

CAGE UNLEASHED

BACK ON GLORIOUSLY UNHINGED FORM IN DOG EAT DOG, NICOLAS CAGE TAKES US ON A WALK THROUGH HIS WILD SIDE



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It's a *Dog Eat Dog* world: ex-cons Troy (Nicolas Cage) and Mad Dog (Willem Dafoe).



There's Method to his madness: Cage as Peter Leow in 1997's *Vampire's Kiss*.



Getting into the swing of things in *Birdy* (1984) as Vietnam vet Al Columbati.



Things get explosive for Cage as Johnny Blaze in 2011's *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*.

a place populated by larger-than-life characters, he has been for some time the largest-living. And, as his new film *Dog Eat Dog* amply demonstrates, the extremes of his life are still reflected by the trajectory of his career. After several decades at the top, Cage remains a fascinating, unpredictable force of nature.

Just try telling that to him, though. "My life is regular," insists the man who once paid \$276,000 for a Mongolian dinosaur skull. "I have exciting moments. But there are far more days that are mundane and gentle and quiet."

One evening in 1982, a man blew smoke in Cage's face. The incident was to change the course of his life forever. "I was selling popcorn and candy at the concession stand at the Fairfax Theater," remembers the star. "It was the only job I ever had that wasn't acting, and it was a good job. But one day my boss came up and said, 'Someone's smoking in the theatre. Tell them to put it out.'"

Just 18 at the time and called Nicolas Coppola — his famous relations include Francis Ford (uncle) and Sofia (cousin) — he had tried his hand at the family business, appearing in a few scenes in *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*. But when most of his already-brief performance as 'Brad's Bud' was cut, he'd retreated to the Fairfax, where he could dwell in the darkness, watching movies for free. Then a cigarette ruined it all. "I walked up to the customer, a guy with a moustache who was there with some girl, and said, 'Sir, you gotta extinguish that,'" says Cage. "He took one big puff and unloaded it at me. I just looked at him, like, 'Are you kidding me?' And then I realised, 'I've had enough of this. I can't do it.' So I quit."

It was a moment that galvanised him. He changed his surname to that of his beloved

Marvel superhero Luke Cage, then threw himself back into acting with unbridled ferocity. Uncle Francis gave him a role in *Rumble Fish*, but before long he was winning roles on his own, his reputation as an ultra-zealous thespian spreading fast. For 1984's *Birdy* he had four baby teeth pulled out, then spent five weeks with his head wrapped in bandages, even away from the set. He was almost fired from *Peggy Sue Got Married* when he insisted on speaking like the claymation horse from *The Gumby Show*. And in 1988 his Method madness reached its apotheosis when he gobbled down a live cockroach for *Vampire's Kiss*. "There was no muscle in my body that wanted to eat that," he says. "But I knew the impact it would have: the shock, the gasps. It got the reaction you'd get from spending \$50 million tearing apart the White House, but it was just a man eating a bug."

Despite all that, it wasn't until David Lynch's *Wild At Heart* (1990) that Cage learned the enduring lesson of his career: follow your gut. "According to Stanislavski in *An Actor Prepares*, you're not supposed to use imitation," he says. "At the time it was a major no-no, the worst thing you could do. So I said, 'Well, let's break some rules.' One of the brushes I wanted to paint with was the notion that you can use abstract imitation in film acting, just as in any other art form. I began that experimentation with *Wild At Heart*, channelling Elvis Presley as Sailor. That was a breakthrough for me."

Dropping the ultra-disciplined Method acting, he emerged from the experience a liberated man. A YouTube video that's recently been doing the rounds shows Cage making quite possibly the greatest chat-show entrance of all time, as he arrives on *Wogan* to promote the film. Running onstage, he does a somersault, flings bank notes at the audience and executes



Wild At Heart (1990): Sailor Ripley (Cage) channels the spirit of Elvis as he serenades Lula Fortune (Laura Dern).

EVERYONE WHO'S WORKED with Nicolas Cage has a Nicolas Cage story. Justin Bartha, co-star of the *National Treasure* films, recalls a glorious, schnapps-fuelled dinner with Cage and Crispin Glover at LA's Madeo restaurant that went on and on and on. "Like going to a rock 'n' roll voodoo ceremony with a hilarious vampire wearing an orange crocodile jacket... and your skull's on fire," is how Bartha sums up the experience. Alison Lohman, Cage's con-job protégée in *Matchstick Men*, flashes back to a more sedate but equally memorable night aboard his private jet in 2003. "Sam Rockwell and I were talking when Nic came up and told us he was going to bed," she says. "He walked into the bathroom and five minutes later came out in full pyjamas with a night hat on. It was adorable."

But it's Mark Nevelndine, who directed Cage in 2012's *Ghost Rider: Spirit Of Vengeance*, who has the anecdote to beat. Signed on to the sequel but yet to cross paths with its star, he and filmmaking partner Brian Taylor were dispatched to New Orleans for a meet-and-greet. The evening quickly spun out of control. "We were drinking pretty heavily and went to a metal show at a dive bar," says Nevelndine. "At midnight, after too many rounds of liquor, I think the dark spirits inspired Nic to talk about a plot he'd purchased at an old cemetery. The next thing we knew, we were in a cab and then sticking 2x4s up against a fence so we could climb over."

Leaving the taxi waiting outside, the trio headed through the graveyard towards the pyramid mausoleum Cage built for himself in 2010: a majestic, nine-foot-tall stone edifice emblazoned with the Latin phrase "Omni Ab Uno" ("Everything From One"). Then a siren blared. "We got chased out by cops," Nevelndine continues. "Nic and Brian went up the boards, but one broke when I stepped on it, so I had to parkour my way over the fence as our cab was peeling out. It was beyond surreal. But Nic made us feel like everything was gonna be fine. He was so superhero about it."

For anybody else, this would surely be a remarkable night. But when *Empire* speaks to Cage himself in early October, we have to jog his memory. "Gosh, could you elaborate a little bit?" he requests, presumably having been chased through tombstones by cops on more than one occasion. Post-elaboration, he gives a droll chuckle. "Oh right, yeah. We hopped the fence and looked at the tomb. I remember it was after hours. You can't do that anymore: the whole thing is sealed off now."

When you're Nicolas Cage, crazy things happen. During the making of *Bringing Out The Dead*, he was stalked by a mime. He has camped overnight, alone, in the ruins of Dracula's castle in Transylvania. Until recently, he resided in a mansion said to be haunted by 19th century serial killer Delphine LaLaurie. In Hollywood,



Face/Off (1997): Cage as terrorist Castor Troy, who takes on — and assumes the identity of — John Travolta's Agent Sean Archer. And vice versa.



Clockwise from above: Paroled army ranger Cameron Poe (Cage) is the pumped-up hero in 1997's *Con-Air*; Peggy Sue Got Married (1986): Cage channels Elvis (again) as love rat Charlie Bodell; Getting his fingers burnt as Edward Malus in the panned remake of *The Wicker Man* (2006); In his first major role as Smokey in 1983's *Rumble Fish*, directed by his uncle, Francis Ford Coppola.



a manic high kick. Then he strips off his T-shirt and hands it to a startled Terry Wogan. Finishing move: an almighty fist-pump.

"I'm proud of that now, in retrospect," laughs Cage. "I knew it was taking a chance, but heck, I was promoting a movie called *Wild At Heart*, so I thought I had to live the part. It was totally spontaneous: I was just riffing, feeling the energy in the audience and being as playful and punk-rock as I possibly could. I don't think Mr Wogan was too amused, but I think later, as his career continued to be as illustrious as it was, he was kind of proud of it too."

Many have tried to put a label on Cage's style. Ethan Hawke, who admits to being obsessed with his *Lord Of War* co-star, calls it "presentation performance". Online critic Vern came up with the term "mega-acting". Cage himself prefers "Nouveau Shamanic", a phrase taken from his craft bible, *The Way Of The Actor* by Professor Brian Bates. "Shamans in pre-Christian times were actually actors who would go into flights of imagination to help people sort out their problems," he explains. "If you stimulate your mind in such a way that you don't have to act, if you give yourself over to dreams and put yeast on your imagination, that magic works."

Whatever you want to call it, you'll know it when you see it. Think of that bit in *Face/Off* where Cage, dressed as a priest, grabs a girl's

behind and looks to the heavens in bug-eyed rapture. Or the scene in *Bad Lieutenant: Port OfCall New Orleans* where his corrupt lawman twitchily hallucinates an iguana on a coffee table. Or pretty much any moment from his misguided, bee-heavy remake of *The Wicker Man*. Yes, Cage has made dross — lots and lots of it — but he is very rarely boring to watch.

That trend continues with his new film *Dog Eat Dog*, a collaboration with director Paul Schrader that will make lovers of Nicolas Cage GIFs very happy indeed. During its 93-minute runtime, Cage — as stripclub-dwelling ex-con Troy — punches a policewoman repeatedly in slow-motion, squirts Willem Dafoe with mustard while both are clad only in underpants, steals a baby, references Jackie Chan and, for no apparent reason, slips into a Humphrey Bogart impression for the entire final reel. "Paul had final cut," confirms Cage. "We wanted to reflect the way culture has been going — YouTube, short attention spans, Tarantino's impact — and make a movie with the ethos, 'Don't do anything boring. Keep it entertaining. Keep it moving.'"

Astonishingly, his performance could have been even more apeshit: he was originally lined up to play handjob-loving maniac Mad Dog, the role ultimately taken by his old *Wild At Heart* cohort Dafoe. "I was just finishing *Army Of One*, where I was playing a pretty whacked-out character [a donkey-riding kook on a solo mission to find Bin Laden] and was just too exhausted for the flashy role," reveals Cage,

proving there are limits to even his love of lunacy. "I also found a way I wanted to go with Troy: I saw him as a lotus flower on the muddy waters of the River Nile."

The Bogie impression was 100 per cent Cage. "In my mind, Troy would fantasise about old movie stars, and Bogart was the greatest gangster of the Golden Age," he says. "I've experimented with stylisation in film acting for many years now: this continues what I started with *Wild At Heart* and continued with Adam West and *Kick-Ass*." He pauses. "The mustard, though, that was Paul. I can't take credit for that."

He doesn't work like most people. And he doesn't kick back like most people either. "The more coffee I drink, the more stunts I do, the more relaxed I get," says Cage. He's never

happier, he claims, than when holding a snake.

There are still some wild times. "Things just seem to happen, whether I want them to or not. There was an exciting lunch I had, which went out on TMZ," he says, referring to a brawl he got into with Mötley Crüe frontman Vince Neil outside a Vegas casino in April. "I don't think about myself in terms of being famous, so I sometimes get taken by surprise. You go and have a three-Martini lunch with a friend, something happens, someone's got a cell phone with a camera in it and the next thing you know it's everywhere. This day and age is so unlike when Warren Beatty was at the top of the food chain in the '70s. That was a great time to be famous."

But more and more often, he says, he's choosing to head home anyway, booting up Netflix with his 11-year-old son Kal-El. "That is peace to me," he says. "He doesn't really like

live action so it's gotta be animated: *Scooby-Doo* and *Chowder* and *Gumball*. Or I'll sit and watch him play his PS4, games like *Injustice*, the one with the DC characters, which is really cool and beautifully drawn, or the *Godzilla* one that came out a couple of years ago." Cage himself is looking forward to binging on *Luke Cage*, the first live-action adventure for the character who gave him his name. "This actor [Mike Colter] seems like he's really great. I'm very excited for him."

If the lizard king of Hollywood is finally becoming tamed, morphing fully into a family man (just like in his movie, *The Family Man*), fans can be re-assured that there'll be no equivalent calming down on-screen. Fueled partly by his ongoing troubles with the IRS, partly by his feverish work ethic, there are nine more Cage performances on their way. These range from a four-day stint on thriller *Inconceivable* ("I was excited to support two leading ladies and make it really about the women") to a third team-up with John Cusack for crime flick *Southern Fury*.

The one that fans of Extreme Cage should start getting excited for, though, is *Mom And Dad*, a reunion for the star with his cop-eluding buddy Brian Taylor. Despite the vanilla title, it's a *Purge*-style horror in which parents turn into crazed killers for 24 hours; Cage is centre stage as a mad dad bent on exterminating his offspring. "It's really outside the box and it's going to piss some people off for sure," he promises. "But I'm always looking for something that stimulates the senses. A little bit of shock factor can open the floodgates and get the creative receptors going."

Shock and awe: it's the Nic Cage mission statement. All the way from the cradle to the nine-foot-tall pyramid grave. ●

DOG EAT DOG IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 NOVEMBER

