Hollywood Etc.: Don Cheadle, nice guy and 'actorvist,' puts his heart where his mouth is

by Norma Meyer

BEVERLY HILLS - Don Cheadle will not give it up.

"I can't talk about the thing that made us laugh so hard," he insists, smiling and adamantly shaking his head. "I can't - it's very blue. I can't tell you. No, I'm not going to tell you!"

Cheadle, who co-stars with Adam Sandler in the tear-jerker drama "Reign Over Me" is referring to a scene where their characters hysterically laugh while watching a Mel Brooks movie marathon.

"Reign Over Me" is about the renewed friendship between New York dentist Alan Johnson (Cheadle) and his former college roommate, Charlie Fineman (Sandler), who has become an introverted basket case since losing his wife and daughters on a hijacked plane on Sept. 11 five years before.

The serious emoting was hard enough. But Cheadle says he and Sandler were "both dreading the scene" where the script called for them to "laugh uproariously" during the comedy marathon. "It's like man, we better find something funny or we're not going to be laughing uproariously at all," Cheadle recalls.

'REIGN' MAN - For his critically acclaimed role as hotelier Paul Rusesabagina in 'Hotel Rwanda,' Don Cheadle, right, earned an Oscar nomination. CNS Photo courtesy of Blid Alsbirk.

So what was the gut-buster? The Oscar-nominated actor ("Hotel Rwanda") finally spills the secret.

"It involved the guy whose degenerate gambler friends dared him to get breast implants and wear them for a year," says Cheadle, cracking up. "The dare was for something like $100,000. And apparently the dude's still rocking them because he likes them and he says the girls like them. He still has breasts!"

(True story. Pro gambler Brian Zembic did get C cups a decade ago to collect $100,000.)

"And of course that led to more conversations with Adam, and it got to a point where it was just ludicrous. He did something and then I did something and we just lost it," Cheadle says, chortling at a memory one can only imagine.

In person, just like on-screen, the 42-year-old actor can quickly switch the humor button on and off. For much of this interview, as he relaxes into a sofa in a four-star hotel suite, the easygoing California Institute of the Arts grad shows more of his cerebral side. Then again, he's the son of a shrink.

One of Hollywood's busiest performers, Cheadle has played everything from a Los Angeles Police Department detective in the 2005 Academy Award-winning best picture "Crash" to a porn star in 1997's "Boogie Nights." This summer, he's got two movies hitting theaters: He's the lead in "Talk to Me," about real-life 1960s ex-con radio host Ralph "Petey" Green, and reprises his role as a British explosives expert in the caper sequel "Ocean's Thirteen."

He's also a self-described "actorvist."

For more than two years, Cheadle has worked to raise awareness of the crisis in Sudan's Darfur region, where militias have killed an estimated 200,000 villagers and displaced 2.5 million since 2003. Last month, Cheadle testified before a Senate subcommittee about his visit to Darfur and refugee camps in neighboring Chad. In May, "Not on Our Watch," a book he co-authored with human rights activist John Prendergast, hits shelves.

Cheadle was first approached about Darfur by Rep. Ed Royce, D-Calif., and chair of the House Subcommittee on Africa. Royce had just seen a screening of Cheadle's 2004 film "Hotel Rwanda," in which he portrayed real-life hotelier Paul Rusesabagina, the hero who saved 1,200 Rwandans in 1994 during the ethnic massacre of some 800,000 civilians. Royce told Cheadle a similar genocide was occurring in Darfur, and invited him to join a Congressional delegation to the war-torn region in January 2005.

"I'd never heard of Darfur," Cheadle admits. "I didn't know what was going on. I was totally uninformed."

He says the refugee camps teemed with thousands of frightened survivors, some who had been raped and maimed. Children were sick and starving.

"Once you sit down and laugh with a kid - we didn't speak each other's language obviously, but we were there long enough where you use nonverbal language. You kick a ball. They kick a ball back. You start playing a soccer game. You go, 'These are no different than my own kids,'" says Cheadle, who has two daughters, 10 and 12, with his significant other, actress Bridgid Coulter.

"These people are just written off. This is one of the greatest humanitarian crises on the face of the planet.

And Britney Spears not having panties on leads off the news."

With "Ocean's" co-star and Darfur advocate George Clooney, Cheadle traveled to Egypt and China in December to lobby officials to use their ties with the Sudanese government to stop the violence. The actors continued their campaign days later at United Nations headquarters in New York.

"We saw inaction with Katrina," Cheadle says. "You don't have to look across the waters to see it. We have been conditioned to say 'Ah!' and gasp and then go, 'What's on Channel 6? Oh my God, that's awful. Did you get the new so-and-so album?' We have gotten very facile at moving onto the next thing. So if you don't harp on something and if you don't continue to pound on something, it just goes off the radar."

When he's not on set or being an actorvist, Cheadle is a soccer dad who plays the sax, practices tai chi and drives a hybrid Lexus. (His Prius was totaled in an accident while Coulter was driving.)

"I'm someone who happens to believe that global warming is real. I don't believe it's a joke or it's something a bunch of environmentalists got together on to take down corporations. There is a finite amount of dead dinosaurs to turn into gas."

At home, Cheadle says he and Coulter, who appeared as his wife in 1997's "Rosewood," keep busy with kid stuff. "We've got recitals and soccer games and play rehearsals and music practice - all of that."

In "Reign Over Me," Cheadle's character seems to have the perfect family. But he's lost an emotional connection to his wife, played by Jada Pinkett Smith.

He says he and Pinkett Smith - whose actor-husband is Will Smith - "would throw in our home-life scenarios" as they worked out scenes of their marriage. Once, the two realized they "had the exact argument" with their real mates the night before. Nice-guy Cheadle won't divulge what from his offscreen union with Coulter ended up on celluloid.

"Unless she's here to say 'Yeah you can tell that story,' I'm not telling that story," he firmly states.

And unlike his eventual blab about the dude with the breast implants, Cheadle this time wisely remains tight-lipped.

Hollywood Etc.: Don Cheadle, nice guy and 'actorvist,' puts his heart where his mouth is by Norma Meyer