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the conversation

An audience with Al Pacino at Hollywood's secret club

Forget the serious actor who played the Godfather. The star tells Helena de Bertodano why, at 75, he's ditched violence and crime for comedy

t is 10pm and I am standing at the door of a West Hollywood club so exclusive and secret it is called No Name: the burly bouncer regards me truculently, arms folded. "Al Pacino," I say. His countenance changes and the heavy wooden doors swing open. It may be a few decades since Pacino became the world's most famous mobster in his role as Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, but his name still works its magic.

Interviewing Pacino is an adventure – a breath of fresh air in the tightly controlled Hollywood publicity machine. This is the third time I have seen him today. First we met at his home, then he invited me to a screening, now this club. Inside, a band is playing and I squint through the dark booths, eventually locating Pacino on the VIP balcony, sitting with a few very glamorous friends, including a couple of directors. I am, of course, completely out of place but he couldn't be more welcoming. "I'm so happy that you've come," he says effusively.

It wasn't always this way. For years, Pacino had a reputation for being shy and remote. He refused almost all

interviews and kept as low a profile as possible not easy when you have eight Oscar nominations vour name (and one win for Scent of a Woman). He always turned down chat shows. except for David Letterman. But these days he seems more at ease with his celebrity and says he even enjoys talk ing about his life. "You find

out things about yourself." movie, Danny Collins, in which he stars as an ageing rocker reluctant to give up his hard-living ways. But when I mention the movie. Pacino seems almost surprised. "Is that the reason we're here? I really do forget these things."

Suffice it to say that the movie works on every level, eliciting both laughter and tears. "I thought the script had real heart to it," says Pacino, who puts in a stellar comic performance, perhaps surprising to those who know him primarily for his darker side. "It seems odd to me that people would not think I have a sense of humour — I'm still alive, man. How could you not have a sense of humour and be 108 years old?' He's actually 75.)

Pacino looks pensive for a moment, as if rying to work out how he might be seen as mything other than a comedian. "The Godfather role was not funny" he concedes. Then there was Serpico, Dog Day Afternoon, Scarface, Carlito's Way, Heat, Insomnia. I lose count of the number of times Pacino is either wielding a gun or being shot. Admittedly Scarface and Dog Day Afternoon are often funny, but the violence is what lingers. "It was really insanity - desperate," agrees Pacino, referring to the crime movies that define him.

Johnny Depp went so far as to call Pacino "certifiably insane" after they worked together on Donnie Brasco (1997), another crime movie. "As if he's not, right?" Pacino chortles. "I love Johnny so much."

He jokes that he has adopted Depp's love of gothic jewellery. "I just feel safe when I imitate Johnny." Pacino's wrists and fingers are so laden with silver skulls, black beads and heavy rings — and his hands so xpressive when he talks — that the

iangling and clanking is like a musical accompaniment to his raspy words.

Earlier that day we had sat on the porch outside his elegant house, rented from his neighbour Jackie Collins. Screened from the road by elaborate greenery, Pacino calls it his favorite spot. A chessboard sat on a table by the front door and Pacino pointed out the new rocking chair beside it: "My children gave it to me for my birthday."

But the image was deceptive: Pacino may be deep into his seventies but he is not in his dotage, rocking gently on the porch and looking back at

yesteryear. He has a schedule that would exhaust far younger actors. In the past few months he has shot three movies and has a David Mamet China Doll opening on Broadway autumn. which he hopes to bring to ondon. Γhere is also the onstant experimental work, such as Wilde Salomé, an obsessive be-

hind-the-scenes exploration of The reason for this interview is his latest | Oscar Wilde's Salomé, which Pacino directed and starred in. He's hoping to find cinemas in New York and London that can screen both Salomé and Wilde Salomé back to back for a month. "People can either come or not: you can't spoon-feed people this kind of stuff."

Wearing a long-sleeved black T-shirt speckled with holes, tracksuit pants and red-toed socks. Pacino had looked grizzled, his hair a wild mess. By the evening he has sharpened up, donning a brown jacket and his trademark black bandana. On both occasions, he drinks nothing but coffee, almost the only indulgence he allows himself these days. "I totally gave up smoking and drinking. Eating is next."

A tour bus noisily trundles by as he talks,

the guide pointing out the houses of the famous on this exclusive drive. "My son said he was going to get on one of those buses and when it went past our house, he would say, 'Hey, can you stop; I live here.' Pacino smiles: "He's a funny kid."

> Julie, 25, from his relationship with his acting coach Jan Tarrant. "I want to be present, I like being with them. They come 'I have had relationships break

was an issue' in and say, 'There's the mantelpiece, there's

up because marriage

He refers often to his 14-year-old twins,

Anton and Olivia, who divide their time

D'Angelo. He also has an older daughter.

the lamp, there's the couch, there's dad..." Pacino has never married, although he has said in the past that he once came very close. "Oh it was more than once, I have to tell you. I'm trying hard to understand how

I made some of these decisions. I've also

had relationships break up because

marriage was an issue.

His caution about marriage may stem

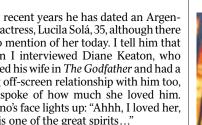
from his own family background. An only child, Pacino grew up in the Bronx with his mother and grandparents. He barely knew his father, who left when he was two, but vividly remembers him coming to a school play. "Afterwards we all went out to a restaurant and I was sitting there in the booth with my mother and father and I can't tell you how wonderful it felt. It's one

To his mother's dismay, Pacino left jobs to save for acting school before finding photograph of himself on stage, which he keeps above the fireplace in his living room. "I was doing a Strindberg play there

tine actress, Lucila Solá, 35, although there is no mention of her today. I tell him that when I interviewed Diane Keaton, who played his wife in *The Godfather* and had a long off-screen relationship with him too, Pacino's face lights up: "Ahhh, I loved her, she is one of the great spirits...

between him and their mother, Beverly of the great moments of my life."

> school early and worked countless odd a niche in Off-Off Broadway productions. Money was so tight that he was often homeless. He shows me a black and white



and I'd sleep on the sofa we used in the



need much when you're 21 - you can pull a lot of vitamins out of a slice of pizza. That play was a seminal moment for me. I knew then that I was always going to act." After studying at the Actors' Studio under Lee Strasberg, Francis Ford

Coppola cast Pacino as Michael Corleone in The Godfather—to the consternation of the studio heads. "I thought, 'What am I doing here?' Pacino says, "These people don't want me." But Coppola showed them the rushes of the restaurant scene in which Corleone shoots dead McCluskey and Sollozzo and Pacino's future was assured. I rewatch the scene the day before meeting Pacino: his eyes skitter uncontrollably as he steels himself to pull the trigger. It is mesmerising, chilling. Known as a consummate method actor, did he make himself believe he was about to shoot them? "I wasn't quite as mad as that but I was close to it."

Pacino does not mind that he will always be known for The Godfather. "Are you kidding? That was a great movie. It really changed [my life].

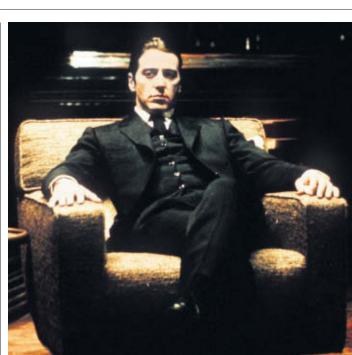
He talks and talks sometimes circuitously but with such warmth and dry humour that the time flies by. After a couple of hours, I feel I am imposing and suggest that we wrap up. "No, no," he insists: "We don't want to rush this. I don't have to go anywhere."

Despite rumours to the contrary, Pacino says he counts Robert De Niro among those closest to him. "Bob is a dear friend, although there is no doubt that we were made into rivals when we were very young. And Dustin [Hoffman] was in the same loop. He started the whole thing with The Graduate — before his lookalikes

In the past, Pacino says, he has even had people ask him for Hoffman's autograph. Now I just look like myself. I like the way your face tells the story of your life...I went to the Oscars once and everybody was asking me if I'd had a face-lift. I said, 'No! I had a night's sleep and I took a shower.' This town — you have one shower and they accuse you of having a face-lift."

Despite his joviality, he hints at demons inside, saying he finds it hard to get a good night's sleep. "The slings and arrows keep coming in there and waking you up. It's just awful, that's why people take narcotics or drink or whatever, just to ease it. But I don't do that." You look it in the eve. I say. "Big





As Michael Corleone in The Godfather: Part II, a life-changing role

The slings and arrows keep coming in there and waking you up. It's awful'

Film Show: Cannes Special

deal!" he booms. "I look it in the eye and it smacks me in the head and knocks me on the floor'

One day, Pacino says, he will start to slow down but not just yet. "I turn things down a lot of the time but then something like Danny Collins comes up and you cannot resist."

Besides, he says, acting is the only way he knows how to escape himself. "People keep asking me, 'How do I get out of the baggage of being Pacino?' That's my answer: I become someone else."

Danny Collins is released on Friday







Pacino in Danny Collins; left, with Johnny Depp in with Michelle Pfeiffer in Frankie and Johnny

