

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: MATT DAMON

A candid conversation with the nice-guy movie star about being a neurotic, fearful action hero, dodging the paparazzi and trying to do good

Among Hollywood's tiny circle of leading men, Matt Damon is considered a quiet giant. In a look-at-me industry he's a stealth star, at least compared with Leonardo DiCaprio, George Clooney or Tom Cruise—free from rumors, personal spinouts and scandals. Fiercely guarded about his personal life, wary of self-promotion and constitutionally allergic to showy moves on-screen and off, Damon is rumored to have earned as much as \$20 million a film. In the past decade he has aligned himself with such directing heavyweights as Martin Scorsese (*The Departed*), Joel and Ethan Coen (*True Grit*), Clint Eastwood (*Invictus*, *Hereafter*), Cameron Crowe (*We Bought a Zoo*) and Steven Soderbergh (*The Informant!*, *Contagion* and three *Ocean's* caper flicks). He created a definitive franchise hero in Jason Bourne, the memory-challenged ex-CIA assassin, in three spy adventures that have hauled in \$945 million globally, mightily contributing to Damon's worldwide career box-office take of just over \$5 billion. Obviously he ranks high in the exclusive club of *Forbes's* 10 most bankable stars, with a net worth of \$65 million.

Damon is a big wheel but not a squeaky one. He's been that way since he broke through the ranks of other good-looking, struggling actors by starring in 1997's *Good Will Hunting*, which he co-wrote with his longtime friend Ben Affleck. They won a best original screenplay

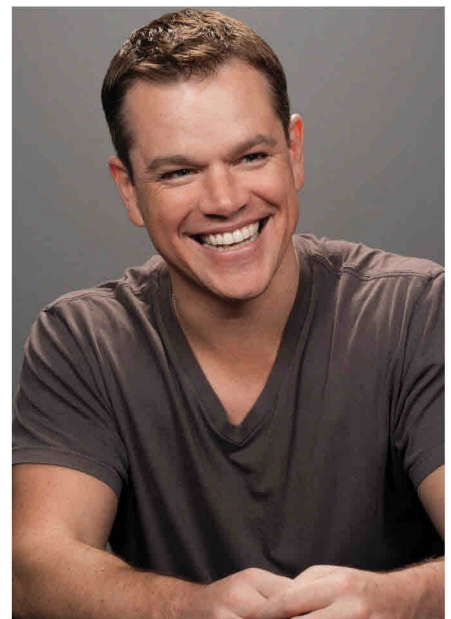
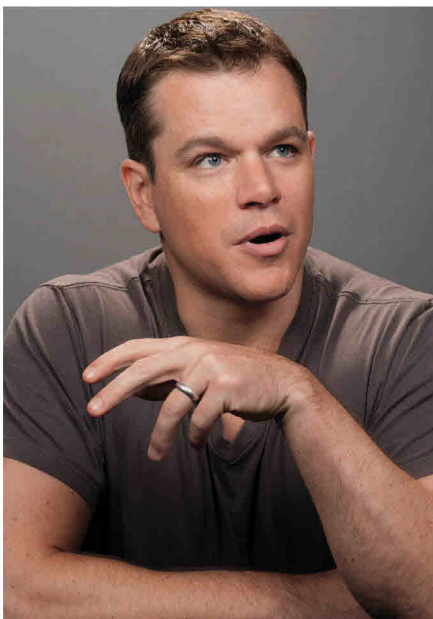
Oscar for their script. Dubbed Hollywood's new Cinderella boy, he snagged the coveted title roles in *Saving Private Ryan* for Steven Spielberg and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* for Anthony Minghella and, on his nights off, squired Minnie Driver and Winona Ryder. But when he tied the knot in 2005, it was to a civilian, Luciana Barroso, a bartender he'd met two years earlier while filming *Stuck on You* in Miami Beach. Today, raising three daughters, ages six, four and two, and one stepdaughter, 14, Damon looks and acts the very picture of responsible domesticity and contentment, a wet blanket for heat-seeking paparazzi.

Like his friends George Clooney and Brad Pitt, he wins admiration—and ignores ridicule—as a smart do-gooder for philanthropic works such as *Water.org*, an organization he co-founded in 2009 with Gary White that helps clean-water-impoorished communities improve their methods and sanitation facilities from the ground up. His political inclinations inform his work as well. Damon is about to be seen with John Krasinski in *Promised Land*, a Gus Van Sant-directed tale about an on-the-ropes American community facing the prospect of utility-company fracking (Damon and Krasinski co-wrote the screenplay). HBO viewers will see him as the longtime lover of flamboyant entertainer Liberace (played by Michael Douglas) in a film

directed by Soderbergh. And just to round out the year, Damon heads back into bare-knuckled action mode in the \$85 million science fiction thriller *Elysium*, in which the rich live on a magnificent space station while the have-nots scabble for crumbs on decimated planet Earth.

We sent Contributing Editor **Stephen Rebello**, who last interviewed James Franco for *PLAYBOY*, to talk with Damon in Manhattan. He reports: "I hadn't seen Matt Damon since we last talked for *PLAYBOY* in Chicago in 2004. Knowing he can be friendly but dodgy about personal stuff in interviews, I secretly hoped our suite would be stocked with a supply of tall cold beers as it was last time. I needn't have worried. This time Damon, looking fit and 15 years younger than his 42 years, was much more open. The same appears to be happening on-screen. In a couple of his new movies, beneath Damon's charm and likability is a new rawness, a vulnerability—the kind that portends an even longer, rewarding career. In conversation he was funny, smart, impassioned and about as 'regular' a world-class movie star as one could ever hope to know."

PLAYBOY: Since we spoke in 2004 you've worked nonstop, married and had three daughters, along with a stepdaughter, with Luciana Barroso, kept active politically and philanthropically and—probably



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ROSE

"You know what? They might have taken the Bourne series out back and shot it in the head. If that's the end of it, that's just the end of it. I hope not. I love the character and the three movies we did."

"The narrative about me goes, 'He's a boring married guy,' which is great, because I don't get any of that other stuff like Brad Pitt and George Clooney do. People think I'm kind of vanilla and they leave me alone to work."

"For one scene, I had to come out of a pool, go over to Michael Douglas, straddle him on a chaise longue and start kissing him. It's not like I kiss him just once. It wasn't the most natural thing in the world to do."

most important to moviegoers—become an action star in the Bourne franchise. With Jeremy Renner starring in last summer's *The Bourne Legacy*, are you officially done with Bourne?

DAMON: The thing that drove Bourne, the deepest source of his angst and anguish, what made him interesting, was the fact that he didn't have his memory. By the end of the last one we did, he has his memory back. When he knows who he is and where he's going, there's not much left for me to play. He's just an utterly efficient machine, and when he's in only that mode—some of us involved with those movies refer to him as "Mission: Bourne"—it's fun to watch for a little while, but I don't know if you can watch that for a whole movie.

PLAYBOY: Wait, that sounds like a review of *The Bourne Legacy*.

DAMON: Jeremy Renner is a terrific actor. I love everything he does. I have not seen the movie yet, but it isn't in protest or anything. When it came out last summer, I was filming a movie about Liberace right up to the end of August. We then had to rush back to New York, where we live, so we could get the kids settled and into school.

PLAYBOY: In *The Bourne Legacy*, the rules established by your Bourne trilogy are switched up. For example, Renner's character is one of a series of genetically enhanced operatives who require regular doses of little pills—or things get ugly.

DAMON: You know what? They might have taken the Bourne series out back and shot it in the head. If that's the end of it, that's just the end of it. I hope not. I love the character and the three movies we did, so I'd love to figure out a way to do another one. I'm going to talk to [director] Paul Greengrass about it. But I know what you mean about the rules and differences, because if they were to put Jason Bourne and Jeremy's character together in a movie, would those rules, like the pills, have to apply in Jason Bourne's world? Frankly, though, I don't see those characters teaming up with anybody.

PLAYBOY: You've said you're not a Bond movie fan, and you've called the James Bond character "misogynistic," "repulsive" and other choice terms. Do you find it ironic that the Bond movies starring Daniel Craig have been influenced by the gritty action style of the Bourne movies?

DAMON: The Bond movies have kind of bent more toward Bourne, but from the reviews I've read, this last Bourne bent a little more toward Bond. By the way, I never signed up for three Bourne movies. I signed up for them one at a time.

PLAYBOY: Why was that?

DAMON: I'd been on action-movie sets where people were just sitting around waiting for hours for explosions to be wired. People said I was a surprising choice for the part, but the truth is, I didn't know if I would want to do it or

want to continue to do it or if I even had the patience to do it.

PLAYBOY: You, Daniel Craig and Tom Cruise in his *Mission: Impossible* movies are the kings of the big-budget spy-thriller franchise world. For a Bourne or any other movie, would you do some of the daredevil stunts Cruise did in, say, *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*, such as climbing up and down that 160-story skyscraper in Dubai?

DAMON: Seeing Tom Cruise running down the side of that building was the most incredible thing. I went, "Okay, you win. You are the greatest of all time." He didn't just appear to do it for the movie; he actually *did* that. I, literally, could never do that.

PLAYBOY: What else scares you?

DAMON: I learned that I am afraid of heights. When I was doing *Syriana*, they arranged for my wife, Lucy, and me to go up to watch the sunset over the Arabian Peninsula from the top of that seven-star Dubai hotel that's shaped like a sail, the Burj Al Arab. So we go to the very top—60 stories or something—we're given champagne, and we go, "Oh

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my God, this is great." But as I started to walk toward the edge, my legs locked up. I was absolutely frozen. I completely jumped my neocortex and went straight to this primal, full lizard-brain fear state. Lucy was walking all around the edge, while I was about to collapse from fear. She thought it was hysterical.

PLAYBOY: Scarlett Johansson kidded you in the press for being squeamish about snakes when you two did scenes with reptiles in *We Bought a Zoo*.

DAMON: I had to be assured none of the snakes bit. Scarlett was totally cool with handling them. I warmed up to it, but it took time. One of the scariest things I've ever had to do was the underwater scene in the second Bourne movie, where the car goes into the river and I've lost the love of my life. I didn't want to do that at all. So I wouldn't be constantly aware of how scared I am of drowning, I had to go to a pool with this great stunt guy and dive master a couple of times a week for a month or so to train me to relax underwater without an oxygen mask and with a blindfold and, later, to do simple tasks underwater like tying a shoe.

PLAYBOY: Did the training take?

DAMON: After we shot for one day, that night I woke up probably four times gasping for breath, thinking I was drowning. It was terrible. When you make movies, you end up being trained to do really weird things you don't do anywhere else.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever talked with a professional about how to conquer fear?

DAMON: When I was in Mexico City filming *Elysium*, I had a conversation with one of the bodyguards they hired for me. He's one of our special forces guys who was in the Army's Operational Detachment Alpha. They've trained and have been fighting for 10 straight years and are now the best; they've pushed it to another level. After every combat experience, every traumatic event, these guys talk to a therapist. There was a problem with the first group of Alpha guys. You'd ask them, "How does it feel to see your son?" They'd go, "It feels okay." "How does it feel to shoot somebody in the face?" "It feels okay."

PLAYBOY: So they're almost numb from the stress and trauma they've sustained?

DAMON: They found that if you don't deal with trauma, it cripples you, and the next time you're in that situation, it's even worse. Processing it, talking it out with a professional who knows how to help, almost serves as an inoculation. So these special forces guys are now absolutely cool under fire. They're not detached; they're highly emotional, connected, unbelievably engaged and have a deep understanding of what's going on. They're able to hang on to their humanity and do these incredibly inhumane things. You wouldn't see Rambo sitting down and having these types of conversations, but that's exactly what these real guys do.

PLAYBOY: Do people always expect you to be in freakishly good physical condition in your real life?

DAMON: I don't have much time between work, parenting and other pursuits I'm involved in, but I lift weights. If somebody's around to box with, I can hit the focus pads, but I haven't done that in a while. I used to jog a lot, but now I'll do maybe one long run a week, or I'll do sprints.

PLAYBOY: Has being a husband and father made you more aware of your vulnerability?

DAMON: I don't know, but Lucy and the girls can definitely bring me to my knees. They just *know*. My wife gives me shit because it's harder for me to discipline my girls, probably because they're girls. With boys, I could relate more and it would probably be easier. Growing up, girls are so mysterious to us. Even as a grown man, they remain mysterious.

PLAYBOY: What personal traits of yours do you hope your kids don't inherit?

DAMON: My kids came into the world with a kind of hyper obsessiveness and stubbornness that I know I have. I've

always been competitive. I used to be out-of-control competitive, like when I was playing games, maybe because I grew up with my brother, Kyle, who is three years older. I was always smaller, and it was harder for me to win.

PLAYBOY: When do your kids most turn into mini versions of yourself?

DAMON: I would throw blazing temper tantrums as a kid—my parents worried about me. I remember being so angry that I saw red, and no amount of encouragement, love or hugging would get me out of that. It just has to burn out. I've seen my kids get to that point where you can't get through to them. The only reason I can get through those moments is because I remember what it feels like to be in that situation. On the other hand, there's a great thing that comes along with being stubborn and obsessive, which is a passion for life. Things matter to you. Whatever work you end up doing matters to you. That has brought me so much joy even I'm willing to be a little obsessive about it.

PLAYBOY: With your stepdaughter, Alexia, now a young teen and probably about to date sooner rather than later, do you think you might be a tough father to deal with?

DAMON: Alexia is a terrific girl, sensible and with good taste in music, like the Beatles and Coldplay—good taste in everything. I'm more worried about some of our younger daughters. [laughs]

When you grow up, you know what your parents did to you. After you become a parent, you know what your parents felt like when they did what they did. It's funny; I feel I know my parents more now.

PLAYBOY: What are fans most likely to ask you to autograph?

DAMON: Pictures of the puppet of me from *Team America: World Police*. I always write "Maaat Damon," like they say it in the movie.

PLAYBOY: What do you absolutely refuse to sign?

DAMON: I've never had a woman say, "Sign my ass," but I've drawn the line at autographing women's skin.

PLAYBOY: How does your wife deal with

fans who become aggressive or flirtatious around you?

DAMON: The people who are crazy enough to throw themselves at you tend to be so young that I'd be way too old for them. The ones who are slicker are probably interested in somebody else anyway. Besides, the narrative about me kind of goes, "He's a boring married guy," which is great, because I don't get any of that other stuff like Brad Pitt and George Clooney do. Lucy doesn't have to worry anyway.

PLAYBOY: You met 10 years ago. Why is this relationship better than the others?

DAMON: This is the first relationship I've had that wasn't like *work* to be in. I never

PLAYBOY: How have you managed to be in the public eye since the late 1990s without—unlike some of your peers—any big public missteps?

DAMON: I did a Larry King interview with Angelina Jolie and Robert De Niro when *The Good Shepherd* was coming out in 2006, and he read a list of words he got from some website or something about how people saw each of us. For Angelina it was *sexy, dangerous*. For Bob it was *intense*. My word was *nice*. That's been great for me because people think I'm kind of vanilla and they leave me alone to work, have an actual private life and be a husband and dad.

PLAYBOY: Does being perceived as a decent guy cost you edgier roles?

DAMON: The perception seems to be that I'm boring enough not to pay attention to but not so boring that I stop working.

PLAYBOY: As an admitted competitive guy, do you sweat movie roles that go to other actors?

DAMON: Having to say no to *Avatar* was tough because I particularly wanted to work with James Cameron, and still do, because he's fantastic. He knew he was the star of that movie and that everyone was going to go see it anyway. When he said, "Look, I'm offering it to you, but if you say no, the movie doesn't need you," I remember thinking, Oh God, not only do I have to say no because of scheduling, but he's going to make a star out of some guy who's go-

ing to start taking jobs from me later.

PLAYBOY: Do you have pangs of regret about any other movies?

DAMON: *Milk* was another hard one because I was excited it would have been for Gus Van Sant, and I would have had the chance to do scenes with Sean Penn. They pushed the schedule and it ran into the slot for *Green Zone*. Steven Soderbergh's mantra is "The movie gets the right person; the right actor gets the part," but I was like, "Shit, no. That was *my* part." But when I saw *Milk*, Josh Brolin was so fucking good that I knew Soderbergh was right. Way back, Gus and I talked about my doing *Brokeback Mountain* with Joaquin Phoenix, but I had just done *The*

knew it could be like this. There's always stuff you can work on, of course, but being married and having kids, for me, there's a lot of romance, but it's a much bigger endeavor with a lot of nuts-and-bolts problem-solving you have to do together. It's like building a company.

PLAYBOY: Are you good at turning up the sensuality and romance with extravagant romantic gestures?

DAMON: No, I'm shitty at that. I wish I were better because my wife deserves somebody who surprises her with a gift or flowers or some wonderful idea. I've never been good at that, and she's really good at it, which makes me feel even more like shit.

Talented Mr. Ripley and *All the Pretty Horses*, so I said, “Gus, let’s do it in a couple of years. I just did a gay movie and a cowboy movie. I can’t do a gay cowboy movie now.” The right actor got the part. Heath Ledger was magnificent.

PLAYBOY: What drives you to keep working? It can’t be the money.

DAMON: Certainly not now it isn’t. [laughs] I remember coming home to tell Lucy about the first day of filming *Invictus* with Clint Eastwood, who at 79 was electrifying, great at what he does, had a ton of energy, enormous purpose and was surrounded by a crew who adored him and felt privileged to be there. He was as excited to be there as I was and still has stories he wants to tell. I said to Lucy, “That’s it for me. That’s the goal.” I’ve been making movies for 15, 20 years. I really love it, and I’m getting better at it and want to keep taking chances.

PLAYBOY: Speaking of taking chances, what did you make of Clint Eastwood’s performance during the Republican National Convention, when he questioned an empty chair?

DAMON: I heard the backlash, but I never saw the whole thing because I just didn’t want to see my friend...you know. Look, his knowledge of filmmaking is so vast and deep that he can wing it beautifully on the set. What he did at the RNC was an unrehearsed bit he decided to do at the last minute. You can’t go onstage and do 12 minutes of stand-up completely unrehearsed. But I agree with what Bill Maher said—Clint killed at the convention for 12 minutes, and the audience loved him. I wouldn’t do that unless I spent a month rehearsing.

PLAYBOY: You were supposed to make your long-promised directorial debut with your new film *Promised Land*, in which you and Frances McDormand play corporate salespeople who persuade economically strapped rural homeowners to sell their natural gas drilling rights—that is, to allow their land to be fracked, possibly destroying their drinking water, health and futures.

DAMON: John Krasinski and I wrote *Promised Land* with the intention that I would direct it. I loved working with him. I would have preferred to just direct and have someone else act, but it was easier on the budget for me to play in it too.

PLAYBOY: What stopped you from directing it?

DAMON: *Elysium* was supposed to finish in October 2011 but ended up finishing in early December, partly because I got sick and shut the production down for two weeks. Then I came back from filming and had two straight weeks of press to do for *We Bought a Zoo*, and I realized I would have to go into preproduction for *Promised Land* on January 2. I’d also been away from my kids, and it had been a huge strain on our family.

PLAYBOY: So you were up against the wall?

DAMON: I had to call John one night,

and he was great about it, but he’s also a producer on the movie. He said, “We’re going into the holidays—we’re totally fucked! Why didn’t you tell me this a month ago? We could’ve found another director.” I said, “I didn’t know a month ago, and now that I’ve come up for air I’m realizing what the reality of all this is.” It was tough. I said, “I promise you, this is the right thing for the movie—me going into directing it when I’m this burned out won’t be good for us.”

PLAYBOY: How did Gus Van Sant become involved?

DAMON: The morning after that tough night with John, I was in a plane with my family, on the airport runway, going to Florida. The flight attendants were about to tell us to turn our phones off, and I e-mailed Gus what had been going on. He e-mailed back, “I love your writing—why don’t you send me the script?” They said, “Turn your phones off,” and I’m like, “Yeah, one second.” I e-mailed him the script and turned off my phone. When we landed two and a half hours later, there was a message from Gus that he wanted to direct the movie.

I was having dinner with Tommy Lee Jones 20 years ago. I was looking at his face and thinking, I can’t wait to have lines like that. I’m getting more every day.

PLAYBOY: Did John forgive you?

DAMON: When I said, “Gus Van Sant’s directing our movie,” it was just too much for John to process. His head was still in the middle of dealing with what had happened the night before. I ended up doing the best thing for the movie. We definitely traded up in the directing department.

PLAYBOY: Being a well-known political progressive, you might be accused of making a strident polemic—an anti-fracking movie. But the film is human, funny and moving, and it doesn’t preach.

DAMON: We went to the studio saying, “Who fucking wants to go see an anti-fracking movie?” and were all in agreement. When we were working on the script, it was about wind farms, but we changed it to fracking—a good issue because the stakes are so high. That shit is real. They’re debating about letting it happen in New York now. To us, the movie was really about American identity. We loved the characters because they felt like real people making the kinds of compromises you have to just to live your life.

PLAYBOY: The film raises issues that many politicians appear to be ducking, particu-

larly the potentially devastating effects of hydraulically injecting millions of gallons of water, sand and carcinogenic chemicals into rock surrounding a gas or oil well.

DAMON: We’re at a point where politicians don’t really get any benefit from engaging with long-term issues. Instead, it’s all about the next election cycle. Those guys in the House don’t do anything now but run for office. So unless they can find some little thing that zips them up a couple of points in the polls, they’re not interested. There’s a consensus among scientists, though, that we face serious long-term issues. They’re saying that unless we engage with those issues, we’re genuinely fucked. The way it looks, we’re going to wait until one of those big issues smacks us. Hopefully, [author and futurist] Ray Kurzweil is right and all our problems will be solved by technology.

PLAYBOY: No matter how many times Michael Moore asks you or how many others wish you would, it doesn’t sound as though you will run for office.

DAMON: No, no, no.

PLAYBOY: In December 2011 you said you would have preferred President Obama to be “a one-term president with some balls who actually got stuff done.” Did you vote for him this time?

DAMON: Definitely. I assume there will be some Supreme Court appointments in this next term; that alone was reason to vote for him. I don’t think I said anything a lot of people weren’t thinking. It’s easier now more than ever in my life to feel the fix is in, the game is rigged and no matter how hard you work to change things, it just doesn’t matter.

PLAYBOY: *Promised Land* has generated awards buzz, including for your performance. Not only do you show gravitas in it, but also, for once, you’re beginning to look your age.

DAMON: I remember having dinner with Tommy Lee Jones 20 years ago. I was looking at his face and thinking, Shit, I can’t wait to have lines like that. A guy like that can just sit there and be so expressive. I mean, he’s also one of the best actors ever, but I remember being in a hurry to get some of those lines. I’m getting more lines every day.

PLAYBOY: You and Ben Affleck, your longtime hometown Boston buddy and fellow Oscar winner for the *Good Will Hunting* screenplay, have gone your separate ways careerwise. But last year it was rumored he might direct you in a film in which you would play the notorious Boston organized crime kingpin Whitey Bulger.

DAMON: We’re working on stuff, yeah. The movie Ben directed, *Argo*, is so great, and it’s also nice that I’m starting to get offered scripts that have Ben’s fingerprints on them. It’s about time.

PLAYBOY: You mean because he’s already turned down those scripts?

DAMON: Yeah, but that’s just part of the deal in Hollywood. I know not to take it personally. (continued on page 173)

MATT DAMON

(continued from page 62)

PLAYBOY: Are you concerned you will ignite a paparazzi frenzy now that you and your wife have bought a house in L.A. close to Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner's family home?

DAMON: We lived in the same neighborhood this summer and had no problems at all. Granted, we didn't look for attention by parading our kids down the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, but scandal and sex are what move most of those publications anyway. That's not us. Ben and Jen are both famous, and people are interested in her and how she parents, which makes them a target. If we had gotten it like that, I wouldn't have gone to Los Angeles. It's just not worth it.

PLAYBOY: *Elysium* comes out this summer. Did shooting scenes in a human-waste dump for the \$85 million science fiction epic trigger any new anxieties?

DAMON: The concept of the movie is that Earth has been ravaged and *Elysium* is an orbital habitat, 120 kilometers up, where all the rich people have gone.

PLAYBOY: Leaving the poor slobs of the 99 percent to struggle pretty much on their own?

DAMON: Right. We shot in that human-waste dump for two weeks. What you see on-screen is supposed to look futuristic, but it was actually just helicopters flying over us, kicking up dust that coats you and that you know is fecal matter. We were very careful, but it was unbelievably toxic. It's the worst location I've ever heard of and could have been worse only if we'd filmed in the world's largest waste dump, in South Korea. What was unbelievable and really sad was the giant community of people who are born, raised, live and die in that dump. They just pick through the trash.

PLAYBOY: What convinces anyone, let alone a movie star, to agree to shoot in such nasty conditions?

DAMON: Shooting a big action set piece in a third-world dump was a great idea, visually and dramatically. We did it toward the end of the schedule, and everybody bought in knowing it would be tough but also knowing we would be happy we did it.

PLAYBOY: Was it worth it?

DAMON: Between the concept and the script, it's going to be really good. I genuinely believe the director, Neill Blomkamp, is the next guy—our generation's James Cameron. I hope I can work with him a lot more.

PLAYBOY: The movie that put Blomkamp on the map, *District 9*, touched on apart-

heid and racism, upholding the tradition of melding science fiction with social commentary. This new one sounds like a kick in the shins to polluters.

DAMON: Yeah, future generations will not look kindly on us. Our grandkids and great-grandkids are going to have to live here. With the "greatest generation," the attitude wasn't "Well, I'm not going to be around, so fuck the rest of you," it was "Well, this is our problem, so let's work on it together." It's like we have this weird block when it comes to projecting beyond ourselves, as though we've become selfish on some very deep level.

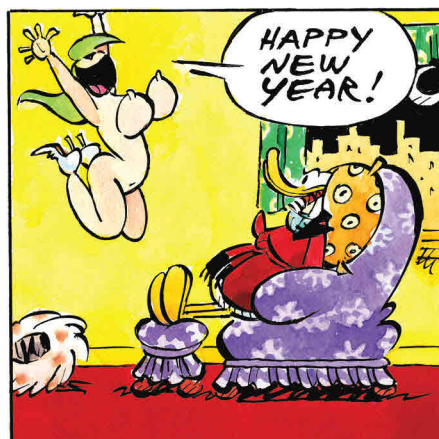
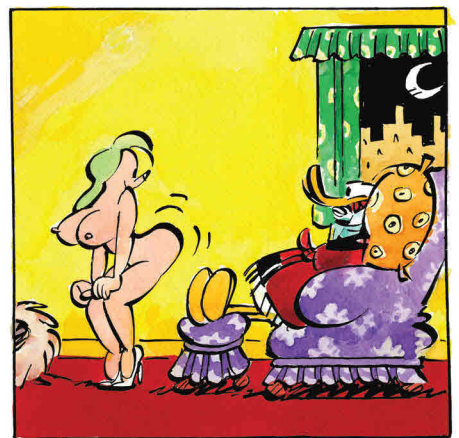
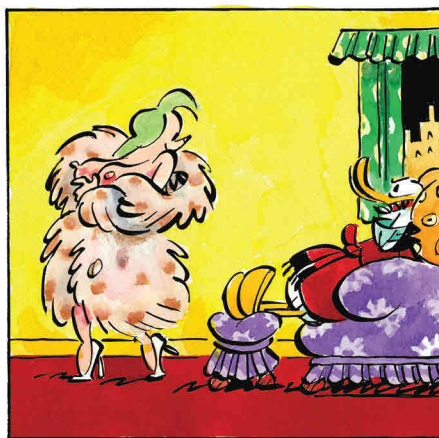
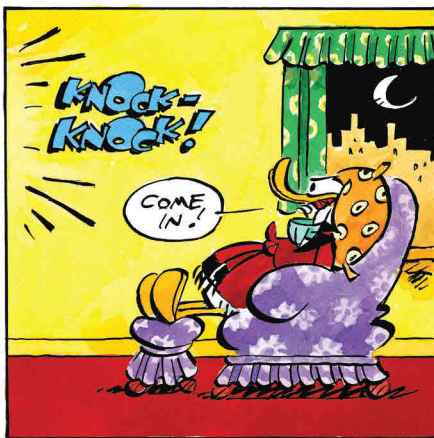
PLAYBOY: It's your job to save the world in this movie. How did you prepare?

DAMON: The script wasn't just run, run, run. It has real characters, so that was great. I worked with an NFL trainer who said, "I'm going to make you stronger and faster. As a by-product, you'll look the way you want to." It wasn't a Hollywood vanity workout.

PLAYBOY: Did vanity creep in when you had to shave your head for the movie?

DAMON: From a practical standpoint, I figured I would like it, but at the moment of truth, I have to admit my worry was, Am I going to look good? Because however I looked, I couldn't change it. I got quite a

Dirty Duck[®] by Bobby London



few compliments, though, which could have just been their way of letting me down softly.

PLAYBOY: Are there any kinds of roles you think twice about doing now that you're a family man?

DAMON: Well, normally I'd say no to nudity, but I just did a lot of it playing the long-term partner of Liberace, Scott Thorson, in *Behind the Candelabra*. I mean, it's tastefully done. Steven Soderbergh directed it, and Michael Douglas plays Liberace. But this movie's not going to be for everyone.

PLAYBOY: A movie about a closeted, larger-than-life TV and Vegas entertainer and his much younger lover, whose plastic surgery he paid for so they could look more alike? Sounds like must-see family viewing to us.

DAMON: These two men were deeply in love and in a real relationship—a marriage—long before there was gay marriage. That's not an insignificant thing. The script is beautiful and relatable. Their conversations when they're dressing or undressing or having a spat or getting ready for bed? That's every marriage. It feels like you're witnessing something really intimate you would normally see with a man and a woman, but instead it's two men, which was thrilling. There's stuff I think will make people uncomfortable. Great. It's HBO—they can change the channel.

PLAYBOY: How did you and Michael Douglas ease into your roles?

DAMON: We both have a lot of gay friends, and we were not going to screw this up or bullshit it. It wasn't the most natural thing in the world to do, though. Like, for one scene, I had to come out of a pool, go over to Michael, straddle him on a chaise longue and start kissing him. And throughout the script, it's not like I kiss him just once. We drew it up like a football plan.

PLAYBOY: Did that help?

DAMON: Not completely. I remember asking Heath Ledger after *Brokeback Mountain*, "How'd you do that scene with Jake?"—meaning the scene where they start ferociously kissing. He said, "Well, mate, I drank a half case of beer in my trailer." I started laughing, and he goes, "No, I'm serious. I needed to just go for it. If you can't do that, you're not making the movie."

PLAYBOY: Is Michael Douglas a good kisser?

DAMON: [Laughs] Michael was a wonderful kisser. My concerns ended up mattering a lot less once we were filming. The dynamic between the men was complex and interesting. Liberace was very powerful and adored, a great showman making \$50,000 a week doing his act in Vegas. Scott was much younger and grew up in foster homes, so there was a lot to play.

PLAYBOY: Liberace lived his life in the closet, and times have changed a bit. What was it like when you and Ben Affleck were constantly asked if you were gay, back when you were starting your careers?

DAMON: I never denied those rumors because I was offended and didn't want to offend my friends who were gay—as if being gay were some kind of fucking disease. It put me in a weird position in that sense. The whole thing was just gross. But look, there have been great signs of progress—

the fact that Anderson Cooper and Ellen DeGeneres can come out so beautifully and powerfully, and it's a big fucking deal that it turns out nobody gives a shit. If Liberace were alive today, everybody would love his music and nobody would care what he did in his private life. Like with Elton John.

PLAYBOY: This marks your sixth time working with Steven Soderbergh since 2001. What has changed in how you work together?

DAMON: The level of filmmaking on this movie is so high—I mean, Steven is in a place I don't think many other people have ever been. He has mastered moviemaking. Although Clint Eastwood is as fast, the only other person I've seen make movies with that kind of prodigiousness was Spielberg on *Saving Private Ryan*. But Soderbergh is very in touch with the way we all live our lives. He's not in a bubble. He is incredibly empathic and understands human emotions. He's retiring, though, which is incredibly sad for me.

PLAYBOY: We've heard him announce that a couple of times. We've also heard him jokingly refer to you as "a 14-year-old girl" when it comes to keeping secrets. Is he really quitting?

DAMON: He's serious about painting. He's going to be 50 this year and feels he has 25 years to devote to something he thinks he could be good enough at to do as an actual other career.

PLAYBOY: You've made big movies, not so big movies, hits, bombs. Is there one film that nearly made you want to pack it all in?

DAMON: Everybody who worked on *All the Pretty Horses* took so much time and cared so much. As you know, the Cormac McCarthy book is set in 1949 and is about a guy trying to hold on to his old way of life. The electric guitar became popular in 1949, and the composer Daniel Lanois got an old 1949 guitar and wrote this spare, haunting score. We did the movie listening to his score. It informed everything we did. We made this very dark, spare movie, but the studio wanted an epic with big emotions and violins. They saw the cast, the director, Billy Bob Thornton, and the fact that we spent \$50 million, and they never released our movie—though the cut still exists. Billy had a heart problem at that time, and it was because his heart fucking broke from fighting for that film. It really fucked him up. It still bothers me to this day.

PLAYBOY: At the end of the day, what would you most like to have as your legacy?

DAMON: When I turned 40 I had my whole family and some friends together. I realized I had to make a toast and hadn't thought of anything to say. I stood up, and what came to me seemed incredibly true in the moment and even more so as time has gone by. I said, "I think I might actually be the luckiest guy on earth. I really might be him." And nobody in the room reflexively said, "Bullshit," because I am so lucky to have Lucy, my kids, my friends and this job. It's been an unbelievable life. So I'm just looking for health and to stay in this groove as long as I can.

