

Downey steels self to be "Iron Man"

BY SCOTT BOWLES
USA Today

LOS ANGELES — Robert Downey Jr. is hardly the obvious choice to play an iconic crime fighter.

After all, this is the guy who became a poster boy for Hollywood excess, serving a year in prison on drug-and-alcohol-related charges and checking in and out of rehab like it was the Four Seasons.

But it is exactly that past, says director/actor Jon Favreau ("Elf," "Friends"), that makes Downey the only choice to play playboy millionaire and recovering alcoholic Tony Stark, aka Iron Man, the comic-book superhero who hits multiplexes next year.

"We didn't want to just go with a safe choice," Favreau says from the set of the film, due in theaters May 2, 2008. "The best and worst moments of Robert's life have been in the public eye. He had to find an inner balance to overcome obstacles that went far beyond his career. That's Tony Stark. Robert brings a depth that goes beyond a comic-book character who is having trouble in high school, or can't get the girl. Plus, he's simply one of the best actors around."

For his part, Downey is trying to become an iron man. At 42, he lifts weights five days a week and practices martial arts to play the hard-bodied Stark, an arms manufacturer who uses his ultimate weapon, a jet-powered, missile-launching suit of armor, to fight evil.

More important, Downey says, he's been working on his emotional stamina since coming out of rehab in 2002. His supporting roles in "Good Night, and Good Luck" and "Zodiac" have earned critical raves.

And anchoring a big-budget summer film such as "Iron Man" could go a long way toward cementing that return.

"I'm more diligent than I used to be," Downey says. "I want to show Jon he was right to have faith in me"



KEVORK DJANSEZIAN / AP

Actor Robert Downey Jr. takes on "Iron Man" role.

Nor with many fans, says Rob Morley of *Comics2Film.com*.

"Fans need the heart of the comic to be in" the movie, he says. "Tony Stark had a substance-abuse problem. He was built up and torn down many times. I think when people heard Robert Downey was going to play the part, there was actually a big relief."

Downey knows a thing or two about comics, and he can get downright geeky when discussing them. He prefers Marvel to D.C. comics. He liked "Iron Man," "but mainly through his appearance with Avengers." His favorite early heroes, he says, were the relatively obscure Sgt. Rock and Sgt. Fury.

It wasn't until Downey matured that he came to appreciate the man in the iron suit.

"He struggles with his lifestyle, he struggles with the drinking," Downey says of Stark. "He faces the same issues a lot of people do."

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