ONE LAST HIT

WORLD EXCLUSIVE | **IT TAKES A VERY SPECIAL MOVIE TO BRING TOGETHER ROBERT DE NIRO, MARTIN SCORSESE, JOE PESCI AND AL PACINO. IN FACT, IT TAKES A MOVIE LIKE THE IRISHMAN. IN THIS, THEIR FIRST AND ONLY INTERVIEW, THEY TELL THE FULL STORY OF BRINGING THE ULTIMATE CRIME EPIC TO THE SCREEN**

EXCLUSIVE PORTRAITS **BRIGITTE LACOMBE**

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Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, Joe Pesci and Al Pacino, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in New York on 2 April 2019.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON, ROBERT DE NIRO WAS STILL PISSED ABOUT THE PINK CADILLAC.

"I don't give a fuck whose name it's under," he growled. "Are you stupid or what? Did you hear what I said? Don't *buy* anything, don't *get* anything. Did you hear what I said? What's the matter with you?"

It was August 2015, and in a classified location in New York, the actor was recreating one of his many iconic sequences from Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas*. Specifically, the one in which his Jimmy 'The Gent' Conway dresses down a hapless cohort at a Christmas party. This time, though, there was no Caddy, no tinsel and no scene partner — De Niro was talking to air. It didn't look like much. But in this room, history was being made, and not just because it marked the first time the star was being directed by Scorsese in a movie scene since 1995's *Casino*.

"We made a little set that looked a little like the original film, and then Bob got going," remembers Scorsese, talking to *Empire* in his office near Central Park. "He did monologues and soliloquies and different expressions. 'Get rid of the fur coat! Get rid of the Cadillac!' Then he went through a series of computer processes. One had to do with tubes of light."

There was a very good reason for De Niro to step back into Conway's no-doubt stolen footwear. He and Scorsese had their hearts set on reuniting at last on a vastly ambitious new crime epic, but it would only be possible if this test was successful. The guy manning the light-tubes and prototype camera equipment was Pablo Helman of VFX house Industrial Light & Magic. He thought he'd discovered a way to make their dream come true. And months later he returned to show the results.

De Niro, Scorsese, editor Thelma Schoonmaker and producers Jane Rosenthal and Emma Tillinger Koskoff filed into Scorsese's ›



Martin Scorsese directs Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci.

personal screening room. There they sat and watched two reels: the original 1990 *GoodFellas* scene, followed by the new version, but with De Niro magically rewound, via cutting-edge digital trickery, to the age of 46. "It was spectacular," says Rosenthal. "I mean, when you stared at it you could start seeing a little lip-line here and there. But it really was hard to tell."

Finally, the lights came up. There was a moment of silence, but also a palpable buzz of excitement. "We all decided," says Scorsese, "'This is going to work.'"

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THE IRISHMAN IS A STORY THAT SPANS many years; it's a saga of power and money, friendship and loyalty, bonds dissolving and long, dark nights of the soul. So, it is fair to say, is the story of the making of *The Irishman*. No other movie this year has had such a dramatic trek to the screen, or so many daunting obstacles placed in its way.

For starters, the long-awaited De Niro/Scorsese reunion wasn't supposed to be *The Irishman* at all. De Niro had been watching with a touch of envy as his old friend made film after film with Leonardo DiCaprio. "I work with a guy named Lewis Friedman," De Niro says, "and Lewis started turning it into a running thing — how many Leo does as opposed to me." (For the record, the score is now De Niro — 9, DiCaprio — 6, with both set to appear in Scorsese's next, *Killers Of The Flower Moon*.)

The reality was, he and Scorsese had been struggling to find something that fired both of them up. "We wanted to go through a journey again," says Scorsese. "He told me in the early 2000s, 'I only really feel comfortable doing something like we used to do.' Like *GoodFellas* or *Casino*. But I just didn't know what story would make me want to live in that milieu again. I knew it would have to be from an older person's point of view."

In 2006, they thought they'd found it. *The Winter Of Frankie Machine* would be a thriller based on a new Don Winslow novel, in which De Niro would play Frank Machianno, a retired West Coast assassin trying to find out which of his enemies wants him dead. Scorsese raided his film library, pulling out French classics he wanted to draw from: Jacques Becker's *Grisbi*, Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Deuxième Souffle* and *Le Doulos*. He told De Niro to pay close attention to the late-career performances of Jean Gabin. "I always felt that Bob, looking at Sharon Stone as she's throwing the chips in the air in *Casino*, reminded me of an older Gabin," he says.

Frankie Machine was on the cusp of getting a greenlight from Paramount. But then, for research, De Niro picked up a different book about criminals, Charles Brandt's *I Heard You Paint Houses*, and it had a strong effect. "I read it and said, 'Jesus. To me this story's kind of great,'" De Niro remembers, gesturing at the book, four copies of which sit on a shelf in his Tribeca office, not far from such other prized possessions as a framed dagger from Kuwait and a portrait ›

THE GODFATHER — PART II

ROBERT DE NIRO OPENS UP ON BEING MARTY'S MAIN MAN FOR ALMOST HALF A CENTURY

You have Irish roots yourself, don't you?
Yeah. My mother's Dutch, French, German. And my father was Irish and Italian. I hitchhiked around Ireland when I was about 18,19. I've been trying for years to find relatives there. For some reason it's not easy. Italy was easier.

What did you make of Martin Scorsese when you met him for the first time?
Well, Marty and I used to see each other when we were teenagers in Little Italy. We hung out with different groups of kids. And there was a kid who would go between our groups — he was in the productions Marty was directing and would tell me what Marty was doing. I was interested in him because I wanted to be an actor; that's what I was telling my friends. Then our mutual friend, Jay Cocks, set up a Christmas dinner. Marty and I started talking about *Mean Streets* there. He said, "What do you wanna do in it?" Harvey Keitel was playing the lead and I was trying to decide which part I would play. I kept going back and forth to Marty: "What should I do? This or that?" He sort of just let me figure it out. [He ended up choosing the role of livewire Johnny Boy.]

That was the first of your New York movies with him. Why did you decide to stay rather than move to Hollywood?
With *Mean Streets* we actually shot two weeks in New York and three in LA. And I was living in LA a little bit. My son was born there. But I just prefer New York. You walk around — you can be anonymous if you want. It's just a different feeling.

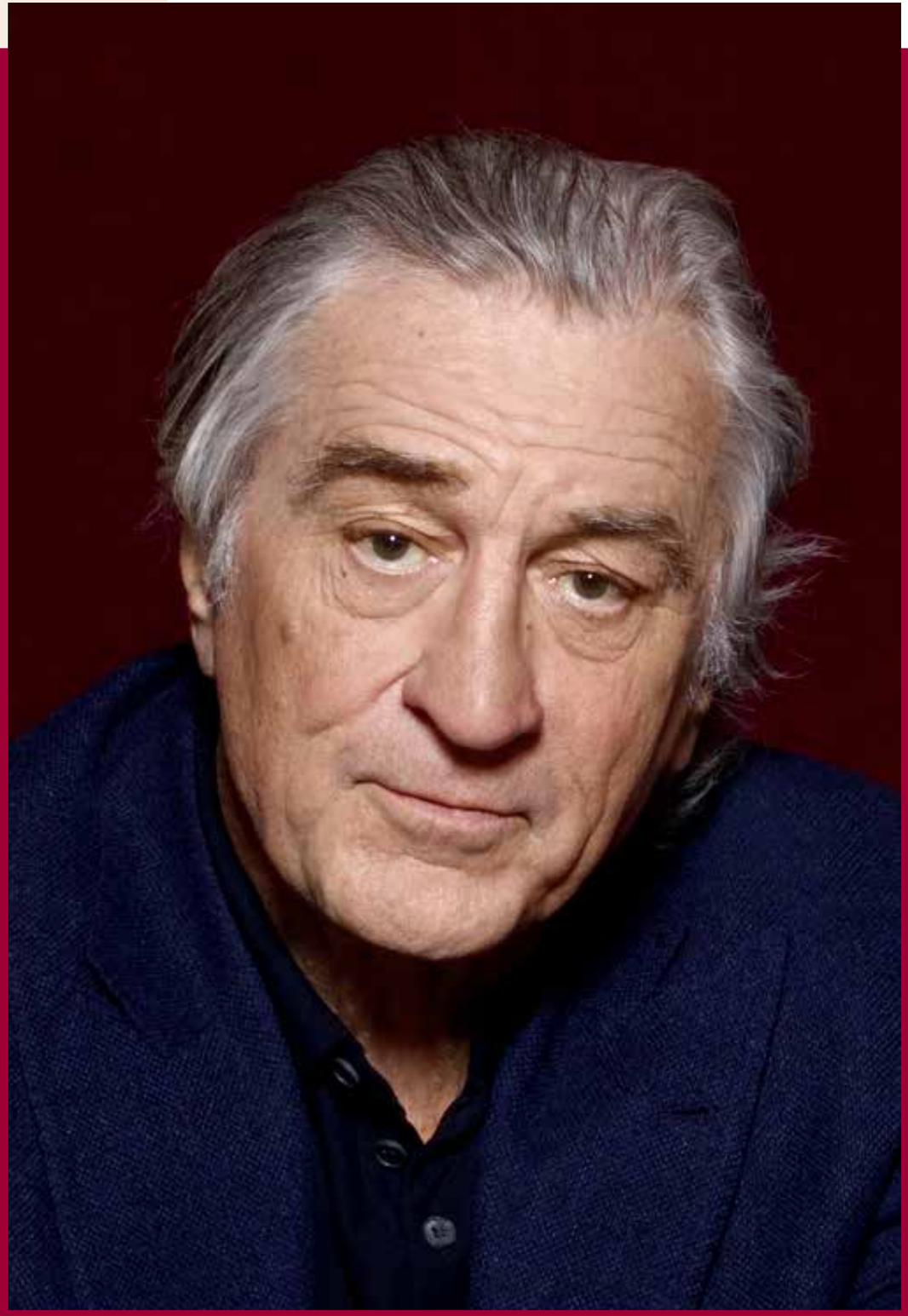
The two of you made the city look terrifying in *Taxi Driver*.
Well, everybody loved what Paul [Schrader] had done with the script. I'm from New York, and even I felt alienated as a young man here. He was not from New York, Travis. And anybody can identify.

Do you have a favourite of your Scorsese collaborations?
They've all been special in their own way. Every one was different. *Taxi Driver* was a lot of nights. *Raging Bull* [below] was just a long shoot — I believe it was nine weeks of fighting stuff in LA, then we took a hiatus and shot for another ten weeks in New York, when I'd gained the weight. It was all hard work. I mean, even eating is no joy after the first 15lb.

When you did your famous eating tour around Europe, were you alone?
Yeah, I was on my own. I was just hanging out, eating as much as I could. Travelling. You think it's gonna be fun, but it's just work. 'Cause it's unnatural. So I was seeing a doctor and monitoring it and everything.

Scorsese took convincing to do *Raging Bull*. He's not a sports enthusiast, is he?
No, he didn't care about that. This guy Pete Savage gave me the book [Jake LaMotta's memoir, *Raging Bull: My Story*]. I was doing *1900* with Bertolucci at the time. I read it and called Marty from Italy.





I said, "This is interesting. It's not very good, but it's got heart." And the idea of actually gaining the weight interested me. The writer, Mardik Martin, and I did a lot of research; we went to visit Jake's ex-wife, Vikki. And then the script got stalled, so Marty brought in Schrader, who gave us a structure. We went somewhere in the Caribbean and worked on it. And that's how it started off.

As a director he seems to relish doing things nobody's done before...
I always say this. Marty was always open to trying something. "You wanna try this? Let's try." My first wife [Diahnne Abbott] was in *New York, New York* — I forget the song she sang in it — and she asked if she could read for him. She did, and he put her in the movie. I mean, he's not afraid to do things even though they may not be obvious. It's good, because it gives you a sense that you can do no wrong. There's a freedom, yet there's a guide there.

Harvey Keitel is also in *The Irishman*. Is it true the two of you were mistaken for terrorists in Rome in the '80s?
Yeah. We were on the road for *Raging Bull* and Harvey came along. We were in the Hassler Hotel, on a long street just above the Spanish Steps, and we were trying to leave but the paparazzi were all waiting outside. We said, "How can we get out of here?" The hotel guy said, "Well, there was a convent in the back once and Frank Sinatra went out that way, but that's too hard to do now. You can go out a side door over there, but you have to ask the manager." So I said, "Who's the manager?" He said, "I'm the manager." It didn't matter — we went out the side door and were still followed by the paparazzi. And then the police thought we were the Red Brigades, so they had us up against a wall, and took us to the police station. The cops said, "Don't worry, we have the cameras." Yeah, right. The pictures were all over the papers and everything the next day. *[Laughs]* It was silly.

of his father, Robert De Niro Sr. "It was fascinating and simple. I liked the character: how he was introduced to this world and slowly saw how it worked."

The actor scribbled the date in his inside cover, as is his wont, then hustled over to Scorsese's office to recount the tale. "When he sat down to tell me this story, he reacted with a great deal of emotion," says the director. "Having taken a cue on *Raging Bull* that way, I knew that when Bob says, 'There's a movie in there,' you gotta make the movie."

Just like *Raging Bull*, the new film — quickly retitled *The Irishman* — is about a real-life, brutal, complex figure: Frank Sheeran, the eponymous Irishman, who goes from truck driver to Mafia enforcer, completing blood-soaked tasks for labour leader Jimmy Hoffa and Pennsylvania crime boss Russell Bufalino. Sheeran becomes close friends with each, wearing a gold ring given to him by Bufalino and a gold watch from Hoffa. But against an epic sprawl of American history — the Bay Of Pigs, JFK's assassination, the rise of the Teamsters — the three men draw closer to a violent endgame, and Hoffa's notorious disappearance in July 1975. De Niro loved the relationships between the three men, the shocking ending, and the little bits of underworld arcana: "I heard you paint houses" is code someone would use over the phone while hiring Sheeran to kill people; to "go to Australia" is to be wiped off the face of the Earth.

Suddenly, Frankie the hitman was out, and Frank the hitman was in. A screenplay was written by Steven Zaillian in 2007. And in a lightning flash of inspiration, De Niro and Scorsese realised who could play the two key supporting roles: Al Pacino as Hoffa and Joe Pesci as Bufalino. *The Irishman* was shaping up to be celluloid nirvana, bringing together a host of screen gods. It would be the ultimate gangster movie. 'BestFellas', if you will.

Yet, unbelievably, the greenlight remained resolutely red. "We couldn't get it going," says Scorsese. "Bob can get pictures made. I can get pictures made. But not that picture. At that time there wasn't too much of a demand for that kind of film, particularly with the amount of money it would cost."

The tricky thing was that, like the book, the script whizzed back and forth over a period of over 50 years, requiring characters to age many decades on screen. "The possibility of them playing younger in make-up, you could do. But as time went on, we lost that opportunity," Scorsese notes. "There was talk about shooting it in such a way that the flashbacks would obscure the characters." At one particularly desperate juncture, somebody suggested casting three other actors to play the younger De Niro, Pacino and Pesci.

The conversations went on and on. Until, in January 2013, in an attempt to hook prospective investors, a taped reading of the script was set up in De Niro's office. One by one the icons arrived: De Niro himself, Pacino, Scorsese, Harvey Keitel, even the lesser-spotted Pesci, seen in only two films since 1998's *Lethal Weapon 4*.











Left, top to bottom: Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino) and Frank Sheeran (De Niro) feel the heat; Sheeran and goons go to war on New York's taxi business; Sheeran and Russell Bufalino (Pesci) talk shop; Filming a Hoffa trial. **Above:** The charismatic Hoffa addresses an audience of Teamsters.

"Total goosebumps. I just sat and was awed for the whole read-through and several days after." Even Pacino got the jitters, asking Bobby Cannavale, who was starring in *Glengarry Glen Ross* on Broadway with him and had just signed up to play 'Skinny Razor' DiTullio in *The Irishman*, to accompany him to Tribeca. "Al said, 'Can we ride down together? I'm a little nervous. I've never worked with Marty before,'" says Cannavale. "But he just destroyed in that reading."

As Pacino remembers now, "It was quite apparent to everyone that there was a real film there. The atmosphere in that room was the opposite of toxic: it was full of life." De Niro himself was just as pleased. "It read better than when you read it on the page," he says, looking around the room where it happened. "And when I watched it after, I was pleasantly surprised."

> "I SAID TO JOE, 'WE GOTTA DO THIS. WHO KNOWS IF THERE'LL BE ANYTHING AFTER?'"
>
> ROBERT DE NIRO

But even this gambit failed to drum up the finances they needed. "We got everyone in the room," says Jane Rosenthal. "But afterwards I believed that tape was all we'd ever have of this project."

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JOE PESCI HAS A RULE, WHICH HE SHARED with *Empire* back in 2012: "Talking about something you want to do is like stepping on your dick."

When it came to *The Irishman*, Pesci's pal decided to break that rule. "I'm very careful about announcing a film," says De Niro. "I used to be superstitious — I wouldn't say anything, 'cause you'll talk it away or whatever. But I felt with this one, it was different. We didn't go out making speeches, but we kept putting it out there that we intended to make it."

De Niro's determination to get *The Irishman* on screen never waned. As Scorsese went off to shoot *Hugo* and *The Wolf Of Wall Street* and ›

Silence, the actor kept hoping. When Pablo Helman offered his miraculous de-aging tech to Scorsese midway through the *Silence* shoot in Taiwan, things looked bright. When Mexican financier Fábrica de Cine withdrew in 2016, citing the rising budget, resulting in Paramount dropping out too, things looked bleak. Then Netflix arrived on the scene, offering to pick up the entire tab, with a limited theatrical release before the film hit the streaming service. Suddenly, *The Irishman* was packing heat.

On 18 September 2017, the shoot finally began, with a De Niro/Pesci scene. It's been widely reported that Pesci, who's been busy golfing and breeding racehorses (one of whom he named "Pesci"), turned down the role 50 times. The claim is not exactly denied by Scorsese. "In his trailer, he turned it down! As he came out of the trailer — eventually — he turned it down! While we were shooting a scene, he turned it down!" the director cackles. "That's part of the performance. He has to feel right. He could not do anything that would be false." It was De Niro, as Pesci's best friend, who was responsible for coaxing him back to the screen. "Yeah," De Niro grins wryly when asked if it was a tough task. "He doesn't want to act too much or anything. But I said, 'We gotta do this together. Who knows if there'll be anything else after this?'"

Pesci may be playing another mobster (one who, according to legend, had final script approval over *The Godfather*), but his performance as Bufalino is a long way from the pen-stabbing, vice-wielding, waiter-shooting firecrackers of *GoodFellas* and *Casino*. "Marty told me that it's not going to be like organised-crime figures I've played in the past," says the man himself. "My character always remains in control. He has a quiet power."

A couple of months into the shoot, Pacino arrived. "I came onto this movie like jumping on a moving train," he tells *Empire*. "I even said it, 'WHOA! I'M COMING! HOLD ON THERE!' But it immediately felt like territory where I belong. It's set in a world that Marty of course excels in. But he's looking at it here through a different lens. It's a different energy. And there's something very moving about these relationships and what happens."

At times, the presence of the three acting titans made their supporting players feel like Spider at a *GoodFellas* card game. "My first scene I'm with De Niro and Pesci and I broke out in hives," admits Ray Romano, aka lawyer Bill Bufalino. "I really was a wreck. After every take, I would go over and Bobby Cannavale would hold me, because I was so nervous."

Stephen Graham, who plays hot-tempered capo Anthony 'Tony Pro' Provenzano, had an even rougher time. "*Fuck*, man," he says. "I phoned my missus from the Winnebago and said, 'I'm shitting myself! I've been in the toilet about seven times. I'm spraying deodorant everywhere, but my guts are all over the place.' She told me to pull myself together, that I'd earned the right ›

THE GODFATHER — PART III

AL PACINO REFLECTS ON HIS LUSTROUS CAREER AND LOUSY SINGING VOICE

Why did it take so long for you and Scorsese to team up?
We both asked each other this question! You know, I had a relationship with [Sidney] Lumet and Marty had his relationship with Bob. I met Marty when I was a youngster, in around '70 or '71, and from time to time we'd run into each other and always got along. Throughout the years we had gotten very close to doing something together. We worked on a film years ago, about a painter [*Modigliani*], but it didn't turn out.

In 2010, it was reported that he wanted you to play Frank Sinatra in a biopic, with De Niro as Dean Martin.
No, I've seen that but I was never approached. All I can tell you is it's really tough playing a singer if you're not a singer! I was playing one [in 2015's *Danny Collins*] and I thought I was actually singing pretty good. But then I heard a real singer do the same song and I thought, "Oh my God, I'm nowhere near it." I always thought I had a relatively decent voice, because I started in musicals and stuff. But they were in junior high school. Sinatra? [*Laughs*] I could play Joey Bishop, maybe.

What's your go-to Scorsese movie?
The one that engages my mind the most is *Raging Bull*. Just recently it was on TV a lot and I ended up seeing it four or five times. It's just a piece of art. That's all. *Casino*, I love too. The energy of that film — you could watch it with the volume off if you want to.

Was the experience of being in one everything you'd hoped for?
Marty's the master. He instills comfort. Just the way he is and the way he talks and his knowledge of things, he makes you feel at home. And he allows for a certain spontaneity, because in a lot of ways that's what film is. When I did my movie *Dog Day Afternoon* — I don't know if you ever heard of that one — just before I went out to talk to the crowd, the great AD Burtt Harris said to me, "Attica. Tell the crowd about Attica." Because it had just happened, when they killed those prisoners. It was all over the news. So I went out there and just started yelling, "ATTICA!" And the whole thing exploded. [*Laughs*] You know, you don't get those things in rehearsal. But on the set, right there when you're in the moment, there's nothing like it.

Hoffa is a famous historical figure. Did that make prepping straightforward?
The best, of course, is when you have the person in front of you, like I did when I played Frank Serpico. But in today's world, everybody's photographing everybody — they got footage of me next year walking around! So I had a lot of footage of Hoffa and said, "I'll look at this stuff, inundate myself with it and then hopefully some of it will reach my imagination." There's a part of an actor's work where you start to think of yourself as a writer. You're writing this character that you're gonna play inside yourself. So you and the character get together within yourself and hang out. I'm just coming up with that now. I hope it doesn't startle too many people!





It's interesting.
I'm somewhat impressed with it! I never thought of this. Thisis a new thing. After you hang up, I'm gonna write it down in my diary.

It's exciting to be present at its genesis. You've said that *The Irishman* reminded you of the way films were made in the '70s.
I'll tell you one thing: we weren't worried about getting it done in three weeks. There was room to feel as though you were making a big film, because you weren't being rushed all the time. There was a kind of largesse. There's one moment I'll never forget. It was *The Godfather* [below left], and I was new to movies. We were doing a scene in the cemetery, 'cause we were burying the Don. And after the day was over, about 6pm, Coppola was sitting on a gravestone and he was weeping. I went over to him and said, "Francis, what's wrong?" He looked up and said, "They don't want to give me one more set-up." I was amazed at it. I thought, "Hey, this may be a very good film." [*Laughs*]

You could have made *Apocalypse Now* with him a few years on. Why did you turn it down?
I just wasn't ready to do it. I was at a certain point in my life and not in the right space for going away and doing a movie like that. I remember Coppola saying at the time, "Pacino won't do a film unless you do it at his house." I said, "Yes, come over to my place. We can do *Apocalypse Now* here. Look, we'll get *somewhere* with it."

You could have shot it in the garden.
Yeah. Call it avant-garde!

to be there, that I should just enjoy myself. And she was right, as most missuses are."

For Scorsese, who drinks just one cup of coffee a day, it was a testing shoot — at 108 days not quite as lengthy as the one for *Hugo*, but packed with 117 locations, 319 scenes, complex camera moves and one particularly arduous -10°C night spent pushing taxi cabs into New York Harbor. He was determined, though, to make it a special experience, summoning a gaggle of his and De Niro's old friends to fill bit-parts.

"We gathered whatever troops were left, you know, and it was very comfortable," Scorsese says. "Butchy the Hat is still around, thankfully; [Frank] Aquilino, he's in it. Joe Bono. So there was an incredible sense of old family ties coming together. Just the atmosphere was that way. Particularly in the bigger scenes where people would just come on the set. I wouldn't know what they were doing or who they were: 'Are they in the film? Put a wide tie on 'em — it's 1977!'"

Watching *The Irishman*, you'll be able to spot familiar, if now weathered, faces from the likes of *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas*. "I did a restaurant scene and all the guys I was eating steak with were from Marty's neighbourhood," chuckles Cannavale. "They'd be sitting there telling crazy stories about why Bob was called Bobby Milk, or what Johnny D's cousin was up to. All these names come up, and it's a movie unto itself."

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IT MAY BE A THROWBACK TO THE GOLDEN age of auteur-driven moviemaking — no pre-existing IP, no merchandise, no superheroes. But with its groundbreakingly extensive "youthification" (Scorsese's preferred term), the film is also a broad stride into the future. Not to mention a massive gamble — while there's no official figure, *Variety* in late July reported the budget as being $160 million. *The Irishman*'s 76-year-old director, though, seems unfazed by the fact he's leading a technological revolution. "I really had no choice," he shrugs. "The risk was there, and that was it. We just tried to make the film. After sitting on the couch for ten years — arguing about it, pushing the script this way and that way, people coming and going, Al checking in every now and again, Joe saying, 'I don't want to do it!' — we finally had a way."

There were no bodysuits or ping-pong balls on set: De Niro, Pacino and Pesci only had to put up with clips on their clothes and faint grey dots on their faces to guide the VFX wizards. A posture coach was on hand to offer tips on how to comport themselves like much younger men. "This guy, Gary, he showed me how I should go down the stairs," says the 76-year-old De Niro, who at one point plays Sheeran at 24 (the age at which the actor was playing his first lead role, a draft-dodger, in Brian De Palma's *Greetings*). "I kind of hopped. Let myself fall down the stairs as opposed to carefully stepping down them. What's the word? Sprightlier."

Pacino had a tougher task: to run *up* a set of stairs. "Hoffa was a very energetic fella!" booms the 79-year-old, who will be de-aged in every single scene he's in. "Somehow I managed to do it with real alacrity. And after the take I of course had to be rushed off to the hospital. Just joking. Just joking. But during the take, it was powerful. I did think, 'How did I manage to do that?'"

The many flashback scenes, captured by a bulky ILM camera rig nicknamed the 'three-headed monster', have been meticulously fine-tuned. And in July, with approximately 200 shots left to complete, the film was finally taking form. "I keep saying it's magical, because it is," says Jane Rosenthal. "There's a moment early in the movie where they're on the side of the road, these older guys. They turn around and say, 'Look where we are,' and you are instantly seeing them in their younger years together. The first time I saw it I was an emotional wreck. It had that feeling of, 'My God, we finally got to this point.'"

The Irishman has become an event. A production freighted with drama and technological significance, as pumped-up as a blockbuster. But for De Niro and Scorsese, it's just a good story: the tale of a man reflecting on his life, his memories sometimes warm, sometimes thick with remorse. And despite the colossal canvas, it's as personal as can be.

"The brashness of the cowboys, a Tommy DeVito in *GoodFellas*, running out shooting guns in the air, we've seen it," says Scorsese. "We've done it ourselves, meaning in the world and in cinema. We were the wild ones, in a way. But now we've reached a point where we can look back. Not even look back, but look inside. Because we have no more time."

De Niro, the guy who cracked open a paperback in 2006 and got this whole train rolling, puts it more simply. "Marty and I thought this is what we should be doing."

So they did it. No matter what it took.

> "WE WERE THE WILD ONES. NOW WE'VE REACHED A POINT WHERE WE CAN LOOK BACK."
>
> MARTIN SCORSESE

***THE IRISHMAN* IS IN CINEMAS AND ON NETFLIX LATER THIS YEAR**











Left, top to bottom: Conflicted lawyer Bill Bufalino (Ray Romano) talks to Hoffa pal Chuckie O'Brien (Jesse Plemons); 'Tony Pro' (Stephen Graham) is a volatile customer; More business, more bars; An aged Sheeran reminisces. **Above:** Sheeran, Hoffa and cohorts hear of JFK's assassination.