

# ‘WHY DOES EVERYONE REMEMBER THE PSYCHOS?’

*His IMDb biography says he ‘specialises in psychopathic characters who hide behind a cultivated charm’. Well, what would they know? It’s true, his performance in Goodfellas was a seminal moment, but Ray Liotta’s career boasts an eclecticism that has gone unnoticed. Until now, writes NICK SCOTT.*

*photography **gavin bond** fashion direction **jo grzeszczuk***

Grey camel hair, wool and silk, double-breasted suit and emerald-green silk malachite print pyjama shirt, both **Caruso**; brown Havana acetate with brown mirrored lens 0009 sunglasses, **Persol**.

Silver rings, property of Ray Liotta.



Black wool double-breasted suit and black silk floral print pyjama shirt, both **Dolce & Gabbana**, white-gold and stainless steel Datejust 41 with blue dial, **Rolex**.

Silver rings, property of Ray Liotta.

Ray Liotta, as far as I'm aware, does not have a cold, as a fractious Frank Sinatra famously did in Gay Talese's brilliant *Esquire* profile that became a seminal example of New Journalism in the mid sixties. Adversity does, however, reign supreme. Shooting schedules, Fourth of July celebrations, and Lord knows what else have conspired to make interview time with Liotta an elusive prospect. Faintly pencilled-in slots have been erased, tentative travel plans shelved, but we finally get to chat over a three-way telephone conversation (L.A.-based publicist, New York-based Ray, your rural East Sussex-based writer), during which, in Liotta's words, I sound like I'm "underwater". Thankfully, we're only bantering about the rumour that he becomes an avid Tottenham Hotspur fan when he visits London (it's just shy of utterly untrue: "I wanted to go to a game, and just flipped a coin") when a series of fire alerts in his hotel means our conversation is gatecrashed by sirens and Tannoy pleas, soon retracted, to vacate the premises.

So it is to Liotta's credit that much personality, charm, warmth and humour manage to battering-ram their way into this knotty conversation scenario. It helps that the now 62-year-old actor is speaking, between takes, from the set of a project about which he's always effusive, *Shades of Blue*, the third season of which will begin in early 2018. For those who came in late, the show, which premiered early last year, sees Liotta play Matt 'Woz' Wozniak, a veteran lieutenant presiding over a maverick N.Y.P.D. crew in the shadow of an F.B.I. anti-corruption investigation. Jennifer Lopez and Drea de Matteo (who played Adriana La Cerva, Christopher Moltisanti's fiancée in *The Sopranos*: correct — that stake-out/tennis scene) also put in convincing turns in a show whose narrative creeps through the valley between loyalty and betrayal. Its writers distribute knowledge of what's happening parsimoniously between the characters while dishing it out generously to viewers.

"I always seem to have a dilemma going on, a moral conflict," says Liotta (throughout our exchange, he uses the first person when talking about his characters' predicaments; make of that what you will about his approach to Stanislavski's method). "What I feel is right and wrong is never clear. I'm not afraid to cross the line that's been drawn in terms of legalities of what can and can't be done while going after bad guys." Season three will kick off with Woz in dogged pursuit of the drug barons who forced a minor to put a bullet in his stomach at the end of season two: can he reveal more? "Because of what's happened, me and [Lopez's character] Harlee look at life in a very different way. Let me leave it at that so I don't give anything away. Because of it there's a rift between us — we're not exactly seeing eye-to-eye on how we do things."

While season two went out with a literal bang, audiences had already been shellshocked by one in the idiomatic sense, early in season one, when full sexual relations with internal affairs chief Donnie Pomp, played by Michael Esper, transpired following an

out-of-the-blue kiss. Woz's secret bisexual tendencies, thus far, haven't proved much of a plot driver, so what was the purpose of writing them at all? "I asked the exact same question, but in a sense it informs the character," he says. "The way I looked at it, I've met people in my life who just have this sense of freedom, that 'I want to live fully and deeply and experience everything I can' instinct. And I think a lot of that is Woz, even though he's a chicken about it. He'll do anything he can to keep it under wraps."

"One scene we shot but didn't use was a sequence where I was walking down the street and a group of kids were bullying an obviously gay kid, and I absolutely unleash on these kids, and tell this kid who is gay, 'Be who you are, don't be afraid, and let me tell you, I might have just taken care of this situation, but you're much stronger than me as a person. Because you've got the strength to be who you are, whereas I don't have — no pun intended — the balls to tell anyone.' There's also something that happens this season where I end up in a gay bar, but what you think might happen doesn't happen... Right now that appetite is not always prevalent; it's always bubbling underneath. I like

**"I kept going back to school because I liked drama, even though in the first year all I did was musicals."**

the fact that I'm playing a character who is bisexual."

A more prevailing theme in the show — perhaps as omnipresent as it is in the opening season of *The Wire* — is narcotics, and the violence that comes with them. The team's policy, within the narrative, is containment at all costs. Liotta says: "There's no way there's not going to be drug dealing going on. But if you could somehow kerb it, limit it to a certain amount of people, then so much the better. I don't know about your country but here there are gangs, and if you're caught dealing in someone else's neck of the woods, innocent people get killed in the crossfire. My way of thinking, and Woz's way of thinking, is limit it to just a couple of groups of people doing it, and really come down hard on those who are not approved by our group to do it, and this way we get a handle on it."

These storylines have heightened Liotta's sensitivity to America's drugs problem. "Actually, obviously the best way to get a handle on it is just to legalise it," he says. "The three strikes law means a lot of people are in jail for the rest of their lives because they got caught again dealing drugs. Now, if you're bringing in tons and tons — if you're a kingpin, and head of a cartel — those are the people who you want to limit. To blast someone who's got a little bit, because they're trying to get by in life because they can't get a job, there's no way it's not going to happen. In my country now there's a really big problem with opioids — Vicodin, OxyContin — and those kind of drugs became a gateway drug to heroin, because they cracked down on the doctors and pharmaceutical companies over the handing out of those things, so what happens is people want better highs. A lot of these smaller cities — Midwestern places, farming communities, where kids are just bored because there's not enough to do — that's where



Opposite page:  
Black and white  
houndstooth, wool-mix  
oversized coat, **AMI** at  
**Harrods**; navy wool  
trousers, **Gieves &  
Hawkes**; navy linen shirt,  
**Anderson & Sheppard  
Haberdashery**; white-gold  
and stainless steel Datejust  
41 with blue dial, **Rolex**.

Black cotton T-shirt,  
property of **Ray Liotta**.

This page:  
Black wool double-  
breasted coat, **Dries  
Van Noten** at **Harrods**; navy wool two-piece suit,  
**Ralph Lauren Purple  
Label**; navy linen shirt  
and cream cotton pocket-  
handkerchief, **Anderson &  
Sheppard Haberdashery**;  
cream, navy and black  
cashmere-silk **Quadrige**  
Losange scarf, **Hermès**.

they find their jollies. The gangs have brought the drugs out to cities in Ohio, and through the Midwest — not just L.A. or New York or Chicago. It's prevalent everywhere."

#### 'A lung with legs'

Ray Liotta never set out to be an actor. He left his high school in New Jersey with nothing but a vague idea of going into construction while nurturing some sub-professional athletic talent. "My sport was soccer," he says. "I loved it — I was obsessed with it. I played centre-back and would just run like a lung with legs. I was able to go for a long, long time just running all over the field. Maybe if I'd grown up somewhere else — England, maybe — I'd maybe have pursued that harder. But by the time you graduate out of high school, you realise, 'There's no way I'm going to realise all these pipe dreams and become a professional athlete'. You're not six-foot-nine."

So how did he end up studying at the University of Miami? "I had no idea whatsoever what I wanted to do with my life. I only went there because my dad said, 'Go to college and take whatever you want'. He was a big believer — as I have become, and learned from him — that the more you get out, especially as a youngster, and see and do different things, the more you might experience or find something you'd never have thought of before. But I'd walked out of my S.A.T.s thinking, 'Who am I trying to kid? I didn't study for this.' These days, that college (the University of Miami) is well respected, and not just a party school, but when I went there it was an easy school to get into. A woman called Donna Shalala, who served as Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Clinton administration, was made president, and she changed the whole culture."

He's described the university less politely in the past — "If you had a pulse, you could get in" — and enrolling didn't set Liotta's course for long. "I was just going to take the liberal arts course, but you had to take math and history, and I thought, 'No way, I don't want to even be in college'. Right next to that department, though, was the drama department, so I just took a step over and said, 'O.K., well, I'll be an actor. I'll take these classes for a year and fulfil my obligations to my father.' I figured that after that I'd go home and work in construction. My dad had a chain of automotive stores — carburettor, old tyres and so on — and deep down he was thinking I'd take that over, but I hated it. I hate the smell of rubber to this day because of how it smelled in his stores."

To sustain his initially half-hearted studies, Liotta worked in a cemetery. "It was my first job," he says. "A friend of mine who was a roommate in school — and we were from the same town — wanted a job for the summer, so we were just driving around and ended up stopping at the cemetery. Ironically, it was called Hollywood Park. They needed kids to do a lot of the gardening, and set-up for funerals, and wait in the bushes while the last

rites are being administered, and then after the people left we'd lower the bodies in the ground. Like every human being who's not religious, I have a big fear of death, and I won't say that job got rid of it but it got me closer to the reality of death — seeing it every day, burying bodies. It's not going to be fun." Even with our conversation hobbling through transatlantic sea cables, I detect his reverent tone become suddenly infused with jollity. "But it was a good job — I had a lot of people under me."

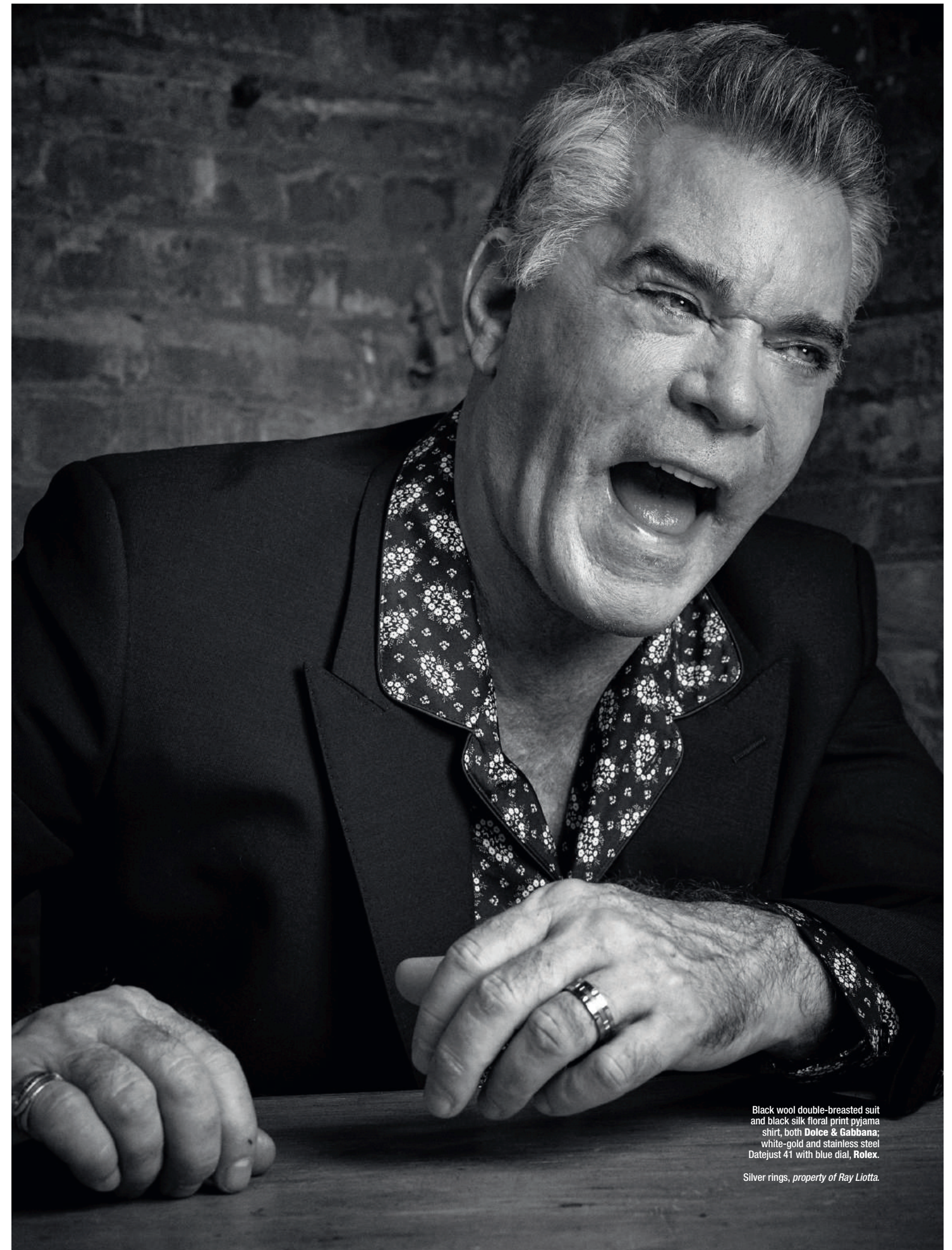
Ghoulish ways of earning a crust between college sessions notwithstanding, it was a happy period, and Liotta was pleasantly surprised by how tightly his randomly chosen study discipline began to grip him — despite a role (look away now, *Goodfellas* obsessives) as one of the Von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music* being fairly typical of the performance gigs he took on during the course. "I kept going back to school because I started liking drama, even though in the first year all I did was musicals," he says. "There was an acting teacher there — Robert 'Buckets' Lowery — who I really responded to. He made acting challenging."

Leaving Miami, Liotta encountered the grim triumvirate that so often befalls newly qualified actors: bartending, impecuniousness, frustration. But then came a role in a soap opera, *Another World*, in which he played Joey Perrini, as sweet-and-savoury a distillation of maternally approved wholesomeness as one might ever encounter, even in a soap. And yet, 36 years after that job came to an end, Liotta's IMDb bio states: "He specialises in psychopathic characters who hide behind a cultivated charm." So what happened?

#### 'Harrowing and beautifully wrought'


We know what the main catalyst was. In the late 1980s, Martin Scorsese — impressed by the way Liotta infused explosive energy with a soupçon of vulnerability in his first major movie role, 1986's *Something Wild* — cast him as a leading protagonist in what would become one of the most seminal mob dramas of all time, *Goodfellas*. What little needs to be said about the film is perhaps best left to Woody Allen: "I felt, when I sat there in the theatre... that it's like you're there with those guys for the entire two-and-a-half hours. You're there with them when they're sitting in those dives, when they're playing cards in the daytime, when they're with their wives, when they go and dig up bodies... It's funny, harrowing and beautifully wrought." *Goodfellas* is, indeed, a masterpiece, a brilliant antidote to the romanticised Mafia of the *Godfather* trilogy, made all the more compelling by Liotta, Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci's performances (livewire, measured, psychopathic, respectively). Had Liotta accepted an offer to play Harvey Dent in *Batman* around the same time, instead of taking on Scorsese, well, he probably wouldn't have exchanged digging up corpses for burying them again, but it's unlikely he'd be the household name he is today.

**Liotta worked in a cemetery ironically called Hollywood Park. "It was a good job — I had a lot of people under me."**



Black wool double-breasted suit and black silk floral print pyjama shirt, both Dolce & Gabbana; white-gold and stainless steel Datejust 41 with blue dial, Rolex.

Silver rings, property of Ray Liotta.



*Goodfellas is, indeed,  
a masterpiece, a brilliant  
antidote to the romanticised  
Mafia of the Godfather trilogy.*

Light blue linen classic  
summer shirt and navy  
webbing belt, **Anderson &  
Sheppard Haberdashery**;  
navy wool trousers, **Gieves  
& Hawkes**; white-gold and  
stainless steel Datejust 41  
with blue dial, **Rolex**.



REX FEATURES; PETER KRAMER/NBC



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Ray Liotta in *Something Wild*, 1986; playing baseball in *Field of Dreams*, 1989; as the malevolent cop in *Unlawful Entry*, 1992; starring alongside Whoopi Goldberg in *Corrina, Corrina*, 1994; in *Unforgettable*, 1996; with Bradley Cooper in *The Place Beyond the Pines*, 2012; Ray alongside co-star Jennifer Lopez in *Shades of Blue*; dishevelled in *Wild Hogs*, 2007; as the mob boss in *The Iceman*, 2012; in *Narc*, 2002; as Henry Hill, with Joe Pesci and Robert De Niro, in the iconic *Goodfellas*, 1990.

Black wool double-breasted coat, **Dries Van Noten** at Harrods; navy wool two-piece suit, **Ralph Lauren Purple Label**; navy linen shirt and cream cotton pocket-handkerchief, **Anderson & Sheppard Haberdashery**; cream, navy and black cashmere-silk Quadrige Losange scarf, **Hermès**; navy suede loafers, **Crockett & Jones**.

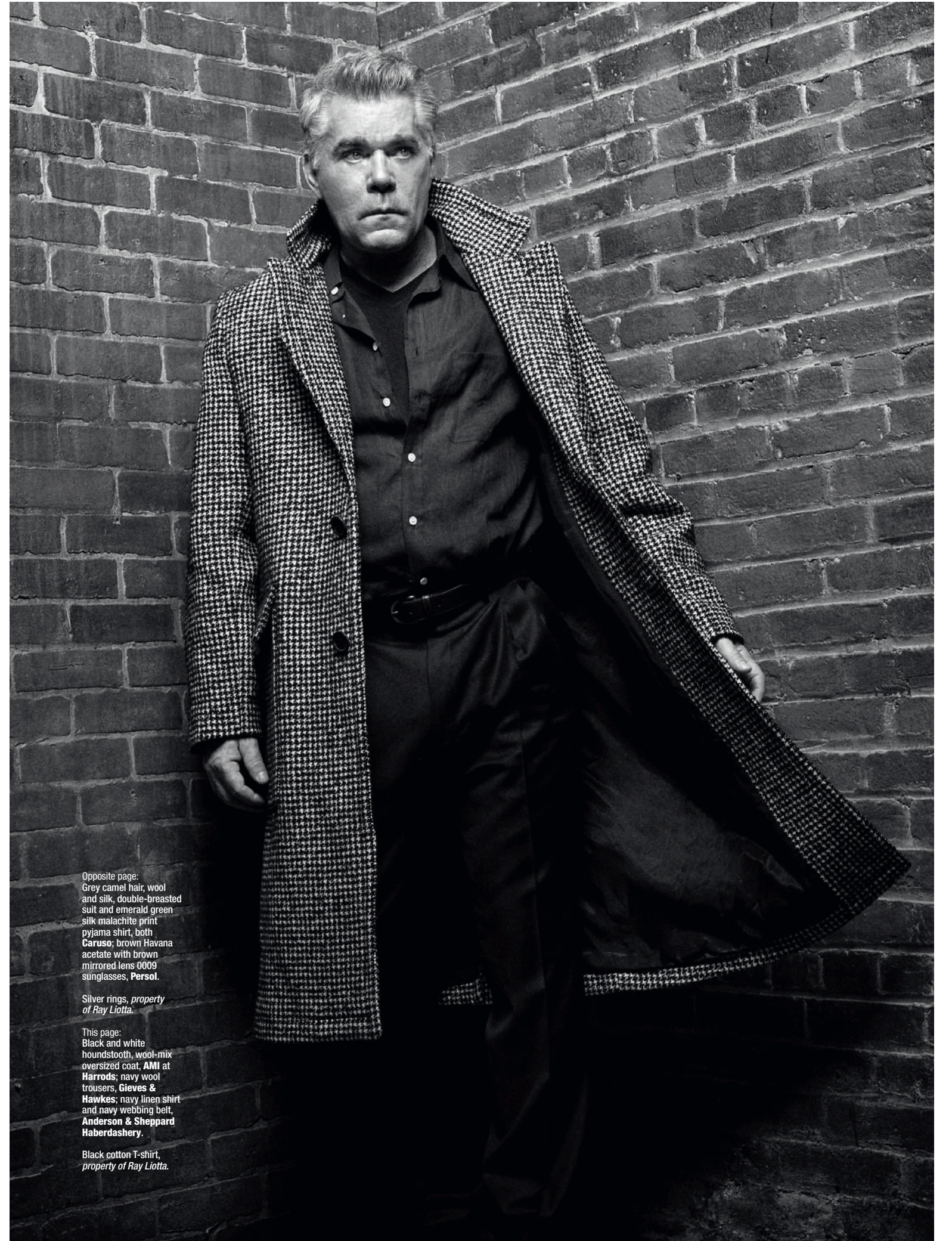
He rarely watches his own movies (“It was only when I started acting, around ’73, ’74, that I started paying attention to movies; I hadn’t been a moviegoer growing up”), and watched *Goodfellas* a few years ago for the first time since the premiere. “There was a film festival in Aruba I went to with my daughter, Karsen, so that we’d have a week of fun in the sun,” says Liotta, whose marriage to Karsen’s mother, Michelle Grace, ended in 2004. “I didn’t realise they were playing *Goodfellas* until they came up to me and asked me to introduce it. My daughter was waiting in the back row. I went down, the theatre was full, and I said to the crowd, ‘To my surprise, they’re showing *Goodfellas* and here I am to introduce it, please enjoy’. I started walking up the steps, and my daughter, once I got to the top, her eyes were glued to the screen. I said — she was 13 at the time — I said, ‘Karsen, do you really want to watch this?’ I think she was intrigued because she was at that age where boys come into her life, and they had the cute kid who played me at the beginning when I’m narrating it, and we ended up watching the movie. I don’t watch many of the things I do. It was just a really nice experience, because I hadn’t seen it in so long, [and] I watched the movie through her eyes. Afterwards she said, ‘I think this is one of the best movies I’ve ever seen!’ It was a super-nice daddy-daughter moment.”

**Cop with a conscience**

While *Goodfellas*’ Henry Hill will forever be Liotta’s defining role, an analysis of his career exposes just how reductive, how cursory, the aforementioned IMDb “specialises in psychopathic

characters” remark is. O.K., he’s played some nutters: in *Something Wild*, as Melanie Griffith’s former bad-beau, he injected proper vitality into that stock character, the unhinged ex; he found his own portrayal of a homicidal vampire in 1992’s *Unlawful Entry* so unpleasant he struggled to shake off the character after shooting; his detective Henry Oak in 2002’s crime thriller *Narc* — much like his ongoing incarnation Woz — is a haunted cop who follows his own conscience, rather than The Book, when it comes to whether occasional brutal violence is a legitimate method of law enforcement; and as real-life mobster Roy DeMeo in 2013’s *The Iceman* (actually only the second Mafioso he’s ever played), he stole and polished the trident from Michael Shannon’s cold-blooded killer.

But what of Gino, his devoted emotional carer to a mentally challenged sibling in 1988’s *Dominick and Eugene*? And his quietly benevolent Shoeless Joe Jackson in 1989’s fantasy-drama Kevin Costner vehicle, *Field of Dreams*? And Johnny Depp’s diligent sap of a father in 2001’s *Blow*? Cripes, he even had a supporting role in *Muppets Most Wanted* in 2014. He clarifies my question through the distorted ether: “Why does everyone only remember the psychos? Well, that’s true for most actors who play such characters. You see De Niro and Pacino and Gene Hackman, all of whom I might say proudly I’ve worked with... If you think of their movies you do not think of *Author! Author!* for Pacino, or *Glengarry Glen Ross*, you think of the harder edge — of *The Godfather*, of *Serpico*; same with De Niro, same for most actors. Those movies stand out more in people’s minds.”

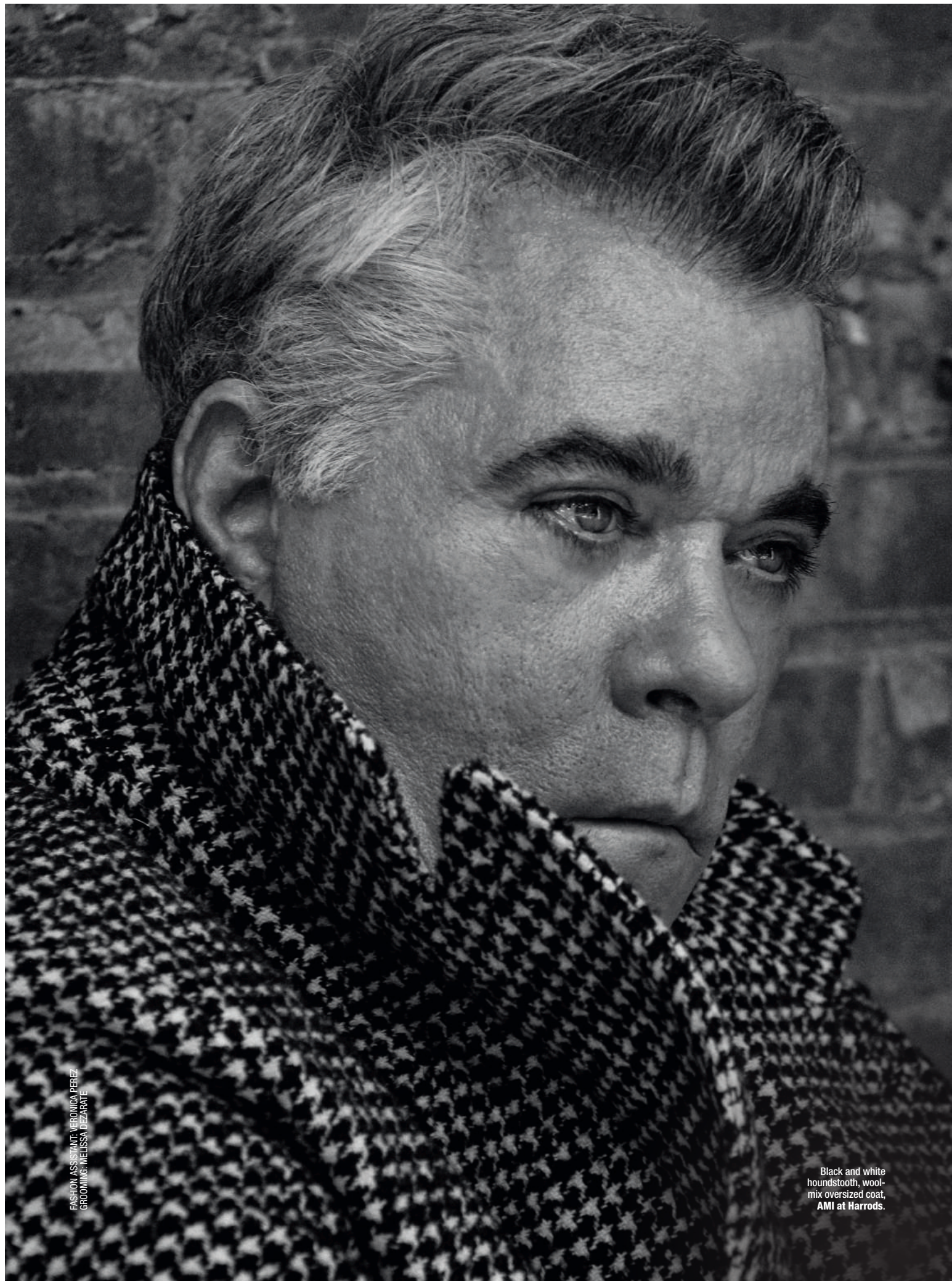


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Silver rings, *property  
of Ray Liotta*.

This page:  
Black and white  
houndstooth, wool-mix  
oversized coat, **AMI** at  
**Harrods**; navy wool  
trousers, **Gieves &  
Hawkes**; navy linen shirt  
and navy webbing belt,  
**Anderson & Sheppard  
Haberdashery**.

Black cotton T-shirt,  
*property of Ray Liotta*.



FASHION ASSISTANT: VERONICA PEREZ  
GROOMING: MELISSA BIZARTE

Black and white  
houndstooth, wool-  
mix oversized coat,  
AMI at Harrods.

Liotta's performance in his most famous movie is more than accomplished (a testimony, indeed, to the power of earthy, believable and engaging narration), and he's won plaudits for plenty of other performances in huge movies: not least the 1992 medical drama *Article 99* (which co-starred Kiefer Sutherland and Forest Whitaker); 2001's *Hannibal*; and more recently 2012's *Killing Them Softly*, a mob-crime romp also starring Brad Pitt and James Gandolfini. But arguably much of Liotta's best work — like that of the Coen Brothers (see *Blood Simple*), Charles Bukowski or Salvador Dalí — is that with which most people are less familiar. Liotta certainly did not have a cold when he played Sinatra in 1992's made-for-cable flick *The Rat Pack*, which co-starred Joe Mantegna as Dean Martin, Don Cheadle as Sammy Davis Jr., and Angus Macfadyen as Peter Lawford — not judging by the impressive job he made of summoning Sinatra's suavity, swagger and lethal charm.

For Liotta, though, his most underrated turn was that in *The Identical*, a 2014 period drama in which he plays a priest whose twin sons are separated at birth, with one going on to become an iconic rock star not so loosely based on Elvis Presley. Possibly because of his close emotional ties to filial estrangement — Liotta was adopted, and only found his birth mother, half brother, five half sisters and a full sister as an adult — he was engaged in the role from the beginning. He took preparation very seriously: "Because my character aged and changed in the film, I would watch a lot of [celebrity evangelist] Billy Graham on YouTube — when he was younger and more fiery in his sermons and preaching, and as he got older when he became just as passionate but not as we are as kids, which is a little over-dramatic.

"I wanted to use that, because my character, in the beginning of the film, is all fire-and-brimstone kind of preaching, then as I get older... I also went to lots of churches around Nashville, Tennessee, where we shot the film, which has more churches than any other city in America. It's like with Starbucks elsewhere, but with churches. Everywhere you look, different denominations, and I went to lots of different ones — Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic... I even went to Jewish temples to listen and learn as much as I could, and to watch the people as much as the preachers."

As he hinted during the cemetery anecdote previously, Liotta is not spiritually inclined. "My parents were heavily involved with politics and... let it just suffice for me to say that when they were running for office they went to church a lot, but when they started getting out of politics, church stopped," he says. "Religious groups fighting other religious groups, saying, 'This is the way we should be living, interpreting what was said in different ways...' It's just hypocritical, in terms of what is said and what is done." Familiarising himself with the *Bible* for the first time as part of his prep, he was startled by its content. "You read the *New Testament*,

then go back to the *Old Testament*, and the brutality, the fear, the fierceness of God is just overwhelming. He was scaaaary! What he did to you if you acted out! It was softened up a lot in the *New Testament...*" Sadly, Liotta feels, his efforts in that movie have never been fully appreciated. "That was one of the better roles I ever did, and yet I think about seven people saw it. I loved it. I loved that I aged over time. It was so different to anything I'd done. I felt that it was a role that was closer to me than anything I've done — I've never got in a fight in my whole life, but I have been able to relate to passion about things, to love. I have a daughter, meaning I can relate to the love of a son."

So why don't we know more about it? "A new group of people was doing the movie, and they'd never done a movie before," he says. "They were distributing it themselves, and it was a small movie, starring myself, Ashley Judd as my wife, and this new kid who nobody knew of. They said they were going to open the movie into

1,200 to 1,500 screens, and I said, 'You guys are crazy — this thing has to be platformed, it has to come out slowly and smartly, and you have to do it through churches, show it to pastors, go to religious conventions, get

the movie into people's heads slowly...' But [a producer] said, 'No, no, no, no, Ray, we got a secret weapon.' I said, 'What?' He piously holds his finger up in the air and looks in my eyes and says, 'We have him!' I say, 'That's not how it works! Just because you believe in God doesn't mean he's going to open your movie!'"

There's plenty Ray Liotta and *The Rake* don't get to talk about: his Scottish-Italian heritage; the rigorous workouts he still performs five days a week; his thoughts on the changing face of masculinity (he said, a couple of years back, that men are a "little lighter in the loafers" these days); the Tony Soprano rumour; how things might have panned out had he chosen to play Harvey Dent in *Batman* instead of doing *Goodfellas*; endless more stuff about *Goodfellas* (did De Niro really leave horses' heads in his dressing room, as a *Godfather* homage? Did he really listen to F.B.I. wiretaps of Henry Hill on his way to set each day?) ...

There's also the not-so-small matter of his career's future, a subject that, with the *Shades of Blue* crew calling him back to set, Liotta has a few precious seconds to elaborate on: "I'd like to do something more romantic, a sweeping love story. I've got a beautiful, beautiful script called *The Italian* that I'd love to do. It's about a guy who plays the violin, and when he was a kid his dad used to beat him because only sissies did that, so he's now in his forties, fifties, and he still goes off and plays the violin, but only in private... It's a beautiful story. I'd also love to do something more fun and goofy."

And, with that tantalising glimpse of an even more diverse future, and with the 100 TV. and movie credits milestone becoming a smaller and smaller spec in his rearview mirror, Ray Liotta returns to a career that, while it is about to enter its fifth decade, only came into being on a whim. ❧

**"In the Old Testament, the brutality, fear, the fierceness of God is overwhelming. He was scaaaary!"**