

Better reviews than Jack Nicholson, a shiny Oscar nom, a new action vehicle in Shooter... Retired hellraiser Mark Wahlberg has got it good

WORDS NICK DE SEMLYEN PORTRAIT SAM JONES

TOUGH AT THE TOP

ON THE STREETS OF BOSTON

in the early '80s, Mark Wahlberg was such a tearaway that it wasn't long before he became on first-name terms with many of the city's law-enforcement officials. The youngest of nine siblings, the boy Wahlberg was constantly being picked up for petty infractions and hauled into the local cop-shop for the night. At the time, it seemed a sign he was destined for a shaky, short-lived life of crime. Little did he know that his hours of pressing fingers onto ink-pads and exchanging caustic put-downs with the Boston PD would lead to the most glorious moment of his professional life to date: his Oscar nomination for *The Departed*.

"I was locked up by the kind of guy I play in that movie so many times, you know," he says. "In Boston then I felt there wasn't so much difference between the cops and the crooks. A lot of the friends I got in trouble with have since become police officers. So it was nice to put that real-life experience to good use. It was great to call my parents — who I called 20 or 30 times to say I was staring at a set of bars — to tell them I'd been nominated for an Oscar. For once their tears were tears of joy."

For Wahlberg — the ex-underpants model, retired Funky Buncher and creator of a 1993 abs-toning video called *The Marky Mark Workout* — to get *The Departed*'s sole acting Oscar nod, over Jack Nicholson, Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon, is further proof of how far he's come since his misspent youth. Indeed, when *Empire* speaks with him, he's about to get ready to go schmooze the Academy at an Oscar lunch.

And he did it on his own terms, too; his performance as the flippant, foul-mouthed Sergeant Dignam was the most outrageously fun of the year, firing off acid insults at the Hollywood elite with a smirk on his face. "Marty (*Scorsese*) just fired me up and let me go," Wahlberg chuckles. "I mean, I know those guys and like those guys, but being in a position where I can bust their balls all day long and they can't do anything about it, it was pretty enjoyable for me."

The actor, who's friendly, soft-spoken and displays a dry, wry sense of humour throughout our conversation, recalls one scene with DiCaprio — a close friend of Wahlberg, dating back to *The Basketball Diaries* — where the Titanic star became "genuinely livid" after the baiting turned personal. "Marty knew he was getting mad and kept whispering at me to turn it up. All the way through I ad-libbed tons of lines. The stuff, you know, about the priest and the 12 year-old boy living on a beach in Thailand — that was mine!"

Dignam was Wahlberg as we hadn't seen him for a while, perhaps not since his breakthrough, *Boogie Nights*. After casting him as a >>

succession of bland heroes in big-money pictures, it was about time Hollywood learned again to channel his rough-hewn, gritty charisma.

“Yeah, I’ve had some bumps in the road,” he sighs. “The Truth About Charlie wasn’t a highlight. And Planet Of The Apes, though an amazing experience, didn’t turn out the way I’d hoped. It wasn’t a reality-based thing; I couldn’t dive in there the way I could with Dignam or Tommy Corn on I ♥ Huckabees.” He pauses. “No, my whole thing is, I used to make sacrifices as far as the character was concerned just to work with a great director. Now I’ve paid my dues. I want roles that are right for me.”

AS DEVOTEES OF

Entourage, the hit TV show based on Wahlberg’s early career, will know, the rapper-turned-actor was once a rowdy regular on the LA party circuit. He’d enter a club in an Armani suit and instantly be surrounded by young, beautiful women grabbing for his crotch. He soaked it all up; there were regular reports of A-list actresses slinking into his hotel rooms to intimately introduce themselves. And he was a fighter as well as a lover, getting into drunken brawls and famously tangling with Madonna’s ‘people’.

Those hotheaded days are now, he assures us, behind him. Wahlberg lives away from the lights, sequestered away in a mansion (complete with screening room, gym and basketball court) in the Hills. Last year he had his second baby with girlfriend Rhea Durham, and he maintains, with a relaxed grin, that he’s never been happier.

“Both professionally and personally, this is an amazing time. I feel comfortable in front



“I SPENT 20 YEARS DOING THE WRONG THING.”

of the camera, and away from it I feel very fortunate that for the most part we’re left alone — the paparazzi don’t bother me.”

Wahlberg admits the movie industry has tamed his fiery spirit. “I spent 20 years doing the wrong thing. That wasn’t cool. All it did was get me in trouble. I’ve changed drastically, thank God.” The transformation is evident in his choice of leisure activities, too. Rather than boozing, womanising and frequenting tattoo parlours (Wahlberg has four, including one of Bob Marley on his left shoulder), he’s now more likely to be spotted buffing up one of his four cars: “I was obsessed with English craftsmanship for a while, so I bought a couple of Bentleys.” He’s also a key figure in the Hollywood golfing circle — Joe Pesci’s a regular opponent and he’s knocked balls with Jack Nicholson, so to speak.

Post-Oscar nod, all kinds of offers and paycheques are being waved in front of his nose. But Wahlberg, characteristically, isn’t playing ball. In fact, he’s threatening to drop out of the game altogether. “I’ve had a lot of time to pursue my dreams, and now my children are a much bigger priority. But they’re still really young so I’ve got a couple more years to focus

on me and what I want to do.”

Which is what, exactly?

“Well, I’d love to take a shot at directing. I’d love to play a boxer. And I’d love to play English. I mean, I don’t have to play Tony Blair or anything but I’d like to take a crack at the accent — maybe a period piece or something.”

BEFORE ANY OF THAT

happens, we’ll see him as a sniper in Shooter, a tough new action-thriller from Training Day director Antoine Fuqua. With the same dedication to the process that saw him get smothered with swordfish gore in the run-up to The Perfect Storm, Wahlberg spent weeks wielding automatic weapons and peppering targets from 2,000 yards. “I can win stuffed animals at the funfair now, for sure,” he winks.

It’s his first run at a big action vehicle since The Italian Job, but Wahlberg says he was drawn in by the script’s edge. “I’m an expert Marine marksman who gets set up and shot a couple of times. I gotta figure out what’s happened, fix the problem and kill some bad guys. It’s intricate and extremely smart.”

Then he’ll be pulling on that holster again for the Departed sequel, which will see Wahlberg take centre-stage. “Where do I see Dignam going? Crazy. The fun part of it is they would have me basically looking for myself, because I’m investigating the murder of Leo’s, Matt’s and Martin Sheen’s characters. They’re talking about bringing in De Niro as a senator, the corruption reaching up the political chain. And if that’s a success, they’re gonna do a prequel. Bring everyone back, make it a trilogy...”

It couldn’t be going much better for the man who once paced sullenly around a Boston jail-cell. Except for one small thing: a recurring nightmare that just won’t go away.

“I have this bad dream all the time about being chased by cops and put in prison. It’s getting a little easier — I try to focus on good things when my head hits the pillow, not dwell on the darkness. But I guess the nightmares are a good reminder of where I was... and where I don’t ever want to go again.”

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» Shooter is out on March 23 and will be reviewed in the next issue.

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