

Film Close-Up: John C. Reilly

by Joey_Berlin

After 40 supporting roles in a career spanning 18 years, John C. Reilly finally gets to star in his own comedy, "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story." A stinging spoof of 2005's "Walk the Line," the new film casts Reilly as a country singer with a life story like Johnny Cash's. The R-rated "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story" comedically chronicles his rise and fall, and Reilly gave it everything he's got.

JOHN C. REILLY - Actor John C. Reilly plays hard-living faux music legend Dewey Cox in the comedy 'Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story,' a stinging spoof of 2005's 'Walk the Line.' CNS Photo courtesy of Gemma La Mana. Director Jake Kasdan co-wrote the screenplay with producer Judd Apatow (of "Knocked Up" and "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" fame). Reilly rarely gets an above-the-title credit, and he has never been the only face on a film's poster before. But he is familiar to audiences from his long and distinguished career playing second bananas in films such as "Talladega Nights," "Gangs of New York," "The Perfect Storm," "Boogie Nights" and "Chicago," for which he was Oscar-nominated.

The 42-year-old husband and father of two is also an acclaimed stage actor. He also has five upcoming films in various stages of production, all scheduled for release in 2008.

Q: In "Walk Hard" you do not seem worried about going all the way with a joke and embarrassing yourself, almost treating it as a serious role. Is that the best way to approach comedy, that it's not funny?

A: Biggest mistake of my life! No, that's the agreement when you're doing comedy. You can't go, "Oh, well, I'll chase the joke only this far." I learned that from Will Ferrell, actually. If you commit to something, you commit all the way. And you have to throw everything you have in the line of fire, including your body, your dignity, your reputation. That's it. If you're playing a jester, you've got to do what you can, what's required. And watching Will run around in his underwear on "Talladega Nights" was a big inspiration. I was like, man, that guy's brave! Look at him. And it just showed me, like, it doesn't really matter. I'm not in the matinee-idol business, where people are judging me by my body or whatever. I think, if anything, people appreciate that you are brave like that.

Q: Is that liberating, as an actor? Do you often get to throw everything you have into a role?

A: Yeah, you do. That's the way I've always done everything. I remember my first movie was "Casualties of War." I was in Thailand, and there was a big rehearsal room and all these actors were there. I was just playing a day-player part at that point. I eventually got bumped up to one of the leads of the movie, but at that point I was there just to kind of help out. And I'd come from the theater. I had never done a movie before, I had never been out of the country before or anything. I was the new kid, I was 22. They had to do a scene where there was an old Vietnamese villager the soldiers come upon. And they said, oh, we don't have that guy here, we're going to hire him on the day. So they said, "John, just read this guy." So I take it and start attempting to speak Vietnamese, just fully committed to it. I remember Sean Penn just smirking like, who the heck is this kid? But that's the only way I know how to do it.

Q: So your approach to a drama, "Casualties of War," was the same as it was for "Walk Hard"?

A: I don't view it like there's a big difference between comedic acting and dramatic acting. You push yourself as honestly as you can and as real as you can, and if the circumstances of the scene are ridiculous, then you're in a comedy, you know?

Q: How about when you throw singing into the mix? Was there any style that was a particular challenge?

A: A challenge? I don't know. I'm the sort of person that's a chameleon anyway. I think that's why I got into acting, like, I don't even know who I really am. I think I'm just sort of a sum of my characters, to tell you the truth. So to be able to do all of these different musical styles, it's way more fun than any straight biopic would have been because if I had done the Johnny Cash story or the Roy Orbison story, those guys did basically one type of music. They had some changes through their careers, but not like Dewey Cox. So I just took to it like a duck to water. I loved changing my voice and changing the point of view of the character as he went through different time periods. It was a really cool part of the making of this movie, that we spent those six months crafting those songs.

Q: Is there any concern about the possibility of offending Johnny Cash fans or his family or any of the people

you reference in the movie?

A: I have to think that if Johnny Cash saw this movie, he would find it really funny. Because you can't have lived through the life that guy lived through without some type of gallows humor about the dark stuff that went on and the craziness that is a musician's life. And that was shown to us by Lyle Lovett and Eddie Vedder and Jack White (who all did cameos in "Walk Hard"). They all got it. They immediately thought, like, yeah it's crazy what musicians do and what they go through and the way people mythologize them. So I'm not too worried about offending people. We were equal-opportunity offenders as much as we could be.

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