

Blow Job

Johnny Depp and the rest of director Ted Demme's cast discuss the daunting task of creating a film about a sympathetic coke dealer

by Laurel D'Gangi

To say that the Standard Hotel on the Sunset Strip is a fitting location for a press junket promoting *Blow*, the epic tale of George Jung, America's most successful cocaine dealer, is a gross understatement. The '60s décor, with its tacky shag rugs, inflatable furniture and Warhol print curtains, reflects the era in which illegal drug use was embraced by the masses. What's more, temperature control knobs in each of the hotel's 138 rooms are labeled "Blow...hard...harder...stop."

But *maybe* this is mere coincidence. Perhaps the somewhat run-down Standard (compared to the posh Mondrian or Four Seasons, frequent interview spots) was chosen so Johnny Depp, who portrays Jung, could smoke his hand-rolled cigarettes freely. After all, he tells us journalists that he moved to France so he could smoke (and, we assume, to be with his girlfriend, Vanessa Paradis, and daughter, Lily-Rose).

He smokes as he explains how he initially was uncertain about taking on the role. Even after reading Bruce Porter's biography of Jung, Depp just wasn't sure it was such a great idea to make a film about a drug dealer. But a visit to Otisville Federal Correctional Institute in New York, where Jung is serving time on drug charges until 2015, changed his mind. "He [Jung] didn't have to say anything," says Depp. "I could see the hurt in his eyes and that hurt has been there for a real long time. It wasn't until I met George that I could say, 'Yeah, I could do this movie.'"

After spending two intense, 14-hour days getting to know Jung, Depp felt a strong rapport with the character he ended up portraying. "You have to really work at it to say he's a criminal," says Depp. "He's very charming, smart, funny, really a man. He's in there, doing his time, not whining about it."

Depp sees Jung as a victim of his uneventful, middle-class upbringing. Jung's mother, Ermine (Australian actress Rachel Griffiths) is forever frustrated that her hard-working husband Fred (Ray Liotta) can't provide her with a big enough piece of the American Dream. The adolescent Jung vows that he'll grow up never having to worry about money. "We're all a product of what our parents make us and our surroundings," says Depp. "He became what he became because of that."

And although Jung, before landing at Otisville, had earned approximately 100 million dollars in two years working with the Medellín cocaine cartel, Depp implies that even more powerful forces are to blame for the

nation's drug problems. "It would be pretty naïve to believe that... maybe in some top branches of the government there isn't some top brass involved in the drug trade. There's just too much money." He even praises Jung for a reticence to rat on these imagined forces. "Here's a guy, he could probably blow the whistle on that top brass, and he hasn't."

The first draft of *Blow*'s screenplay was writ-



Depp consults with director Demme on the set of *Blow*

ten by David McKenna (*American History X*). McKenna was deeply involved in another project when Ted Demme approached actor-writer-director Nick Cassavetes (*Unhook the Stars*) regarding a rewrite.

Cassavetes admits that he, too, was initially reluctant to work on *Blow*. After reading the Bruce Porter book, he got back to Demme and admitted that he just didn't get it. "It had all the trappings—the music and dancing and fun and frivolity—but I just didn't understand the story."

Like Depp, Cassavetes was turned around after meeting with Jung. But unlike Depp, he had a completely different take on the former dealer. "George has got a lot of game," says Cassavetes. "Right away, he was like, 'It's a shame that I'm here and I got screwed around and there might be some money still out there and I didn't lose all my money and maybe you can help me...' All that kind of stuff that people in prison say. They like to test you and see where you're at. And I said, 'Shut up George. I don't want to hear all this shit.'"

It took several days of meeting with Jung before Cassavetes had the information he needed to commit to the project: Jung admitted that his grown daughter, Kristina, hates him and never visits him in prison. "I got back to the hotel and called Teddy and said,

"Yeah, OK, I'll do it. From there George and I got along great," Cassavetes says. "He still calls me every five minutes."

Ted Demme, director of *The Ref*, *Beautiful Girls* and the critically-acclaimed *Monument Avenue*, helmed and co-produced *Blow* with Joe Stillerman and Denis Leary. When he sits down at the roundtable, ready to be interviewed, he's greeted by Depp's ashtray and the remains of his hand-rolled cigarettes. "Looks like Johnny's been here," he laughs.

Demme had wanted to direct a film based on Jung's life from the moment he finished reading the Bruce Porter book. "I thought it was an incredible story... small town boy, all American boy, football player, grows up to be Pablo Escobar's right-hand man. Like Depp, Demme was mesmerized by the "real" George Jung. "He made me laugh, he made me cry, he told me amazing stories. He quoted Kerouac and Bob Dylan. I couldn't get [our meeting] out of my head for a week. I was dreaming about him at night."

Demme admits he was attracted to the challenge of presenting George Jung as a sympathetic character. But is he, perhaps, portrayed too sympathetically? Is it possible to tell Jung's story without glamorizing him?

"*Blow* is about a period of time in America that was all about transformation, from innocence to cynicism, from pot to cocaine," says Demme. "I thought that we could have some fun in the first half of the film, so that our last sequence would be a condemning of the lifestyle. George certainly made some pretty bad decisions in his life. And the result is that you have a 58-year-old man in prison, growing old, estranged from his family, broke and broken, and very remorseful. To me that's really sad."

"Obviously if we only did movies about the good guys, then we wouldn't know about the bad guys," says Cassavetes. "George is interesting to me, therefore I write about him, and I'm proud I did. For me it was a great experience. It reminded me that, yes, we can be so stupid that we can throw everything away."

Depp also considers *Blow* a cautionary tale. "It's better to watch someone else make the mistakes rather than make them ourselves," he says.

Paul Reubens (best known as Pee Wee Herman) plays Jung's friend and West Coast connection, hairdresser Derek Foreal. Donning flowered pants, a checked shirt and a Beatles' hairdo,

Reubens' duds at the press junket complement the Standard's ambience. His only concern about being involved in *Blow* was altruistic: he feared that the audience's suspension of disbelief toward Derek might be undermined by Reubens' "Pee Wee persona." (It isn't.)

And like Demme, Depp and Cassavetes, Reubens doesn't believe that *Blow* glamorizes the cocaine trade. "You'd have to be insane to see this movie and want to be a drug dealer, unless you're the kind of person — and you may be," he adds with a grin, "[where] you say, 'Oh, I see what to avoid here.'"

Unfortunately, Jung was too much of a trail blazer to know what to avoid — if, indeed, it was avoidable. According to Cassavetes, when Jung first started selling coke, the official Surgeon General's report was that it wasn't addictive. "By the time the blush was off the rose, he was in too deep, the course was set."

Perhaps greed, but perhaps more likely the adrenaline rush, the pure fun of being a pirate and lawbreaker who liked to steal planes and thumb his nose at authority daily is what kept Jung from retiring from the drug trade while he still had a chance.

Cassavetes notes that Jung had run into Tuna (Ethan Suplee), his early partner in the marijuana business, years after Tuna had stopped dealing. Tuna was now living the straight life, but his drug money had bought him the good life, including a boat and a house on Cape Cod. After reminiscing about the old days, Tuna invited him over for dinner. Jung had no interest; instead he wanted to involve Tuna in more deals. Tuna refused and Jung didn't understand.

"Tuna wasn't the aberration," says Cassavetes. "He got out. He was able to value his life, was able to say, 'You know what, I made a lot of money and I don't need to make any more.'"

So, should George Jung be in prison? "I don't think so," says Reubens. "I have very mixed feelings about that, specifically about how many people are incarcerated for minor drug infractions. The so-called war on drugs seems like a big failure to me."

Cassavetes feels differently. "I don't feel sorry for George Jung... I feel bad because he's sitting in prison. I feel bad that my name goes on the screen and I make money off his pain. I don't feel bad enough not to do it... [But] George is where he should be, and I don't mean that in any moralistic sense."

According to Cassavetes, Jung "had been in the joint so long he didn't know who Johnny Depp was," and had only one request concerning the filming of his life story: "George said, 'I don't want any of these fruity actors playing me.'" But when Jung and Depp met, there was instant simpatico. Jung was thrilled with Depp's characterization of him, and equally pleased with the film itself. During one of his many phone calls to Cassavetes, he praised the film for being "really good, just the way it happened."

But his satisfaction is bittersweet. "From what I understand," says Depp, "it was very emotional for him having to relive all that — sort of like a sledgehammer to the head to realize the reality of where he's at now."

Ray Liotta, also at the press junket, welcomed the role of Jung's father, Fred, for the opportunity to play someone who ages from 27 to 60 during the course of the film. He was also attracted to the role of a "non-aggressive character," who has great "unconditional love for his son, despite how bad he screwed up his life."

There's a scene in *Blow* where Jung, unable to see his dying father, sends him a cassette tape expressing his feelings for the man, and his sorrow and remorse. Cassavetes and McKenna used the exact words in the script that Jung used in the cassette. Jung never knew how his father reacted to this tape, but seeing this scene in the film was an emotional experience for him. "He just lost it," says Liotta, "just cried and broke down. Which then started the warden crying, which then started Ted crying, which then started the guards watching it with them. They all just kind of lost it."

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