

ROBERT DOWNEY JR

Superbad to superhero: Hollywood's premier hellraiser completes his recovery by suiting up for Marvel's **Iron Man**. Tighten those screws... WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

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HO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND EVER PICTURED Robert Downey Jr headlining a superhero franchise? No one – least of all Downey Jr himself. But here he is, tightly gripping the reins to one of 2008's Most Likely To Succeed: *Iron Man*. It counts as an astonishing event for two reasons: 1) it's a paltry few years since the chronically troubled star emerged from a jail cell and 2) it's Marvel's first stab at going it alone after watching their most valuable comic-book properties forged at other studios. To pick Downey Jr to play Tony Stark, the narcissistic billionaire industrialist who turns himself into an indestructible WMD, could seem perverse to some but merely demonstrates the extraordinary aura of goodwill that has illuminated the actor

throughout his career... no matter how defiantly he was scraping barrel bottoms.

The fallout from Downey Jr's addiction struggle has been painful to watch and exhaustively chronicled (arrested for heroin, crack and .357 Magnum possession, passing out in a neighbour's child's bedroom, 12 months in prison for violating probation, etc). But for every bust, relapse and jail spell, there's been a Hollywood knight to rescue him: his good pal Mel Gibson, who gave him his first post-prison starring role in *The Singing Detective*; Joel Silver, who threw him the *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* lifeline; Jon Favreau, who stubbornly quelled Marvel's resistance to hook RDJ for *Iron Man*. And it's thoroughly deserved: to the envy of his >>

GREG WILLIAMS

TF INTERVIEW

peers, the man has an innate talent that no amount of tuition can teach and no deluge of publicity can buy. Pure and simple, he's incapable of being anything but hugely charismatic on camera.

Ensnared today in LA's Four Seasons Hotel (he's just come from Las Vegas, where he was crowned ShoWest's Male Star Of The Year), his hair is cropped short for the film RDJ's currently shooting, *Atonement* director Joe Wright's *The Soloist*. The clipped style exposes a salt-and-pepper evolution, also evident in a trim beard, but his face is youthful and bright, belying a 43-year-old man who's churned himself through the kind of drug-and-alcohol wringer that usually extracts a gloomy physical toll. The actor who's whisked his way through at least nine lives has managed a quicksilver feat away from his damaged past to surface looking fit, healthy and yoga-honed.

A committed 12-Stepper, these days he restricts his substance abuse to caffeine. Ordering a Coke, he flips a chair around and straddles it, not as a defensive barrier but because it gives him more options for channelling his fidgety energy. However, with several publicists lingering in the adjoining room, there is an unmistakable cocoon of protectiveness around Downey Jr. It's unclear whether they're there at his behest (to prevent uncomfortable scrutiny) or the studio's (to keep careful watch over their unpredictable secret weapon in this summer's blockbuster wars). Whatever the truth, he defuses their presence, motioning to a pretty blonde, "That's Whitney, she's my lap dog... Go lie down!" Whitney obediently marches over and collapses onto the sofa.

During *Total Film*'s tete-a-tete, Downey Jr is lively, funny, warm, smart, mostly engaged, occasionally distracted. At one point the actor interrupts himself mid-flow, his gaze diverted out the window, and steps out onto the hotel balcony to take a closer look. "Dude, it's so great — I think it's just a couple of balloons for some kid's birthday," he says ebulliently, showing a glimpse of the childlike glee that makes people feel so protective toward him. He stares raptly at the helium-filled orbs ascending into the sky, then turns and laughs. "That's the action for me in LA right now..."

How do you feel at your age, headlining a film that's likely to connect you to the masses on a grander scale than anything you've done before?

It's really anti-climactic. [Laughs] No, it's... um, it's a lot of things. It's gratifying. It hasn't happened yet so we're not sitting here talking about the wild success of *Iron Man*. And the process is the climax — this is like the maintenance. I mean how much can we really control the outcome of it?

Does any part of you feel wistful that all of this is happening now, after everything you've gone through to get here?

Would wistful include regret? No. Please... life is too short. As a matter of fact, it's kind of funny. I would only do this as a mean joke to somebody else but if you had to map out



Suits you sir: Downey Jr plays Tony Stark (above), who dons robot-gear to fight crime in *Iron Man*.

what's gonna be the best for the growth of a soul in Hollywood, this has been... I mean, there's delayed gratification and then there's 25 years later. I feel like I should get a gold watch or something. And in a way *Iron Man* is that proverbial gold watch. But the watch is not the thing, it's the fact that you've been of service for 25 years and people appreciate that. It would be shitty if it's 25 years later and you get a Swatch. But even that I'd survive.

How did you feel stepping into this huge action blockbuster? Confident? Apprehensive?

I was happy. But, you know, I had to get on my team. If you're not in your own cheering section, then why should anyone else be? That's just a basic tenet of good psychiatry. You've got to be, "Yay! Go Bobby go, you can do it!" And that's the reason that I got through whatever tough times I've had. But also, if you look at my peers, I'm basically the only person that anyone knows from 10 or 20 years ago who still has a fucking career who *hasn't* done this kind of large, accessible franchise role — except maybe Sean Penn... And maybe other people haven't done it for reasons of their own. Well, I don't understand those reasons. I don't want to understand those reasons. I want to be right in the middle of the party. I want to do the big stuff. Why *wouldn't* I?

How was your relationship with Marvel? This is the company's first movie as a standalone studio so there's plenty of risk involved...

It used to piss me off when people would say, "...and I want to thank everyone in the 20th Century Fox family." You're like, "Family?!? They don't give a shit if you die in a car accident tomorrow!" But the Marvel family... it really does



You've been in plenty of situations where film directors have had to fight to cast you. What swung *Iron Man* in your favour?

I just screentested. But when I say I screentested, I know how to prepare. It's such a stupid thing but I could spend a year getting ready to do three scenes. There is just no way that any other actor on earth was going to be able to do it as well as I did because none of them would be crazy enough to spend as much time contemplating it. It's love of the game, you know? I'm gonna get this soooooo dialled in that somebody else would have to go straight from the screentest to an institution to be as ready as I was.

Now that you're Blockbuster Man, will we see less of you when it comes to edgy, eccentric parts like *Fur's* hair-shrouded photographer?

I don't know. I was in *ShoWest* a couple days ago and I got to see this big perspective of the roles I've done throughout the years and... [Sighs deeply] It's weird. It's like, do you ever look at your credit card receipts over the course of the year and go, "What an idiot I am! What's that 30 bucks for?" I never look at where my money's gone and go, "Boy, I feel great!" I'm always pissed off and feeling some sort of anxiety. So looking back over the movies I've done so far, I feel, you know, cool, but the truth is I preferred *Brendan Fraser's* reel, with *George Of The Jungle* and *The Mummy* and *Encino Man*. He got up there and said, "Well, I don't really know what I've done..." and I was like, "You punk, you're fuckin' great! I want all that on mine!"

You said you felt depressed after making *Chaplin*. Was it related to that experience or do you always feel that way after finishing a film?

I think it was just that we'd worked so hard. I'd prepped for it for so long and it was such a big deal and then it was over



'I had to work pretty hard to get in trouble. After that, it's not that difficult to maintain it'

feel like they care. It was *Avi Arad* when I was signing on to do it and now there's *Kevin Feige*, this guy who runs it, who was there with us in the trenches every day. I'd be like, "Here's the scene between *Tony* and *Pepper* [*Gwyneth Paltrow*] where we're supposed to wonder if they're gonna be an item or not..." He goes, "It's pretty good." I go, "Yeah, it's pretty good, we got great writers, they were Oscar nominated..." Then he'd be like, "What is it, *Robert*?" And I say, "You gotta rewrite it." [Laughs] It got to the point where the crew would just come in and go, "I'll go do some laundry and then as long as we're back after lunch..."

Do you get that involved in most of the roles you do, or is this one special?

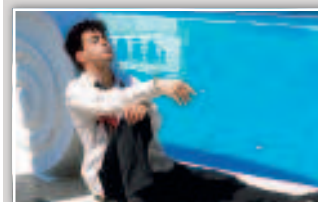
No I don't and I'm not sure if it's because I was more neurotic or the opportunity was greater or whatever. But you see people just freak out when they wind up in situations like that... you're out of your element, you feel a certain responsibility to make something all it can be. Not that I'm right. Just 'cos you are central in something doesn't mean you're always going to be right.

and everyone left and I was still hanging out in Switzerland, getting drunk. I didn't know what to do, I was just hanging out partying in a hotel room. They were like, "You really should go!" But I was tired and it was Switzerland and they got great food and there were lots of chicks around. People are calling, like, "Where's *Robert*?" and I'm changing rooms to avoid them. I don't know if you call that depression or just the right idea. Almost everything is fucking anti-climactic. It's the truth. And once you're mature enough to know that, it's no longer a big shock when you eat a big, sugary dessert and then feel like shit an hour later.

Is there a real temptation to just keep working now that you've had this umpteenth career wind and the parts are rolling in again?

Yeah, I guess there would be. I honestly couldn't deny or refuse the opportunity to do *Iron Man* and maybe create a franchise. Then I went from that into a big epic comedy with *Ben Stiller* – I think *Tropic Thunder* is the biggest budget R-rated movie that's ever been made. And then I went into doing a drama with the guy that just made >>

FILMOGRAPHY



LESS THAN ZERO (1987)
Bret Easton Ellis plus *Beverly Hills* excess divided by *Bratpack* banality = less than spectacular. ★★



CHAPLIN (1992)
Richard Attenborough's earnest but overstretched biopic is a star-making central turn in search of a story. ★★★



ONLY YOU (1994)
This *Italian-set Cinderella* for frustrated thirtysomethings seasons the sticky-sweetness with sass. ★★★



NATURAL BORN KILLERS (1994)
Stone's gaudy, godless whirlwind of anti-media polemic condemns, confounds and cudgels. ★★★



ONE NIGHT STAND (1997)
This *Snipes*-starring exploration of (s)existential (w)angst for bourgeois breeders is close, but no *Closer*. ★★★



ZODIAC (2007)
Fincher's straight-talking serial killer flick dazzles and depresses, without Hollywoodising its subject. ★★★★★

TF INTERVIEW

MUST SEE

RDJ and Val Kilmer give film noir a kick in the private dick...



KISS KISS BANG BANG (2005)

Maybe it's the knowingness in those haunted, rabbit-in-the-headlights eyes. Maybe it's the way his extracurricular excesses bleed into characters seeking to control their own stories, which ultimately unravel along with their narratives (Chaplin, *Natural Born Killers*, *Zodiac*). Either way, Robert Downey Junior's best work has always been in movies about movies.

Chock full of scurrilous self-reference, Shane Black's whip-smart Hollywood noir skims satirical stonks across the surfaces of the genre, revealing and refracting in equal measure. Forget the preposterous, pulp-fiction plot (Raymond Chandler always did); from the title (a Bond song too blatant even for 007), to the Saul Bass-inspired titlecards, to the endless LA in-jokes, this is a film hopelessly enamoured with the format itself – irreverent, throwaway and indecently entertaining.

Teaming up with fellow back-from-the-brink badboy Val Kilmer (playing preening PI "Gay" Perry), Downey Jr's Harry Lockhart is a scumbag-come-sleuth ensnared in a murder plot by childhood love Harmony (Michelle Monaghan). Ill equipped but always on the make, chivalrous but lascivious, he's a twitly contradiction, forever chewing, chattering, smoking, consuming. "It's a perfect fit. The way Shane thinks and writes is the way I talk," the actor admits.

While Downey Jr's unfortunate autobiography lends the character a certain frisson ("I can just keep drinking until it goes away," he says of an unwelcome erection), his game metrosexual turn makes explicit the homoeroticism embedded in the buddy-buddy genre. "I shot him with a small revolver I keep near my balls!" explains Perry. Quite.

But there's a tangible vulnerability here, too. Even as his profane, post-modern narration dictates the action, Downey Jr's glance always flits away, ashamed, as if he can make wise with the audience, but never look them in the eye. "So much for unreality," sums up Harry in a give-a-shit signoff. "But while it lasted, brothers, it was one for the books!" **Matt Glasby**

Atonement. It was this trifecta where I was like, "When is this ever gonna happen again?"

How was it making *Tropic Thunder*?

We were in Hawaii, which was nice. I was in special effects make-up, which was not so nice. It was beautiful and sunny, which was nice. We were dressed in 30 pounds of army gear, which was not so nice. And it was a beautiful island, which was nice. We were knee deep in pig shit for 12 hours a day, which was not so nice. If I'd been doing an actual Vietnam movie, it probably would have been a drag, but the whole movie was this ridiculous send-up so it wound up being kind of fun.

And the character you play is a white actor made up in black face...

I hesitate to talk about this movie until people have seen it because I've already had journalists misinterpret it and basically start off the conversation going, "So you're racist and you're playing Tony Stark in a movie about a black man..." And I go, "Wow! What happened there?" And they're like, [*Sneering*] "Racist!"

Do you have anything in mind that you'd like to develop and direct yourself?

Yeah, I come back to the same two or three ideas from time to time but everything's so different now. I'm just gonna focus on what's out there and what other people think is a good idea. I would love to direct sooner or later. Let me put it this way, though: historically, my good ideas don't turn out so great.

Why do you think Hollywood – or certain power players here – has demonstrated such unwavering faith in you? You've had so many "second chances"...

Yeah, cos we're not talking about individuals, we're talking about a collective unconscious which really means we're talking about energy, which really means we're having an interesting conversation because, you know, I'm here and [*Leans back and tugs at the blue jacket he's wearing over a striped shirt*] I think this is a pretty cool jacket I got on and I picked these stripes and we're here to do this thing and we're not phoning it in, you know, we mean it. At the same time, it's just such a small part of this big psychic undercurrent of what's been going on for a long time. I marvel almost every day when I drive around and it says, "5-2-08: *Iron Man* Comes Out". I go, [*Incredulous*] "2008? Jesus Christ, I'm class of '83!" It's mind-blowing! And the way things are timing out for me is that it's pretty much 25 years to the day that I was in *Weird Science*. Twenty-five years ago was the first time I was ever in a studio movie and 25 years ago was when I met Joel Silver, who I then did *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* with and I met my wife [*Producer Susan Levin*] on the movie he did before that [*Gothika*] and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* was the movie that had Jon Favreau saying, "Maybe this guy could do something with *Iron Man*." None of my other movies had demonstrated that to him and not many people saw *Kiss Kiss* but Jon did.



'We'd worked so hard, then Chaplin was over and I was still hanging out in Switzerland getting drunk'

Was *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* the movie where you perhaps felt like you were back on track?

Yeah, I think so and everyone said, "God we really enjoyed this." We went to Cannes and it even played well with subtitles to a French audience. Then it came out, had a really good two days, I got a call from the head of the studio, then they pulled all the ads and it tanked. And I said, "What just happened there?" They didn't want to spend another \$2m in TV advertising to make another million and a half dollars. And while I understand why they did what they did, that still sucks.

Is it upsetting when you make a good film and it just doesn't take?

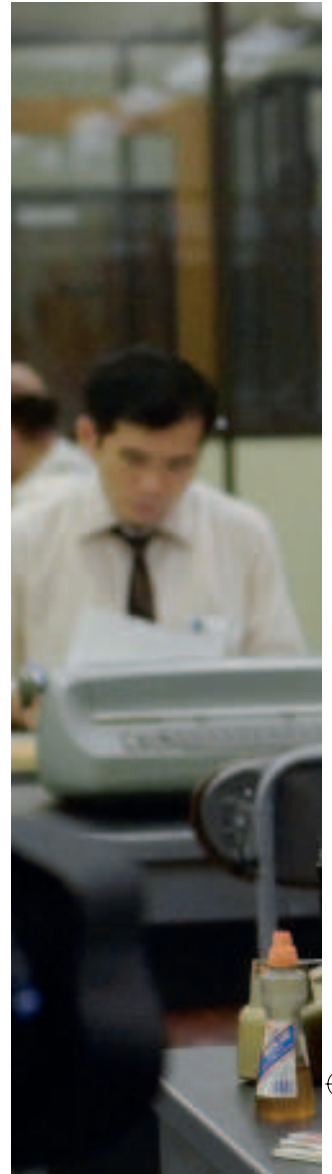
Yeah! And of the 70-something credits I have, I could say that was the case with 25 of them and the other 50 just weren't very good. But, you know, none of those case scenarios wind up with, "Job well done, lead in a big movie, big movie is big success." That's literally the only combination that hasn't happened for me. [*Smiles*] Woe is me...

As one of the forerunners of the Lindsay-Britney media feeding-frenzy culture, what do you think when you see what they're going through?

Empathy. And even that's pretty temporal. But there's some empathy. It's weird. The society we have now, you run a red light and you get a ticket in the mail because somebody's watching you. But it's not even somebody, some machine is watching you. And if you're a guy or a gal who's struggling – or isn't struggling, just doesn't give a shit and you want to party or you don't really know how you got famous and maybe you actually have talent or maybe you're just the flavour of the month and there's a camera up your ass and anybody with a cellphone can get you on YouTube and you're toast. I mean, I had to work pretty hard to get in trouble for a while. After you are in trouble, it's not that difficult to maintain it.

Do you like working with actor-directors as you've done on *Iron Man* and *Good Night, And Good Luck*?

Yeah, and *Tropic Thunder* with Ben. It's happened a bunch recently. It's also led me to hopefully imagine that while directing is probably a way off for me, this year I've certainly become a writing actor. And that's been really valuable, culminating with Joe Wright – he is a force of nature, that guy – and deciding that Susannah Grant wrote this great script for *The Soloist* but there was one scene that we could never get quite right. So we rewrote it together and we shot





it on Friday and Joe and I and Seamus McGarvey – probably the best living director of photography right now – none of us could sleep when we got back from the night shoot. Seamus said it was like watching little piglets being born on the set. So to me, working with acting directors is great but it's also having enough authority and trust at this point creatively to be able to say, "I think this is really what you're trying to say. Right, boss? Then let me write down what it is and tell me if that's right." Not all of the time because then you get into the realm of being an egoist and I've been there too.

That style of working is the opposite of someone like Zodiac's David Fincher...

Yes, he says there's no E in Improv. And I'd be like, 'OK.' But the Fincher experience is great and I love him and I'd do it again.

Did it ever drive you crazy?

No, because if someone can drive you crazy in this game, they're crazy and you're vulnerable. And he's not, Fincher is as cool as a cucumber. He just doesn't give a shit what you're going through; he wants you to open the drawer the right way.

When do directors drive you too far?

The way they can push me too far is by telling me that my instincts aren't valuable. Or that what I believe must occur for me to have the space I need to work is not an option for them. Which basically just means they don't know what they're doing and that the mistake I made was saying yes to working with this schmuck in the first place.

Do you have fond memories of working with Oliver Stone on Natural Born Killers?

Interestingly enough, working with Oliver kind of reminded me of doing *Tropic Thunder* with Ben, where somebody demonstrates such leadership in their vision that there's nothing they can ask of you that you're not happy to do. So when Ben had me in special effects make-up in direct sunlight up to our ankles in mud and pig urine for three months doing a comedy that might or might not work depending on how well it was executed, you see that he was out there on his feet, like Attenborough was the entire time we shot *Chaplin*, like Oliver Stone was the entire time we shot *Natural Born Killers*. Oliver would let us try dynamic things and take risks in *NBK* and there's that same lineage in *Tropic Thunder*.

Now that you are about to kickstart your first big Hollywood franchise, what's driving you now in terms of career choices?

My stuff is I just go, "Oh shit... again?" And I always wind up throwing the script across the room and going, "When do we start?" Because, you know, momma needs a new pair of shoes and I don't have a bunch of real estate in Studio City. I'm a working stiff. So what drives me now is the promise and the possibility of the *real* American dream, which is that you don't retire but when you're 65 you actually have somewhere to retire to if you want and you can start a garden or fuck around or write a book that nobody reads. **TF**

Iron Man opens on 2 May and will be reviewed in the next issue. Tropic Thunder opens on 19 september.

Killer part: Downey shone as journalist Paul Avery in David Fincher's true-life crime drama Zodiac.

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