

CINEMA

Cage gains respect with new role

NEW YORK (AP) — In the movies, even when he's going bonkers, Nicolas Cage is smoo-o-o-th. In person, even when he's just sitting down for a little lunch, it can be a rocky road.

The Hollywood journeyman, gaining renewed respect for his portrayal of mobster Little Junior Brown in *Kiss of Death*, is the first to admit he's no tough guy.

"It was nauseating to me," he says of how he wheezed life into the brutal asthmatic villain of director Barbet Schroeder's film noir.

"I concern myself with whether or not I need my neuroses to be able to do this," Cage says, shaking his head, his unique throaty voice reduced to a near whisper.

Thinning on top and ghostly pale, he's a far cry from the grotesque Little Junior, looking especially harmless in a dark blue suit and inch-wide tie. Nervous, almost jittery, he has no stomach for hot food.

His bodyguard hovering nearby, Cage orders sashimi and iced tea. He fiddles with his jewelry and eyes the dining room at the Four Seasons Hotel, checking to see if he's attracted any undue attention.

It turns out that the main thing bothering him is stage fright.

"I'm terrified about doing David Letterman," he says, antsy about his first appearance on the late-night show. "I'm not a funny guy."

Big movie star frightened by TV goofball?

"I really admire him," Cage says. "That's why I'm so nervous, because his wit is so sharp. He's a heavy dude."

Letterman heavy? Yeah, so is Mr. Rogers.

Cage, 31, relaxes somewhat when he finally gets down to talking, but his overall intensity remains largely undiminished. Smiles are nonexistent.

Dripping remorse, he tells about his shaky start making *Kiss of Death*. He got so deep into Little Junior during the film's violent opening scene that he split open a stuntman's head, sending him to the hospital for stitches.

"I started crying, thinking I had killed somebody on my first day of shooting," Cage says. "And Barbet Schroeder, he knew that we had only one take, one shot of it, and he said, 'Well, we're going to have to use it.'"

"He said, 'Unfortunately, but perhaps fortunately, it will have all the messiness of reality.'"

Slimmed down from the bulky physique he amassed for the role, Cage points out — without being asked — that he refused to take steroids to build muscle mass, relying on weight lifting and a high-calorie diet.

He's also self-conscious



Nicolas Cage said his role in *Kiss of Death* was "nauseating" to him.

about his skin.

"By the way," he says, "the reason I've got makeup on my face is that I've been doing TV all day."

Not to worry Nicolas, you look mah-velous.

"I've done interviews with makeup before and the writer got the wrong idea," he explains.

Cage's early career featured edgy roles in *Birdy*, *Moonstruck*, *Raising Arizona*, *Vampire's Kiss* and *Wild at Heart*. He followed that string with nice-guy parts in *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Guarding Tess* and *It Could Happen to You*.

Red Rock West started a round trip that revved full throttle in *Kiss of Death*.

"I wanted to try and go back to that darker corner of my mind, and come up with something," Cage says. "I liken it to a carbon clean-out, which is when you take a race car and blow the engine out, drive it over 100 mph. I felt that I was getting gummed up and I needed to return to explosive, wild behavior."

After Little Junior, he plays a suicidal alcoholic opposite Elizabeth Shue in *Leaving Las Vegas*, which finished shooting last fall. Next, he'll do *A Simple Plan*, another grim picture directed by John Dahl (*Red Rock West*).

"I'm at a point where I don't want to feel homogenized, I don't want to sell pancakes," he says, digging his chopsticks into a pile of raw tuna. "I want to stay pure to myself and my instincts."

That means, "I think I'm going to make small movies for a while," he says. "The stuff that blows my skirt up is the stuff that provides me an opportunity to change and to keep growing."

Speaking of personal growth, how about marrying actress Patricia Arquette (*True Romance*) after she proposed out the blue in early April?

"I AM a newlywed," he says, growing bright at the mere mention of it. "Once I married Patricia, I knew my life made sense.

NICOLAS CAGE FILMOGRAPHY

In approximate chronological order:

Birdy
Moonstruck
Raising Arizona
Vampire's Kiss
Wild at Heart
Honeymoon in Vegas
Guarding Tess
It Could Happen To You
Red Rock West
Kiss of Death

Up next . . .
Leaving Las Vegas
A Simple Plan

It didn't make sense before. It was like I was a half-moon and I met the other half and everything became circular."

It was the first marriage for both, each of whom are parents of young children. Cage's son, Weston, is 4. The boy's mother is actress Kristina Fulton. Arquette, 27, had Enzo, 6, with rocker Paul Rossi.

Born Nicolas Coppola, the nephew of filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola changed his name to ensure everyone knew at the outset that he meant to make it in the movie industry on his own.

Now that he's done that, he can enjoy his artistic bloodline a little more. "It's an interesting family," Cage says, resorting to understatement. "It's loaded with Italian competitions and grudges, and things like that come up and then go away and come up again. It's just a passionately charged family. I'm proud that I'm part of it."

The future looks bright for Cage. Just don't expect any flood of smiles.

"Whether or not it's necessary for an actor to be neurotic to act, I don't know," he says, biting his lip. "But I made up my mind that I really wanted to concentrate on that, just acting, that I really wanted to become an actor. That's who I am."



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