

Role with the punches

A conversation with Robert De Niro

BY FRANCINE WHITE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

From the moment Robert De Niro uttered the line “You talking to me?” as Travis Bickle in the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, his place on the platform of acting legends was assured.

At that point, he had already won an Oscar for playing the young Vito Corleone in *Godfather II*. Indeed, he and Brando, his hero, are the only two people to have won an Oscar for playing the same character. *Taxi Driver* was his second collaboration with director Martin Scorsese; the two had made *Mean Streets* together in 1973, which set De Niro on what was to become a stratospheric path.

In 1980, again with Scorsese, he took his second Oscar for his portrayal of boxer in decline Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*. Now, aged 75, with over 100 films under his belt, he’s still producing critically acclaimed work. His TV portrayal last year of financial fraudster Bernie Madoff in *Wizard of Lies* won him a Primetime Emmy nomination.

Much has been made of De Niro’s taciturnity when it comes to interviews. He once nearly came to blows with the late film critic Barry Norman and, as recently as 2015, stormed out of an interview with the *Radio Times* because he thought it was negative. So when it was agreed he would do an interview to promote two events in Leeds and Birmingham, England, where he will talk about his life, there was some apprehension on my part.

The De Niro I encounter however couldn’t be more friendly or pleasant. He clearly isn’t comfortable talking about himself and, when doing so, his sentences sort of trail off into a silence. He feels on safer ground talking about his work and approaches verbose when doing so.

We talk a few days after his Tribeca offices had received a pipe bomb addressed to him. De Niro, vocally anti-Trump, had received the device alongside various notable Democrats including the Clintons. The accused bomber, Cesar Sayoc, a Florida-based Trump supporter, had just been

arrested.

“Yes, it’s been quite a week,” De Niro concedes. “There is a way to deal with this with votes. Vote against Trump. If I was president for the day I would roll back a lot of things Trump has put in place and get the country back on the right track. At the moment, it’s a mess. That guy is a mess. Anyway, what can I tell you? What do you want to know?”

It’s intriguing that someone who is ill at ease being interviewed should subject himself to two evenings of on-stage questions and answers about his life and work. With an estimated net worth of \$300 million, he doesn’t need the money.

“Well, I will get paid!” he chuckles. “No seriously, that’s not it. My lifestyle isn’t extravagant and it’s never about money. I’m always curious to go to places that are new to me. Maybe I’ll find something and I’ll come back with my kids to show them. It’s all worth it.”

De Niro has six children, ranging from age seven to 49 and has been married twice. He and his wife, actor and philanthropist Grace Hightower, initially married in 1997. Two years later De Niro filed for divorce. But the couple reconciled and renewed their vows in 2004. She is mother to two of his children.

What sort of father is he? “I try my best with them.” Then there’s silence before he suddenly adds: “If I’m not working I’m always busy: taking my kids to school, picking them up, taking them to things. They always have something going on.” De Niro on the school run is quite an image.

He is working currently, shooting *The Joker* with Joaquin Phoenix and has just finished *The Irishman*, directed by Scorsese and co-starring Al Pacino, Joe Pesci and Harvey Keitel.

“I don’t know exactly when it will come out. It’s going to be on Netflix. I’ve been trying to get this off the ground for a long time. I was looking at my notes when we started shooting and they were from about 10 years earlier. I read the book *I Heard You Paint Houses* by Charles Brandt as a research book for another project I was doing. I said to Marty, you’ve got to read this because I think this is what we should do, you know? That’s how it started. We got the whole thing going.”

The plot focuses on Frank “The Irishman” Sheeran (De Niro), a labor union official with mob connections and his claim to have been involved in the slaying of union boss Jimmy Hoffa (Pacino). The stellar cast also includes Ray Romano and Bobby Cannavale. The fact that a film with such a cast is getting its first airing on TV and not in the cinema shows how the industry has changed since De Niro first started out.

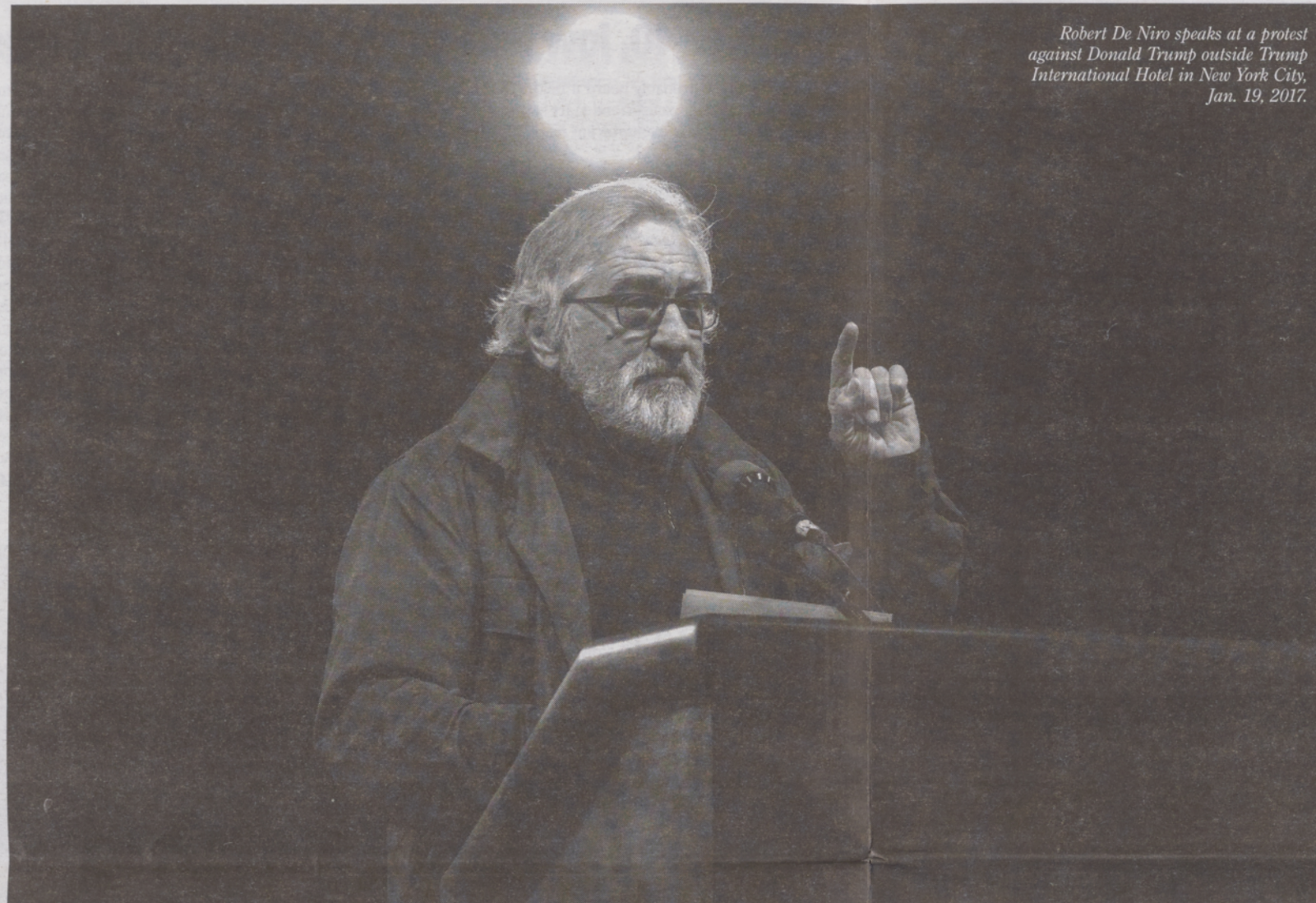
“That’s right. TV has created more opportunities for actors and for every other creative department of film. When I was a young actor there just wasn’t that many things, you know? There was television, or you went out to California, Hollywood, for films. There were a few films made in New York. There wasn’t much independent film making.”

On a roll, he carries on: “TV seems to be replacing what used to be in films. Not the big epic films like *Star Wars* – that’s a different dynamic – but drama. It’s all different now – huge movies that are franchises. Another thing is CGI. They use it everywhere.”

What has been stand-out TV for him? “Ha, well, I don’t really watch TV. I go to the movies!”

The *Irishman* is the ninth collaboration between De Niro and Scorsese, who has described their relationship as “Siamese twins.”

Robert De Niro speaks at a protest against Donald Trump outside Trump International Hotel in New York City, Jan. 19, 2017.



REUTERS/STEPHANIE KEITH

“If I was president for the day I would roll back a lot of things Trump has put in place and get the country back on the right track. At the moment, it’s a mess. That guy is a mess.”

Niro says: “Yeah, yeah, well, at first when I was starting out I found the attention difficult to deal with. But now, I walk about New York freely. I get recognised from time to time, people say ‘hello’, I say ‘hello’ back. Largely it’s OK. It keeps you real.”

I suggest he has such a chameleon quality, taking on a totally different look for every role he plays, that maybe that’s why he’s not recognised so much. “Maybe, maybe.”

His most famous transformation was as the declining boxer Jake La Motta in the film *Raging Bull*, for which he gained 60 pounds to capture the character. “I felt his physical deterioration manifested what was going on with him mentally. I just felt I couldn’t really achieve that by using prosthetics. I worked hard on that film but I liked doing it. It was a labor of love.”

Of late, De Niro has starred in a number of rom-coms and hit comedies. To the younger generation he is Jack Byrnes, the obsessive and disapproving dad in *Meet the Parents* and *Meet the Fockers*, the latter being one of De Niro’s highest grossing films of all time. He explains why he enjoys comedy.

“Billy Crystal really got me into it. He had the script for *Analyze This* and asked me if I fancied doing it. We had a reading and I just thought it would be an interesting and fun thing to do. Now I like doing comedies because they are fun.”

The film and its follow-up *Analyze That*, about a mob leader (De Niro) who goes into analysis, were also huge box office successes.

He says he never gives up looking for great roles and is actually quite excited about something he has on the horizon although he won’t say what it is.

“There is one. I don’t want to talk about it because usually when I talk about these things, they don’t happen. It’s happened three or four times – you talk it away, then somehow they don’t materialise. I’m superstitious. This time I don’t want to say anything. There are so many things you have to do to get it done. I don’t want to jinx it. It’s not a role I’ve wanted, or I’ve been waiting to play. Once I discovered this character, a historical character, I knew this is something I wanted to commit to and get in to.”

Clearly, De Niro has no plans to retire any time soon. “I keep busy, especially as I get older. It’s important to do so. I tell you one thing though. I’m curious to see my obituary! I know the *New York Times* have all these things pre-written and then just add the up-to-date stuff when needed. I’d be very interested to read mine.”

Courtesy of Big Issue North / INSP.ngo

Untitled

by Mary Daniels

If I look into a mirror
(which I seldom do)
I see the same person
I have always been
Eyebrows the same angle
but now with grey hair
Eyes the same blue
with a more focused stare
Same broad nose, same small chin,
and a mouth I still hate
(plastic teeth within)
When I look in a mirror (which I seldom do)
I see the same vehicle of mind, spirit and soul
and the body?
The least possible part of a four-part whole.

A Tale From the Ramp

by Bronwyn “Banshee” Carver

I fly a sign
On a freeway ramp I stand
My dignity and pride
Tucked tight in my throat

My eyes greet drivers
Behind vehicle windows of various steel
Hardly a smile passes lips

Stopping sign pause look
Out at me faces of
Compassion, sadness, smugness, glances
Snuck sideways-quick! Look away

It’s the pity though
This I just cannot bear
They look at me but
They do not see me

A dollar passes window open
Our moment as human to human
Passes.