolve around his good looks and charismatic presence. He is cocky and outgoing. That's part of his charisma. He can test his dramatic skills with an off-kilter drama like *The Beach*, playing a man in search of a secluded paradise, but no matter what he says or does, he's still a charmer.

In director Martin Scorsese's period epic *Gangs of New York*, the first of his two current films, DiCaprio's charisma is more elusive and enigmatic. His raggedy clothes and spotty complexion as Amsterdam Vallon, a gang leader battling for control of the Five Points neighborhood in 1863 New York, soil his matinee idol looks.

The opposite is true for *Catch Me If You Can*, DiCaprio's second year-end feature, in which he plays teen-age con man, Frank Abagnale, a smooth talker who impersonated an airline pilot, a doctor and a lawyer. In *Catch Me If You Can*, DiCaprio dons stylish clothes and surrounds himself with beautiful women. Basically, *Catch Me If You Can* fits his public persona like a well-worn glove.

What arrives for the interview is a DiCaprio



Leonardo DiCaprio plays teen-age con man Frank Abagnale in the comedy *Catch Me If You Can*, the second of his two year-end movies.

few people have seen before. DiCaprio talks quietly, looking down at the table as he answers questions. It makes me wonder. Where is the smooth-talking charmer who brought Abagnale to life? Where is the infamous carouser whose club-hopping habits and supermodel girlfriends make his name a gossip column regular? DiCaprio's trademark charismatic swagger is gone. On this occasion, DiCaprio is quiet and reflective. He's all business because speaking to the press is part of his job. In fact, for the last few weeks, it's mostly what DiCaprio has been doing. When you're starring in two year-end movies, there are a lot of interviews to be done.

"I just finished a four-day marathon, and now I'm on to the new one," DiCaprio says. "You know. You do your best."

Born in Hollywood, Calif., DiCaprio began acting early, appearing in commercials and the TV sitcom, *Growing Pains*. Movies were a natural transition, and he credits the support of his "bohemian" father.

"My father has been a huge influence on me because he has always directed me in a different angle in all walks of life, in art, the environment and architecture. He always introduced me to interesting and unique things that I would never experience if it weren't for him."

These days, people read more about DiCaprio's personal life than his performances. He admits there is little he can do to fight it. It makes sense that he would choose to ignore the

constant gossip. What's surprising is the way DiCaprio says it. He fills the New York City hotel room with a calm demeanor. For the time being, he's at peace with the world.

DiCaprio looks intentionally disheveled today with oily hair, a shaggy goatee and a wispy mustache. The style is two steps away from his *Gangs of New York* character. It's also a statement of grounded seriousness. For this morning, DiCaprio leaves his matinee idol persona hanging in the closet with his other clothes. A Detroit Tigers ball cap rests on his head. A dark shirt and trousers hang loosely on his body. He wants you to know he's a regular 28-year-old man, albeit one who happens to be one of contemporary film's greatest actors.

Catch Me If You Can promises to be the more audience-friendly of his two new films, but it also has moments of drama. Still, it's best surprise is that DiCaprio is capable of making audiences laugh.

Asked about how he managed to play a character 10 years younger than himself, DiCaprio says, "It dawned on me one week before production that I was 11 years this guy's senior ... but I eased my mind understanding that this guy was mature beyond his years. He had this air of authority ever since he was 16 years old and actually had gray streaks in his hair when he

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