

HEY DUDE

Woody Harrelson's ability to convince in both comedic and dramatic roles has taken him from *Cheers*' dopey bartender to his latest role as psychopathic cop Dave Brown in *Rampart*

BY MATT MUELLER

Face to face, Woodrow Tracy Harrelson is goofy, childlike, instantly likeable. He grins like he means it and possesses the finest Southern drawl in Hollywood. He is also one of the most idealistic actors around. He is passionately informed about global issues as well as being an outspoken activist for legalising marijuana, saving the environment and living an ethical vegan lifestyle. But there are demons swirling around the 50-year-old actor's head, and these undoubtedly fed into his searing performance in *Rampart*, writer-director Oren Moverman's taut, shocking drama based on a real-life LAPD scandal in the late '90s. In the film, Harrelson plays a corrupt, racist LA cop named Dave Brown. If Brown's patrol-car lights ever appeared in your rear-view mirror, you'd start saying your prayers.

"Well, nobody likes to see those lights in their rear-view mirror, so I always have that fear," says Harrelson. "Cops tend to get a bad name, but that's because there are quite a few bad ones. There are a lot of good cops, and I got to hang out with some of them. But if it's 80 per cent good guys and 20 per cent bad ones, it's going to be hard for people to embrace that profession." For his part, Harrelson is convinced he'd make a rotten policeman, having been taken out on patrol around LA while researching his role in *Rampart*.

"When we drove around, they'd pull over some guys and tell them to get their hands up on the wall," he recalls. "Then

they'd say to me, 'Okay, go talk to this guy.' So I'd do it, and find this amazing, interesting person, a great conversationalist. When I walked back over, they said, 'You'd never want to turn your back on that guy – he's a stone-cold killer.' I had no idea. He just seemed like a bright, articulate person."

With his role in *Rampart* widely praised as his most powerful performance to date, Harrelson looks odds on to pick up his third Oscar nomination. In addition to a Best Actor nomination in the title role of 1996's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, he was nominated for Best Supporting Actor in Moverman's 2009 debut, *The Messenger*. He must have been disappointed not to win either Academy Award. But if there's one thing Harrelson knows by now, it's to take his cut-throat profession with the proverbial grain of salt, enjoy the good times while they last, and don't take the bad times to heart.

In a career rife with ups, downs and serial misfires, the Texas-born actor rose to prominence as sweetly daft bartender Woody Boyd in the long-running TV sitcom *Cheers*. Before landing the role, Harrelson had appeared on Broadway in Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*, and worked on a play with legendary actor-director John Cassavetes (although he ended up walking out on the play, a decision he regrets). But his eight-year stint in *Cheers* brought him colossal fame and made him an '80s icon, a fact that he parlayed into an estimable film career. Early on, he worked with such critically acclaimed filmmakers as Oliver Stone (*Natural Born Killers*) and Milos Forman (*The People vs. Larry Flynt*), while ►

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keeping his agents happy in more commercial films, like bowling farce *Kingpin* and action-comedy *Money Train*.

This mash-up of roles has kept his career humming along nicely. He’s not always the lead, nor is he so ego-led that he turns down small roles in good projects. His peculiar blend of goofball insouciance and hypermasculinity, tempered by an edge of softness, means that filmmakers have always found a use for him. In recent years, he’s been effective in smaller doses in *No Country for Old Men*, *Zombieland*, and this year’s post-apocalyptic teen franchise *The Hunger Games*.

Highs and lows have always been a part of Harrelson’s personal life as well. Despite his image as a New Age proselytiser (a far cry from the deeply religious Christian his mother raised him to be) and his fervour for eco-issues, Harrelson is also a notorious wild man. His father was too; Charles Harrelson, who drifted in and out of his son’s childhood, was convicted of murdering a US federal judge in 1979. He died in prison in 2007, but not before Woody had healed their rift and was actively campaigning for his retrial.

Perhaps his childhood demons have fuelled the actor’s legendary reputation for hell-raising and womanising. The

FROM TOP As corrupt police officer Dave Brown in *Rampart*; in 1996’s *Kingpin*; in the title role of 1996’s *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, for which he was nominated for Best Actor; in 1994’s *Natural Born Killers*

former has led to bizarre spats with London taxi drivers (involving a police chase and arrest after leaving without paying his fare) and paparazzi (he defended an assault charge on one photographer by claiming he thought the man was a zombie). The latter has dogged him for years, although he’s been with his current partner (and former assistant) Laura Louie for two decades. The couple, who married in 2008, are raising three daughters (18, 15 and five) and divide their time between homes in Costa Rica and Hawaii, where Harrelson can indulge his love of surfing.

Ask him if he’s content playing the rawhide-tough eccentrics that seem to keep coming his way, and he looks a bit nonplussed. “Are you asking me if I’m like that in my life?” No, just whether he’s comfortable filling that gap in the market, or would he rather be trying other things. “I’m never comfortable,” he laughs. “I remember when I was working with John Cassavetes, and Gena Rowlands was on stage telling him that she didn’t feel comfortable. He said, ‘Good! Don’t get comfortable. There’s nothing worse than watching an actor who’s comfortable.’ I couldn’t feel comfortable playing Dave Brown because there’s so much angst that drives him.”

“If you saw the way my daughters bully me, you’d realise I’m not such a tough guy,” he adds. His *Rampart* character has two daughters, but his depravity drives them away, resulting in painful scenes. “Anything to do with the daughters, I found hard. It was treacherous, difficult and scary, because I’m wrapped up with my own daughters. It was a big deal for me.”

One arena where Harrelson has never felt ill at ease is in bedroom scenes. He has several in *Rampart*, including one with actress Robin Wright, who plays his lover. The two go way back, and each describes the other like a sibling. Shooting the scene was so perturbing for Wright that she had to get drunk on tequila first. Harrelson laughs when he’s reminded of his co-star’s torment. “Well, it may have been difficult for her. People always talk about how agonising and difficult sex scenes are. I’ve never had much problem with them. You get this incredible opportunity to be with this beautiful actress who’s amazing, riveting, compelling, and you’re stuck together for the day, sometimes in bed. I don’t see what the downside is.” His smile is a mile wide.

Next up is *Seven Psychopaths*, Irish playwright Martin McDonagh’s follow-up film to *In Bruges*, in which Harrelson plays a screenwriter caught up in a dognapping plot with Colin Farrell. And he’ll continue to be outspoken about all of his firmly held beliefs, in any way he can – even if it means he has to be licked and stuck on a letter. He recently appeared on a series of US postage stamps as one of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’ 20 famous vegetarians.

With the US elections approaching, Harrelson also feels it’s time to up the volume on global warming. He sees President Obama as a huge disappointment on the issue after all his electioneering promises. “I was into climate change way back in 1987,” says Harrelson. “I wrote a play about global warming then, because the information was already out there. But unfortunately there doesn’t seem to be a lot of progress. The industries are still doing what they’re doing and Obama’s still kowtowing to them. The world will keep on going, but it’s a shame to think that we might not be in it.” ■

The *Rampart* DVD will be released in July in the UK

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian