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Depp forges career on his terms, with a clear conscience

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Once known as a Hollywood bad boy, Johnny Depp has grown into more of a suburban dad.

These days, Depp can be found at his home in the south of France with singer-actress Vanessa Paradis and their two children, 6-year-old Lily Rose and 3-year-old Jack. So it seems fitting that the latest of Depp's long line of offbeat characters is Willy Wonka in the film version of Roald Dahl's novel "Charlie and Chocolate Factory."

Why play Willy, a role immortalized by Gene Wilder in the 1971 classic? Besides wanting to make his children happy, Depp was eager to collaborate for a fifth time with director Tim Burton, who gave him his breakout movie role in 1990's "Edward Scissorhands."

During an interview at a resort in the Bahamas near where he was filming two "Pirates of the Caribbean" sequels, Depp, 42, was in full Captain Jack Sparrow regalia -- bandanna, gold teeth, unkempt dreadlocks -- as he sat down to talk about movies, fame and family.

AP: You've said every movie you've done has been for your children, even before they were born. What do you mean by that?

Depp: In the late '80s when I was on that TV show "21 Jump Street," on the one hand it was a great thing. It was an incredible learning experience. It did a lot for me. I was making money for the first time in my life. That was not bad. There were a lot of very positive aspects to that situation. There were also negative aspects. At that time as a television actor, it was very, very difficult to break into films. ...

I was released (from "Jump Street") while I was doing "Edward Scissorhands," and I swore to myself that I would only work on these films or these projects that I would at least someday be able to say to my kids, 'That was all me. That's pure me. I didn't sell out because I don't want you to be mortified or embarrassed.' So that was what was in my head at the time, just thinking if I am going to do this, I am going to do it on my terms. If I am going to fail, I am going to fail on my own terms.

Why do you and Tim Burton work so well together?

It all stems from Tim's bravery. Early on for "Edward Scissorhands," we had this great meeting and somehow connected. I never expected that he would cast me in that role. I never expected that he would take the risk on me, which was a really big risk at that time. He just did and somehow there is this kind of mutual understanding of things, and a mutual fascination with people, human beings, weirdness, character flaws, human ties and all of that stuff.

Did you watch the original "Willy Wonka?" Did it inspire how you portrayed your character?

I watched the original when I was a kid. I ended up watching it with my kids, up until it was time for me to play the role of Willy Wonka. (Then), when my kids would put the DVD in, I would run to the next room because I didn't want to be influenced at all. I was really conscious about making sure I went to a different area than Gene Wilder. I loved his character. I loved Willy Wonka as a kid. He was the best thing in it for sure.

Gene Wilder has said "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" was only remade to make money and that Hollywood has no business messing with a classic film. What's your take on this?

Somebody sent me an article where Gene Wilder said, "Why would they remake Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory?" We didn't remake "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory," we remade (the book) "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." It's based on the same book they based theirs on.

Making a statement that they only made this film because of the money is a really odd statement to make from a guy who has been in the business as long as he has ... all movies were made because somebody somewhere wanted a return on their dollar that they spent. Ultimately it's a business. If you can dance around in there and avoid the sharp edges, and understand the game, but not play the game, then you're OK. Of course, it is a dirty business, but that doesn't mean that it's all about money for me. My intentions are as pure as they can be.

It seems you haven't done a straight-up Hollywood film. Would you ever?

There were a few things that came around the bend, that they tried to get me involved in. I couldn't bring myself to do it. The seed for me was tainted. There was no redemption in there. It was kind of a sellout for a (lot) of money. You would go in and do the work and take the money, but it wasn't anything that you would be particularly proud of. That, I couldn't do. I've attempted things in the past where people thought I tried to sell out. For example I did this film "Nick of Time" with (director) John Badham. I don't know if the film was particularly good. I did that film not for money, or not to sell out. I didn't think it was going to be successful at all. I didn't care. I did it because I wanted to work with Christopher Walken and I wanted to work with John Badham. The script was very much like an old-school Hitchcock film. All of those elements were intriguing to me so I took it.

If you hadn't left Hollywood for France, do you think you would have a different perspective about fame?

No, I don't think so because I come from where I come from. I come from Kentucky. My relatives, and my mom and dad, my sisters and my brother, our life in Kentucky is something that is very strong in my being. In south Florida, we were nomads for years and years, working various jobs for great lengths of time. Dropping out of high school, doing construction, printing T-shirts. Where I come from is what has made me me.

What's this about you buying a cannon to shoot Hunter S. Thompson's ashes out of?

Hunter meant a lot to me. He was another hero and someone that I got to know very well because I played him in "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." We got very, very close. He was a great pal, one of my best friends. We had talked a couple of times about his last wishes to be shot out of a cannon of his own design. ... All I'm doing is trying to make sure his last wish comes true. I just want to send my pal out the way he wants to go out.

You've been in a relationship for many years now ... so what's the secret?

Trust, have fun, respect for one another. Respect for one another's privacy. Respect for what the other person does in their chosen profession. Obviously a whole lot of love. Vanessa was like a bolt of lightning.

So she knocked you out?

Well, yeah, because there were no pretensions. She has her success on her own terms and when we met it wasn't like she was anything other than this sweet, cool, funny girl. I'd never experienced anything like that before. She gave me these two beautiful kids.

Is marriage an option? What does it mean to you?

Marriage can be whatever you define it as. For example, I don't feel like I need a piece of paper that says I own her and she owns me. I think signing a piece of paper doesn't mean anything in the eyes of God or in the eyes of people. The thing is, if you are together and you love each other and are good to each other, make babies and all that, for all intents and purposes you are married.

JOHNNY DEPP FILMS

"A Nightmare on Elm Street," 1984

"Private Resort," 1985

"Platoon," 1986

"Cry-Baby," 1990

"Edward Scissorhands," 1990

"Freddy's Dead: Final Nightmare," 1991

"Arizona Dream," 1993

"Benny & Joon," 1993

"What's Eating Gilbert Grape," 1993

"Ed Wood," 1994

"Don Juan DeMarco," 1995

"Dead Man," 1995

"Nick of Time," 1995

"Donnie Brasco," 1997

"The Brave," 1997

"Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," 1998

"The Ninth Gate," 1999

"The Astronaut's Wife," 1999

"Sleepy Hollow," 1999

"The Man Who Cried," 2000

"Before Night Falls," 2000

"Chocolat," 2000

"Blow," 2001

"From Hell," 2001

"Pirates of the Caribbean:

The Curse of the Black Pearl," 2003

"Once Upon a Time in Mexico," 2003

"Secret Window," 2004

"And They Lived Happily Ever After," 2004

"Finding Neverland," 2004

"The Libertine," 2004

"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," 2005

Source: Internet Movie Database

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