

# They Call Him Bruce

*This year's American Cinematheque Moving Picture Ball honoree isn't an easy man to pin down.*

**BY CHRIS KOSELUK**

**W**hy do so many people seem to have the wrong impression of Bruce Willis? In the case of Matthew Perry, it was understandable. The "Friends" star was considering a role in "The Whole Nine Yards" when he came home one day to a voice message from Willis, who was already cast as a mafia hit man in the comedy.

"I'm paraphrasing, but it was something like this," remembers Perry. "'Matthew, this is Bruce Willis. I'm very famous. Call me, or I'm going to come over, burn down your house and break both your legs.' He left his phone number. I was terrified to call."

Of course, Willis was kidding, and Perry did call. After they met, the young actor agreed to do the movie. Both enjoyed the experience so much, Perry persuaded Willis to do a guest stint on "Friends." It turned out to be a good move. This month, Willis won the Emmy for Outstanding Guest Actor in a Comedy Series.

But something more important came out of the association. "I've made maybe five movies, and I've not really stayed in contact with anyone," says Perry, who is currently starting his seventh season on the popular sitcom. "You're in this environment where you're really close with one another, and the movie ends and everybody says, 'OK, I'll call.' Nobody ever does. Bruce did. Time and again, he proves to be a nice guy and a good friend."

Michael Clarke Duncan had a similar experience. After years of playing bouncers and thugs, the towering actor was thrilled to land a showcase role in "Armageddon." But he was also nervous. People had told him stories about Willis' unusual on-set proclivities.

"I heard he didn't like people looking at him or being around him, so when I got on set, I avoided him," recalls Duncan via phone from Toronto where he's shooting "Sir Parker." "I was going out a door and he was coming in, and we bumped into each other. I'm thinking, 'OK, I'm fired.' I put my head down. He says, 'Excuse me, is your name Michael?' I thought, 'Damn, this is it.' He says, 'How ya doing? You always put your head down when you see me, and you never speak to me.' I said, 'I heard you don't like people looking at you and ...' He said, 'Wait, wait ... did I ever do that to you?' 'No, but I wasn't going to give you a chance to fire me.' He said, 'I don't fire anybody. Why don't we start over. I'm Bruce Willis.' I said, 'They call me 'Big Mike.' We shook hands and became the best of friends. To this day, he'll do anything for me."

Duncan isn't exaggerating. Willis was instrumental in helping Duncan land the role of John Coffey in "The Green Mile," getting him the script and setting up a meeting for him with the film's director, Frank Darabont.



"Usually people in Hollywood don't keep their word. I really didn't expect him to, thinking, 'Yeah, he's really going to reach back and help me,'" says Duncan, whose next project is "The Visitor," Tim Burton's update of "The Planet of the Apes." "When Frank called and said Bruce Willis told him I was the man he'd been looking for and he'd like to set up an audition, I thought, 'Bruce is phenomenal.'"

The role made Duncan a star. It also earned him a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination. The best way Duncan can sum up the relationship? "If I had a brother, I would want it to be him."

Both stories exemplify the mystique surrounding Willis. No one would deny he's a bona fide movie star. On boxoffice numbers alone, he easily makes the grade. His 35 films since his debut in 1988 have grossed more than \$2 billion in North America. Add a couple more billion overseas.

Willis certainly impresses his collaborators — both in front of and behind the camera.

"He's got extraordinary presence. He's really today's Humphrey



## FILMOGRAPHY

YEAR	MOVIE	ROLE
2001	Bandits	Joe
2000	The Kid	Russ Duritz
	Unbreakable	David Dunne
	The Whole Nine Yards	Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudecki
1999	Breakfast of Champions	Dwayne Hoover
	The Sixth Sense	Malcolm Crowe
	The Story of Us	Ben Jordan
1998	Armageddon	Harry S. Stamper
	Mercury Rising	Arthur "Art" Jeffries
	The Siege	Gen. William Devereaux
1997	The Fifth Element	Maj. Karben Dallas
	The Jackal	The Jackal
1996	Bearis and Butt-head Do America	Muddy Grimes (voice) (uncredited)
	Last Man Standing	John Smith
1995	Die Hard: With a Vengeance	Lt. John McClane
	Four Rooms (segment: The Man From Hollywood)	Leo (uncredited)
	Twelve Monkeys	James Cole
1994	Color of Night	Dr. Bill Capa
	Nobody's Fool	Carl Roebuck
	North	Narrator
	Pulp Fiction	Butch Coolidge
1993	National Lampoon's Loaded Weapon 1	Wrong Mobile Home Owner (uncredited)
	Striking Distance	Tom Hardy
1992	Death Becomes Her	Dr. Ernest Menville
	The Player	Himself
1991	Billy Bathgate	Bo Weinberg
	Hudson Hawk	Hudson Hawk
	The Last Boy Scout	Joe Hallenbeck
	Mortal Thoughts	James Urbanski
1990	The Bonfire of the Vanities	Peter Fallow
	Die Hard 2	Lt. John McClane
	Look Who's Talking Too	The Voice of Mikey
1989	In Country	Emmett Smith
	Look Who's Talking	The Voice of Mikey
	That's Adequate	Himself
1988	Blind Date	Walter Davis
	Die Hard	Det. John McClane
	Sunset	Tom Mix
1987	The Verdict	Courtroom Observer (uncredited)
1980	The First Deadly Sin	Man Entering Diner as Delaney Leaves (uncredited)



"Unbreakable"



"Armageddon"



"The Sixth Sense"



"Die Hard"

"Twelve Monkeys"

"Blind Date"

Bogart," says "The Whole Nine Yards" director Jonathan Lynn. "He's very good at judging exactly how much or how little to do in front of the camera. When he does something big, it really counts."

"What bothers me is he can do as much raising an eyebrow as I can do slamming myself into a glass door," adds Perry. "He's got a really minimalistic, realistic acting style. I learned a lot from him."

"The Sixth Sense" director M. Night Shyamalan believes Willis' subtle style was instrumental to the success of the supernatural thriller. "We decided early on that Malcolm Crowe would be really reserved — hold things in — observing the child as a therapist would," says the director, currently in post on Willis' next release, "Unbreakable." "He's just a very controlled individual. It's so tempting to shout or scream or do big things. Bruce was so good at playing it subtly and showcasing the kid."

This downplayed demeanor might be the reason Willis, who has turned the smirk and glib throwaway into an art form, isn't taken as seriously as some of his contemporaries.

Another explanation might be the actor's willingness to forgo

his ego in pursuit of a better end result.

"He's always willing to throw away his best performance for the sake of the movie," says Shyamalan. "We cut two or three scenes in 'Sixth Sense' that showcased his acting. He was more than happy to let them go for the story."

"He has great respect for other actors," agrees Lynn. "He frequently said, 'This isn't my movie — this is Matt's movie.'"

This might explain why Willis fares so poorly when it comes to awards. Unlike most of Hollywood's top talent, he's never been nominated for, let alone won, an Academy Award. "The Sixth Sense" was honored with six nominations, including Best Picture and Best Supporting Actor nods for Haley Joel Osment and Toni Collette. Willis was the forgotten man. Fittingly, one honor he did receive was an MTV Movie Awards nomination — for Best On-Screen Duo, which he shared with Osment.

It was playing the wise-cracking but irresistible private eye David Addison that brought Willis into the spotlight after years of struggling in



# AMERICAN CINEMATHEQUE

theater, commercials, television and bit film parts. Willis beat out 3,000 other hopefuls to win the role and only after "Moonlighting" creator Glenn Gordon Caron insisted he be cast.

Willis' flippant, throwaway delivery almost predestined a long and successful career in comedy. His big-screen debut was in the Blake Edwards slapstick farce "Blind Date," but the actor wasn't about to be pigeonholed. He surprised everyone when it was announced that his next project would be the big-budget actioner "Die Hard." You could almost hear Hollywood collectively shout, "Bruce Willis — action hero?"

But, Willis' performance as John McClane, an everyman caught up in extraordinary circumstances, proved to be boxoffice dynamite. "Die Hard" grossed \$80 million, spawning two sequels that earned even more. Willis became a big-screen icon.

Renny Harlin, who directed "Die Hard 2: Die Harder," believes it is Willis' allegiance to the character that has made the "Die Hard" movies so popular. "Some would say these are comic book movies, but he took the character and his motivation extremely seriously," says Harlin. "He understood the key to this character was not saving the world, but the relationship

between him and his wife. Every day, we'd discuss the how's and why's of this character."

Not that Willis slouched on the film's other important element. "He never complained that I made him run through snowstorms, past helicopters and planes and do a lot of physical fights," Harlin continues. "He was always ready to do another take."

What Willis wasn't willing to do was coast through a film career as an action hero. Though some of his biggest hits have been in that genre, most notably "The Last Boy Scout" and "Armageddon," what distinguishes his filmography are the unlikely character choices: the shell-shocked Vietnam veteran in "In Country," "Pulp Fiction's" beat-up prizefighter, the ne'er-do-well in "Nobody's Fool," the compassionate child psychiatrist in "The Sixth Sense." These roles epitomize Willis' knack for spotting well-written, in-depth characters. What makes them more distinctive is that none would be described as star turns by Hollywood standards.

"There isn't anyone in Hollywood whose career I've admired more than this guy in terms of the risks he's taken and the success and flubs he's had," says producer David Hoberman. "It's just been extraordinary."

## NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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Egyptian," says Smith.

Peter Dekom, co-chair of the Cinematheque's board of directors, also believes that the Egyptian has strengthened the organization's main purpose. "We're a strange preservation society," he says. "We don't preserve prints. We preserve the experience. People see old movies on video, but that's really not how they're supposed to be seen."

This realization hit Dekom when the Cinematheque screened an Alfred Hitchcock film at its new venue. "I realized I was seeing the movie in a facility with a capacity as good — or maybe even better — than the one Mr. Hitchcock himself had probably used," remembers Dekom. "The ability to replicate the experience blew me away. I realized how much we had accomplished."

But the ambitious Hollywood-based organization still has many goals. Not surprisingly, some center around its new home.

Smith insists that next year, the Cinematheque will address the question on everyone's mind: When will the restaurant open? "That's what people talk about most when they see me."

Details for the on-site eatery are still being worked out, but Smith believes it will all come together in 2001. She also reveals installation will begin in January on a new pipe organ to accompany the silent films.

But building improvements are just part of the Cinematheque's expansion goals. Having the Egyptian as a base is allowing the Cinematheque to reach into the community. A new program, recently begun with Hollywood High School, will help bring the cinematic experience to students.

The venture allows students to attend screenings free of charge and encourages them to attend programs related to their studies such as the upcoming Dickens on Film festival and Opera on Film weekend. Future plans also call for student-made films to be screened at

Hoberman believes "Bandits," a film he is co-producing, will show even more of Willis' talent. He and Billy Bob Thornton play bank robbers who become involved with Cate Blanchett, a woman they kidnap during a heist. Barry Levinson is directing the MGM release slated for next summer. "Right now, he's at the top of his game, and we're thrilled to have him on this picture," says Hoberman.

Finally getting some of the recognition he deserves, Willis is being named this year's honoree at the American Cinematheque Moving Picture Ball.

"Let me put it this way: It wasn't a difficult choice," says Peter Dekom, a Cinematheque co-chair. "He takes risks. He'll do these big-budget, star vehicles, but he'll also do the smaller movies, offbeat characters or roles where he's not the star."

But before you start believing he can do it all, think again. Duncan reveals that the star does have one failing. "He cannot play basketball," says Duncan. "He's one of the worst players I've seen in my entire life. Let it be known right now — the celebrity games — I wouldn't take him on my squad. I'd pick Haley Joel Osment first." □

the Egyptian.

Most importantly, the Egyptian has given the Cinematheque the ability to do what it does best. "Our goal is to show movies to as many people as possible," says Smith. The Cinematheque has expanded its screening program to a weekly basis. Its Web site ([www.americancinematheque.com](http://www.americancinematheque.com)) reveals an eclectic mix of cinematic treats, including everything from a program of films about Ancient Egypt, to tributes to such filmmakers as Paul Bartel, Jan Kounen and Victor Saville, to a showing of John Carpenter's "Halloween." Upcoming programs include a tribute to Buster Keaton, highlighted by a tour of the L.A. locations he used, and a showing of the 1929 silent film "Erotikon," featuring a live orchestra from Prague. The AFI Festival, the Latino Festival and Cinecon are all also using the Cinematheque's new home for their events.

That couldn't please the board more.

"Just going into the movie theater is worth the trip, but fortunately, we screen some nice things, too," says Dekom. "The people who go to Cinematheque love movies, and they know the people sitting with them love movies. So they have this great commonality of experience. It's the most interesting intellectual seduction in Los Angeles." □

The American Cinematheque Award will be presented to Bruce Willis at the 15th annual Moving Picture Ball, American Cinematheque's annual benefit gala, on Wednesday, Sept. 23, and televised on TNT on Sept. 27 at 8 p.m. "It's one of the most fun evenings in Hollywood," says Roger Dalrymple, executive producer of the event. "This year, we'll be showing film vignettes, plus an original movie we've made re-creating the early years of Bruce's career in New York."