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**FOR**  
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#27 WALK HARD



WORDS MATT MUELLER PORTRAIT PATRICK SWIRC

# THIS MAN IS VERY FUNNY

But he took ages to realise it. How **John C Reilly** went from super-serious bit-player to A-list comedy ace, with the help of Judd Apatow and Dewey Cox...

EVEN IN HIS VERY FIRST FILM, JOHN C Reilly displayed two traits which have proved crucial to his success: 1) the ability to make big stars laugh, even – as in the case of Brian De Palma’s *Casualties Of War* – when that wasn’t his intention; and 2) a fervent commitment to depicting a character, no matter how far outside his comfort zone. A 23-year-old screen virgin from Chicago – first movie, first time on a plane, first trip outside the midwest – Reilly found himself in Thailand on a big-budget studio production where De Palma was shifting actors like chess pieces in his rehearsal-gripped prelude to shooting. Short of bodies, the director needed someone to play an 80-year-old Vietnamese villager – and fingered Reilly for the task.

CORBIS OUTLINE “I’m a theatre actor from Chicago and I just look at him and go, [*deadly serious*] ‘OK!’” says Reilly. “I totally took it seriously and I started babbling in

what I thought sounded like Vietnamese and just tried to do as good a job as I could.” But, halfway through the script read-through, Sean Penn suddenly stopped because Reilly’s zealous commitment was beginning to crack him up. “It was like, ‘Look at this crazy kid! What is he doing?’” recalls Reilly. “I remember thinking, ‘I made Sean smile, that’s got to be good.’ After that, he took a shine to me.”

It wasn’t just Penn; Reilly’s keenness tickled De Palma, too. As the director fired actors left and right, Reilly was boosted from the original marine-fodder bit-part he’d been hired for (“the guy who gets his arm blown off”) to the film’s fourth lead, a dim-witted private who goes along with Penn’s rape-pillage-murder scheme. In every way, *Casualties* was the start of the life of Reilly; he even met his future wife Alison (Penn’s then-assistant) on the movie... >>

FROM DE PALMA-HIRED ROOKIE TO card-carrying member of the Judd Apatow comedy factory, it's been a long, weird, winding road for Reilly. Today, at the tail end of November 2007, it stops briefly at LA's Beverly Wilshire hotel, where the 42-year-old actor bellows out four tracks, in the guise of faux music legend Dewey Cox, for the international press assembled to make his acquaintance. For someone whose famously reedy voice often lends his characters their pathos, Reilly has a formidable pair of lungs. In *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story*, co-writers Apatow and Jake Kasdan (who also directs) thrash all the music biopic clichés, from childhood traumas (Dewey chops his brother in half) and scornful fathers, to multiple wives, drug addiction and variety show comebacks, all performed with magnificent verve by Reilly.

"It's incredibly liberating and fun to do. It's like this licence to be insane," Reilly tells *Total Film* of his hearty, hilarious music set when he wanders downstairs to meet us. "That's why I became an actor, so I could do stuff like that. It's like putting on a mask. To be that cocky and just assuming that everyone loves you and every woman wants to sleep with you..." Although he's changed out of his cream-coloured rockabilly suit and into black trousers and shirt, he's still looking every inch the country-and-western star. Making himself a cup of tea with honey to soothe his vocal



## 'BEING AN ACTOR IS LIKE PUTTING ON A MASK, ASSUMING THAT EVERY WOMAN WANTS TO SLEEP WITH YOU'

cords, Reilly's polite and casual as he kicks off addressing the subject of, as he calls it, "the comedy thing".

"I'm sort of notoriously picky," says Reilly of his initial reluctance to sign up for *Walk Hard*. "But it was only because things seemed to be speeding up as a result of *Talladega Nights* and I wanted to take it slow and make sure I was making good choices. Once the word gets out that you're able to be funny... although to me it was kind of old news. Not to be immodest but I've done a lot of comic work in the past and for some reason people just showed up for *Talladega* and the studios are in a place right now where that's kind of all they want to make."

Born in an Irish-Lithuanian-Catholic household on Chicago's rough'n'tumble south side, Reilly says he was classed as a neighbourhood freak (although he emerged largely unscathed thanks to having older brothers as protectors) and tore through the local theatre scene, including the city's Steppenwolf Theatre, before celluloid beckoned. Helped by his *War*-mongering

**Funny man:**  
(above) Reilly  
as Dewey Cox.

buddyship with Penn, Reilly was soon dishing out solid support in the likes of *Hoffa*, *Days Of Thunder* and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. Up until last year, his stock-in-trade was good-natured decency, guileless vulnerability and — let's be honest — a lumpen-nosed, plain-John Irish mug that saw him inhabit characters big, small, soulful and goofball in projects directed by Martin Scorsese (*The Aviator*, *Gangs Of New York*), Stephen Daldry (*The Hours*), Wolfgang Petersen (*The Perfect Storm*) and Rob Marshall (*Chicago*, his only Oscar nom).

But it was meeting Paul Thomas Anderson that would herald Reilly's frogmarch to fame — and comic brilliance. The then 23-year-old PTA asked Reilly to come to the annual Sundance Lab to help brainstorm the script for *Sydney* (later retitled *Hard Eight*), eventually casting him as a downtrodden gambler. In the three years it took to get *Hard Eight* off the ground, producers tried to convince Anderson

to dump no-names like Reilly and Philip Baker Hall in favour of Gene Hackman and John Cusack, but PTA stayed loyal. Reilly also praises Anderson for instilling a new confidence in him, culminating in porn star Reed Rothchild in *Boogie Nights*, a character whose sad-sack desperation Reilly managed to twist into a comic tour de force.

"Paul and I just hit it off like gangbusters and you always laugh the hardest with your close friends," says Reilly. While the duo were waiting for the *Boogie Nights* financing to come through, during what Reilly refers to as "our summer of discontent", they drove around LA shooting spoof episodes of *Cops*, the reality-TV show that had just started airing. "I grew this crazy cop moustache and Paul would follow me around with a video camera, pretending to go on calls and improvising scenes. We were just goofing around, trying to make each other laugh... I'd be chasing Philip Seymour Hoffman for blocks and blocks before tackling him. I was in full cop uniform and everything. If we'd had gotten caught, that would have been a felony! When I was chasing Phil through a backyard, the people whose yard it was were like, 'He went that way!' I didn't stop and tell them I wasn't really a cop. I went, 'Thanks!' and just kept running..."

Although neither man knew it at the time, the larky videos formed the basis for Reilly's hapless, moralistic cop in *Magnolia*. "I had to memorise my own improvisations," he says. "Paul had taken monologues that I had improvised and written them into the script, although he had deepened the character and made it more realistic. But the whole thing about losing the gun and all the stuff of him ruminating in the car to himself – that was all from the improv."

THE SAME YEAR HE MADE *MAGNOLIA*, Reilly also took a small role in the Drew Barrymore vehicle *Never Been Kissed* – an unmemorable event on his CV, bar the fact that he met *Saturday Night Live* star Molly Shannon on set and, through her, Will Ferrell. As with PTA before him, Reilly and Ferrell, nearing the brink of his superstardom, became firm friends and began looking for a project together. It nearly happened with *Anchorman: The Legend Of Ron Burgundy*, when director Adam McKay cast Reilly as Champ Kind, only for Scorsese's *Aviator* schedule to muck up their plans.

"When I had to let *Anchorman* go, it really broke my heart," says Reilly. "I could sense, 'I'm meant to be working with those guys. They understand me in a way that is rare.' And when I couldn't, I thought, 'That could have been it, I might not meet that train again.' But luckily, they came back..."

## HIM FROM OUTTA THAT THING

Finally a star, John C Reilly has risen to recognition one rung at a time...



### PFC HERBERT HATCHER

*Casualties Of War* (1989)  
JCR's rumpled, doe-eyed visage catches the eye in De Palma's war movie. Plenty of rape and death. Few laughs.



### TERRY

*The River Wild* (1994)  
Action mom Streeep and sinewy, insinuating Kevin Bacon were the names above the marquee, but Reilly got under the skin as Baddie Number 2.



### JOHN FINNEGAN

*Hard Eight* (1996)  
Reilly's big break, PTA making him a leading man in this smart, sleazy noir. One look at the lovable lummoxx and you know he'll be dealt a bum hand.



### REED ROTHCHILD

*Boogie Nights* (1997)  
PTA again refreshes the parts other directors can't reach. Big John plays Dirk Diggler's partner in crime – a porn star with a big heart. He's funny, too.



### JIM KURRING

*Magnolia* (1999)  
PTA yet again, this time giving JCR his best ever role as the sad-sack cop who loses his gun but finds love. With a coke-head. Touching, tender, tittersome.



### AMOS HEART

*Chicago* (2002)  
Reilly's slouched, sorrowful frame is again put to good use as Roxie's sitting duck husband. Sings, dances... wins an Oscar nod.



### NOAH DIETRICH

*The Aviator* (2004)  
Right-hand man to Leonardo DiCaprio's mental mastermind, Reilly is the schlubby grafter whose hard work allows Howard Hughes to fly.



### CAL NAUGHTON, JR

*Talladega Nights* (2004)  
Dumb, deadpan Reilly drives away with the movie as Ricky Bobby's best mate. A new comedy star is catapulted into the Frat Pack.



With a vengeance... McKay cast Reilly as Ferrell's dim-bulb buddy Cal Naughton Jr in *Talladega Nights* and the actor stunned those who never expected him to hold his own in a cast that included Ferrell and Sacha Baron Cohen, by coming damn close to stealing the movie. He invested even the most idiotic lines with deadpan dynamism. "Aw, thanks," says Reilly, genuinely pleased with the compliment. "Well, you can't steal it from Will because he gives it to you. Will is a real rarity among actors of his stature. Most guys are watching their back and not letting other people get too much funny stuff and Will is just... he's like I am, which

**Streak of lightning: Reilly pulls out the stops in *Walk Hard*.**

is 'if I make you better, that makes me better'. To give rather than to withhold. I just love Will, can't say enough good things about him."

When writer-director Jake Kasdan told Apatow about his idea for a mock music biopic (*Walk The Line* run through the spoofing blender) and the buffoonish hybrid of Orbison, Cash and Presley at its heart, they zeroed in on one name.

They knew Reilly would be able to carry the film's tunes, which span six decades and are laced with double-entendre lyrics like, "In my dreams, you're blowin' me... some kisses." "I always thought he was fantastic," says Apatow. "I remember seeing *Gilbert Grape* and thinking, 'Who is that guy?' He was so funny and so real. There's something kind of heartbreaking about John in his performances. We see how vulnerable he is. I'm shocked he's agreed to do any of this."

Furrowed brow and brown curly hair intact, Reilly embarked on a get-fit regimen for *Walk Hard*, due to the fact that he gleefully spends chunks of the film strolling around in his Y-fronts. "My what?" he shoots back quizzically. "Oh... my underwear. I knew what I was getting into. That's one of the things I've learned from Will: there's no reason to be ashamed of your body. If you show

shame, it's almost like showing weakness and then people feel uncomfortable. But if you're just throwing it out there people applaud your bravery and it gives them room to laugh."

Reilly credits the freedom and the anarchy that Apatow helped create on *Talladega Nights* as one of the reasons he felt safe making *Walk Hard*. And he's continuing his partnership with Team Apatow on the McKay-directed *Step Brothers*, in which he and Ferrell play grown, spoiled men forced to cohabit when their singleton parents marry. But despite his current streak, he insists his status as a comedy god is merely taking advantage of good opportunities, not a shunning of the dramatic work that had many comparing him to Gene Hackman.

"I just want to keep surprising people," he muses. "I'm not really interested in becoming a member of the Frat Pack or whatever these labels are. I want to work with people I am inspired by and who are as interested in doing good work as I am. I'm not the next anything, I'm the only John Reilly. And that's good enough for me..."

**Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story opens on 18 January and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Total Film*.**