



LIEV FOREVER

'I am now, to the world, pretty much Ray Donovan,' says Liev Schreiber, whose face has become synonymous with television's favourite Hollywood fixer-cum-family man. The success of the eponymous Showtime series has given Schreiber great freedom and validation, but it is not everything. In fact, there is more he'd like you to know... writes NICK SCOTT.

photography **guy aroch** fashion direction **grace gilfeather**
Special thanks to The Lowell Hotel, New York



Previous page:
Navy shawl-collar
ribbed cotton cardigan,
Polo Ralph Lauren;
white cotton T-shirt,
Dolce & Gabbana.

This page:
Navy textured wool and
cashmere blazer, Gieves
& Hawkes; white Pima
cotton relax T-shirt,
Hamilton & Hare.

The late, legendary acting instructor Sanford Meisner once described the craft he imparted to others as “behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances”. It’s a diagnosis that sounds obvious at first, but gathers profundity, snowball-like, when considered in terms of specific cinematic performances over the years. Imagine, for example, being tasked with encapsulating the psychological intensity of a man who was conquering nations at the age of 18, who went on to lord over the largest empire in the world at the time and did more to spread the seeds of western culture and philosophy than anyone before or after him — as Colin Farrell did in Oliver Stone’s 2004 biopic *Alexander*. Not exactly a stroll in the palace gardens. Or what about projecting the inner turmoil, through an astronaut’s helmet and without ground or gravity to fall back on, of a shrink sent to assess the mental state of a space station’s crew but beleaguered by hallucinations of his wife’s suicide? A challenge that surely had George Clooney wincing in trepidation, as well as excitement, when he first read the script of Steven Soderbergh’s *Solaris*.

But perhaps the gong, when it comes to Trickiest Acting Gig in Post-War Movie History, should go to Liev Schreiber. It was he who, in the 2004 version of *The Manchurian Candidate*, portrayed a character told by one political colleague within the narrative, “You are about to become the first privately owned and operated vice-president of the United States”. A tricky emotional concept to try and ‘method’? It gets trickier. For the uninitiated, in this paranoid-thriller-slash-political satire, a re-working of a 1962 interpretation of Richard Condon’s 1959 novel co-starring Denzel Washington, Schreiber plays Raymond, a Gulf War vet who is being bullied into the vice-presidency by a hellish senator and mother who is in the pay of a shady global corporation, and he is unaware that a carefully planned assassination is set to make him the default president. If that sounds a breeze, consider the metafictional dimensions added by the fact that the character’s behaviour is being dictated by a reality-distorting chip implanted in his shoulder. You might also consider the fact that the hellish senator-mother in question is played by a markedly on-form Meryl Streep, with whom Schreiber must keep perfect pace in order for such an outlandish plot to pack even one iota of verisimilitude.

When you ponder and factor in the premise, it is, alongside Schreiber’s stellar performance as the feted former *Boston Globe* editor Marty Baron in Tom McCarthy’s journalism drama *Spotlight*, and the role that has made him a perennial Golden Globe nominee — as Hollywood ‘fixer’ Ray Donovan in the eponymous crime series — one of his most compelling and impressive performances to date. In one scene, Washington’s character, Raymond’s troubled former commanding officer and nemesis-slash-would-be-saviour, confronts him over the dreams of an elusive reality

both men have been having. Summoning up decades of conflict, confusion and pain — the accumulated angst of the type of middle-aged, male movie antagonist who refers to his mother as ‘Mother’ with no possessive pronoun (see also Norman Bates) — he manages to convey every peptide zipping through the character’s cortexes with the subtlest twitch of what he calls those “Slavic fat-pads” (his pronounced cheeks). The dialogue — “Weren’t you listening?” is his riposte to Washington’s two-word line of inquiry, “What happened?”; “Mother happened” — contributes just a fraction to what’s being conveyed. It’s the work of an actor who has made non-verbal communication an art form, who can tinge that non-verbal communication with ambiguity and ambivalence at will. An actor who acts in meticulous emotional real-time.

As for where this ability comes from, we could talk endlessly of osmotic observation, of method, of technique, of ethereal powers of connection, but the eternally modest Schreiber insists that an

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altogether less welcome trait — neurosis — is one of the most precious base materials for thoughtful acting. “I think I’ve said it before, and I don’t think it’ll come as much of a surprise to anyone, but most actors —

certainly most of the ones I admire — have a bit of an identity crisis, or they’re trying to work out some sort of an identity crisis,” he tells *The Rake*. “As someone who started in classical theatre, and working with very broad, archetypal characters who are brimming with idiosyncratic behaviour and nuances ... is Henry V neurotic? is a truly interesting question to me. There’s something insecure about Henry that makes him very angry.”

Schreiber says, and this is perhaps a level of method acting that Marlon Brando and Dustin Hoffman would be awed by, that good performances happen “when you feel uncomfortable and you don’t know what you’re doing and your brain is kind of desperately reaching for safe places or tangents or footholds or tail-holds to get into... You’re hyper-aware of the other actors, you’re hyper-aware of where you’re trying to go, but it’s not familiar. It’s almost like what they say about a woman who suddenly has incredible strength if a child is stuck under a car. Suddenly she can lift the car. It’s in those adverse conditions and extreme places that you come alive.”

Schreiber has previously discussed issues with short-term memory, which may sometimes present him with the adversity he considers so conducive to his craft. But is there anything that precipitated the kind of neurosis he also values highly as a professional raw material? Any armchair developmental psychologist would immediately examine a patient’s childhood, and it’s fair to say that Schreiber’s is a rich vein of diagnostic data. Born Isaac Liev Schreiber in 1967 in San Francisco, to a painter-mother seven years older than his “all-American WASP-y guy from Pennsylvania” father, his family moved to a rural farmhouse

in Canada so that his mother could recuperate from a horror LSD trip. Pursued by private detectives hired by his father, who once kidnapped him from an upstate New York commune, Schreiber and his mother spent a spell in a Lower East Side squat. For a time she juggled a health food business with taxi-driving shifts and selling *papier-mâché* puppets from a street stall. School was a Manhattan Quaker academy and, while Oscar Wilde productions in Hell's Kitchen dive-theatres were *de rigueur*, colour TV. was banned.

So has the woman who named him after Leo Tolstoy (his father apparently contests this), nicknamed him 'Huggy' for the rest of his childhood, and bought him a motorcycle for his 16th birthday to promote fearlessness had a large impact on his work? Just as the pause creeps into uncomfortable territory, the soft baritone chuckle that permeates much of our conversation puts me at ease. "I'm sure my mother has everything to do with it. If there is any fearlessness in me, it probably belongs to her." In a good way? "In a good way, yeah, and maybe in a bad way,

too. She was a risk taker, a very unconventional and inventive person. She had a style that maybe would confound a lot of people reading about it, but living it was another thing. For

her, art, music and literature were everything. That's all she cared about. Those were her church. I think some of that, maybe an aspirational thing, rubbed off on me."

It's actually another family member who influenced Schreiber the most: his maternal grandfather, a meat delivery man with a healthy list of dinner party nuggets on his CV (talented cellist; knew people in a Jewish organised-crime gang in the 1930s; wife was one of the last patients in the state of California to receive a lobotomy; spent his personal fortune helping his daughter get custody of Schreiber). "I had a challenging, single-parent upbringing in New York City, growing up with no T.V., my mom driving a taxi, and my grandfather was like a refuge to me," Schreiber says. "He was like an oasis. I don't know how I'd describe it. His house was nice. He had electricity. He had a T.V. He had chestnut cookies. He was the man. All those things were fascinating to me."

Schreiber still finds himself channelling this patriarch not just on the literal stage but on the one Shakespeare referred to as "all the world". "He was the one who taught me how a man should behave," he says. "He was a hockey player. He played tennis, he was an athlete, a football player. I wanted to be all those things that he was — and my father was all of those things, but I didn't have a relationship with my father, so in many ways my grandfather filled in. I just always wanted to impress him. He's that person in my life that I love, very deeply, and I really wanted him to know that. When I got into Yale, I told him I'd got into Yale — I didn't tell him it was the drama school. Later on, he figured it out but he didn't mind. He was a very masculine man. He had very

particular ideas about how men should behave around women, and when I didn't adhere to those I'd get a whack in the head. It was an old-school thing — when a woman rises, you rise. When a woman carries a bag, you grab it. It was all very old-school chivalry. It was very outdated, but that was my grandfather."

Schreiber's bare-fist bravado in various tough-guy roles is also, he says, part of his grandfather's legacy: "There was a real toughness to him. I remember once I was working with him on his meat truck and a car hit him from behind. I could see in his rearview mirror that a really large man got out of the car and started to punch the truck. My grandfather calmly put the car in park and walked back out behind the van so he wasn't in view in the rearview mirror. I never found out what happened but there was a lot of thumping at the back of the truck... And there was something about that stoicism and that strength and fearlessness that stuck with me, and I think probably he's in Ray's character somewhere, as well as

Marty Baron's somewhere. My anxiety and neurosis and all that other stuff peeks out, but the base of most of my characters is that man that I love so much."

'SWIFTNESS OF MIND'

The three Liev Schreiber projects mentioned so far have a thread running through them: establishment subterfuge. The political-slash-corporate establishment in *The Manchurian Candidate*, the Catholic establishment in *Spotlight*, and the media establishment in *Ray Donovan*. But there's more — abundantly more — to his range. There's the wealth of highly acclaimed theatre work. "He has a swiftness of mind which convinces the audience that language is being coined in the moment; his speech, unlike that of the merely adequate supporting cast, feels lived rather than learned," *The New Yorker* magazine critic John Lahr wrote of that unhinged Henry V portrayal Schreiber referred to earlier. His Richard Roma portrayal in the Broadway adaptation of David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, meanwhile, won him a Tony award for best performance by a featured actor in a play.

As for his screen career, it came gradually at first, with several supporting roles in independent films (*Walking and Talking*, *The Daytrippers*, *Big Night*) coming before his big break, playing the wrongly convicted murderer Cotton Weary in the *Scream* trilogy. His portrayal of the young Orson Welles in the HBO movie *RKO 281* (now there's another devilishly tricky acting gig for you) garnered him Emmy and Golden Globe nominations, and laudable turns in a number of supporting roles followed (*Ransom*, *The Hurricane*, *A Walk on the Moon*, Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*, *The Sum of All Fears*) before that exceptional turn in *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Now 51 years old and just shy of a quarter of a century into his silver screen career, Schreiber's roles in the past two decades are too numerous to mention exhaustively, although

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Blue Chambray slim fit cotton shirt with button-down collar, **Drake's**; navy classic line-blend trouser, **Polo Ralph Lauren**. XPS 1860 watch from the L.U.C collection featuring a silver dial, COSC certified, set in stainless steel on a black alligator strap, **Chopard L.U.C.**



Clockwise from top left: Schreiber in *The Manchurian Candidate*, 2004; with Naomi Watts and Edward Norton in *The Painted Veil*, 2006; with Daniel Craig in *Defiance*, 2008; as Soviet grandmaster Boris Spassky in *Pawn Sacrifice*, 2004; with Eddie Marsan in *Ray Donovan*, 2013-present; in boxing biopic *Chuck*, 2016; in the Oscar-winning *Spotlight*, 2015; with Chiwetel Ejiofor and Angelina Jolie in *Salt*, 2010; opposite Hugh Jackman in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, 2009; and in Canadian hockey comedy *Goon*, 2011.

one might record as highlights his stepping into Gregory Peck's shoes as Robert Thorn in the 2006 remake of *The Omen*; lining up alongside Daniel Craig to portray Jewish resistance fighter Zus Bielski in *Defiance* (2008); and teaming up with his now close friend Hugh Jackman (also his co-star in 2001's *Kate and Leopold*) to play the mutant supervillain Victor Creed/Sabretooth in the 2009 installment of the *X-Men* franchise.

Now he's diversified into material aimed at younger audiences, with *My Little Pony: The Movie* (2017) and last year's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, though the children he has with his former partner Naomi Watts (Alexander 'Sasha' Pete, 11, and Samuel Kai, 10) might have other ideas about what he should be best known for. Is this creative left-turn intended to remedy a fact that — his words — he'll "never be cool to them"? "Yeah, I want to impress my kids," he laughs. "I've been working for the past 12 years making stuff that they can't see. Now I want to make them consumers. It's where my mind is these days. It's a huge part of my life, figuring out ways to engage them and entertain them and educate them and connect with them. [Parenthood] is the most interesting gig I've ever had."

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Fatherhood has also, he implies, enriched his work. "I guess at some level as an artist, or as an actor, you're trying to work out something about love, right? At some level, every job is about trying to work out identity. And the thing about identity is that, at the end of the day, isn't it really about love? Isn't it really about feeling either lovable or unlovable, or relatable, or connected in some way, going further than just the idea of a romantic relationship to something bigger? And what you're really trying to figure out is what moves you — what do you love and what inspires that? Then, all of a sudden, what's your relationship to it? Most artists are, in some way or another, trying to connect with something bigger than themselves. Then in the middle is that these creatures pop out of your relationship and you get this tremendous sabbatical of love, and some of us don't come back from it. I'm not sure I ever will, but now that they're older and thoroughly convinced that I'm not really as interesting as I was when they were four, I'm starting to look for work again."

So voicing a Marvel comic crime lord won't make him the ultimate expression of that oxymoron, the cool dad? "A function of parenting is, you can't be cool to them. Maybe when they're older I'll become cool. Maybe cool in retrospect. But a whole part of parenting is that they have to have better ideas than you. If you're always smarter, better, funnier, that sucks. At some point they have to be better at everything than you. That's good parenting at some level.

"I find with my kids, sometimes they want the answers, but more often than not they want to tell me the answer. And it's really interesting for me to hear their answers — 'Well, that's a fascinating

way of looking at it...' Maybe I don't need to be the guy who says, 'Well, actually New York isn't a hundred degrees below zero right now'. I like their imaginations. I've been working really hard to release the controlling part of me — the part that has to correct everything, that has to say, 'Well, actually, no'. It's an exercise you do for acting and improv and it allows their imaginations to go places and empowers them in a way that I think is exciting."

As well as the kids'-movie diversifications, Schreiber has found other opportunities to shine in unexpected ways. His directorial debut came in 2005 with the adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, a book that convinced him to abandon a screenplay he was writing about his relationship with his Ukrainian grandfather, having decided that Foer had just written it. More recently, in November last year, he showed some deft, lighter qualities when hosting *Saturday Night Live*. And indeed, *Ray Donovan* is allowing him to flex his creative muscles. Plot-thickeners since the show's creator, Ann Biderman, stepped down have included the death of the titular character's wife, Donovan's subsequent move from L.A. to New York, and Alan Alda's arrival in the final

moments of the season six finale as psychiatrist Dr. Amiot (what is it with Alda's ability to play sensitive medics?). Expect some *Sopranos*-esque therapy-room drama to unfold in series seven, which Schreiber expected to begin filming in March or April.

For now, he's enjoying being part of the process of keeping the show compelling but steering the ship clear of the realms of the absurd (see *Homeland*, *Lost* and, some have argued, *Breaking Bad*). "We all have a very loose conversation about where we see things going, what we did right, what we did wrong, what we like and what we hate," says a man whose surname, trivia buffs, derives from the German word *schreiben*, which means to write. "We end up pitching each other elaborate storylines and locations and ideas. I love that process of us speaking loosely and creatively about it, then allowing the writers to do their work. With a show like ours, everybody knows enough about the characters and the themes and the ideas. It's not as if Ray's suddenly going to join the New York Ballet and become a dancer. Although now that I hear myself saying it, I love the idea of pitching that storyline..."

Will the scriptwriters continue with the plot-thickening drama? "I think they need to even out a little bit. My takeaway from the death was that it was kind of a release. A new chapter in this guy's personal journey. And I think for the other characters as well, probably. For me, the solidity, unity and loyalty of his family reminds him of his purpose and reminds him of the loneliness that I think haunts him. My take on that season was that for Ray there was an awareness that there were still people to live for. And that gave him a structure and an intention.



Black wool suit and black cashmere crewneck sweater, both **Dolce & Gabbana**. XPS 1860 watch from the L.U.C collection featuring a silver dial, COSC certified, set in stainless steel on a black alligator strap, **Chopard L.U.C.**

In many ways, having lost Abby, having felt the unity and loyalty of his family made him see purpose and move on.”

Schreiber is diligent when it comes to preparation. Does he ponder Donovan’s tribulations as a child, including sexual abuse from his father (played by his *Manchurian Candidate* co-star Jon Voight), when trying to nail the character? “Certainly, when it comes to the DNA of the character, this concept of sexual abuse defines him in many ways. That stuff will always be there — I think it’s at the heart of who he is as a character and very much determines how he relates to his family and, in particular, his father. I think Ray will always struggle with that. His way has been a silent way, and I think that a lot of survivors of that particular situation tend to go through it silently or go through it alone. I think that comes across in some of the more compelling scenes. The journey Ray is on, to be known and to know, seems like a good one, you know? And I think Alan Alda’s character is certainly compelling to me in that regard.”

ART MIRRORING REALITY

Fish-out-of-water roles certainly inspire him. “Something that comes up a lot for me is that notion of fitting in or not fitting in —

of feeling or not feeling connected to something or a part of something,” he says, which, again, is a case of art mirroring reality when it comes to his status as a reluctant celebrity. “The core lie about fame is that we are the most interesting person in the room,” he once said. Asked to elaborate on that today, he goes further: the famous guy is actually the least important person on either side of the proverbial fourth wall. “I think great art at its best gives people a piece of themselves — not the actors or the performers. If we’re doing our jobs well — and it’s the same thing with writers, with directors, with painters — what we’re doing is touching something that is unique to the viewer. When we do our work well, we touch on something that only the viewer could possibly relate to. In marketing our industry we’ve had to make products out of content and characters and people, and that’s what Hollywood is. That’s what celebrity is. It doesn’t even have to be a story any more. It’s just about celebrity for celebrity’s sake, which is confusing for me.”

Is he, then, averse to celebrity? “I’ve always thought that fame itself is a very real challenge for an actor. That’s part of why I avoided television for so long, because of the reality of my life and the fact that I had children. Now that I’ve been there for a while, it’s a great place to work, but my fear about it was — and my fear about fame in general is — that it diminishes your ability to do your job. I am now, to the world, pretty much Ray Donovan. Which is O.K. I’ve come to terms with it. But I’m actually not, I’m actually Liev Schreiber, and I have a mother and I have a father and I have two children and I’m an actor who has done many other things in the course of his life and also will

do many more, but that project, because of its size and scope, is defining, and I’m actually very proud of it. So it’s O.K. But I think that if people see you in a certain way, it makes it difficult for you to be seen in a different way and in the character.”

No surprises, then, that Schreiber has alluded before to “a concerted effort to try and stay out of the papers”. Which we’ll take as a compliment. “I have to stay out of the magazines, yet here I am talking to you and doing a cover story for *The Rake*, but I think there’s a value in not thrusting your face everywhere. The industry’s changed, and now part of it, with the celebrity factor, is that it’s a part of whether we can get work made. We have to pursue that as part of our business model. But for me, from the ‘true story’ perspective, you — or at least I — want the actor to vanish into the story so that the audience has that experience that it is completely about them. But [*Ray Donovan*] is great, clearly, from an acting standpoint. There’s a lot of people who didn’t know who I was. That allows you more freedom and range than you’re allowed when you’re well known.”

Given his track record, we can expect Liev Schreiber to harness that freedom in a spirit of eclecticism and intrepid exploration. Change, for him, is always welcome. “A range of characters to play with is so much fun,” he says. “It’s so much fun to be able to say to yourself, ‘Forget everything you thought you knew about this and go do that’. Then, ‘Forget everything you thought you knew about this and go do that’. You know the Heisenberg principle in physics? Measuring an event changes the nature of that event? I’ve always thought that when you know what you’re doing, it gets a little less interesting. As an actor, or in any profession, once you’re out on a limb, it gets a little more fun and you learn something new. I’ve always felt like everything I ever learned in my career generally came from a place of ‘did not go well’. In the theatre, where I had a long run of success, it was the first time I thought, ‘Whoa, I’m really crap at this’ that made me able to move on from that. Or go find something else, or completely reinvent this or just accept the fact that I’m crap and quit. Particularly when you have to do it again the next night.”

Variety, he says, triggers that professionally healthy unease he alluded to earlier. “I think we do our best work when we’re in that heightened state. Then it comes alive, and that’s the trick when you’re doing Shakespeare, for instance. You’re not changing those lines. Those are the lines you’re going to say. How can you say them in such a way that it feels like they’ve never been said before? And it’s the same exercise, for me, with the contemporary stuff. Let’s accept that the words are the words and then explore that.”


A toast, then, to that burning spirit of fictional exploration, however complex its origins. ■

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GROOMING: KUMI CRAIG @ STARWORKS USING LA MER.

Cream cashmere roll-neck,
Anderson & Sheppard.