

‘I don’t have to walk away friends with everybody’

In a world exclusive interview and shoot, Total Film prowls New York’s mean streets with **Edward Norton**, star of superb urban Western *Down In The Valley*. Great actor. Big talker. Always picks up the tab.

WORDS **NEV PIERCE** PORTRAITS **GLEN WILSON**

Edward Norton is not an idiot. This much we know. Read any article about The Greatest Actor Of His Generation™ and much is made of his intellect. He read History at Yale. He can speak Japanese. His memory makes an elephant’s seem flaky. He’s, like, Really Smart.

Okay. So here are a few things you may not know... Edward Norton is funny. He thinks *Born To Run* is a terrific album. He loves *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. He knows *The Office* scripts scarily well and does a David Brent impression to rival his Nigel Tufnel (“Eleven. Exactly. One louder”). He keeps a cassette recorder by his landline to record memorable phone messages, as a kind of aural diary. “I have tapes back to the early ’90s: tapes of people I know that have died, funny messages, hysterical messages, or even intense things. I’ve gone back and listened to those tapes and, man, the flood that it triggers in your memory and emotion...”

Total Film has seen a lot of Norton during the last 12 months, since chatting to him for the 100th issue article declaring *Fight Club* the greatest film of our lifetime. We’ve driven together from the Polish border to Prague, on the final >>

FILM CHOICE

Romantic, Everyman, Psycho... Edward Norton: chameleon.



PRIMAL FEAR (1996)

A courtroom potboiler with a showcase role whose only reason to exist is to announce a career. Norton auditioned in-character as (spoiler alert) split personality psycho Aaron Stampler – a stuttering altar boy whose dark half chopped up an archbishop. He was so convincing he scared casting director Deborah Aquila (“I thought, ‘We may make it out of this room, we may not’”) and was also Oscar nominated, even if the film remains a muddy TV movie with pretensions. ★★



THE PEOPLE VS LARRY FLYNT (1996)

Or *Mr Flynt Goes To Washington*. Woody Harrelson is impressively objectionable as the titular porn publisher, who argues “all I’m guilty of is bad taste” in a free-speech fight that takes him to the Supreme Court. Tough and chilly, the film refuses to court affection. Norton is excellent as Flynt’s long-suffering lawyer, acting as a sly audience-substitute in his reactions to the disagreeable ‘hero’. Director Milos Forman, an abiding influence, later told *Vanity Fair*: “Edward is a perfectionist. I am also a perfectionist. And on a film set there is no way to accommodate two perfectionists.” ★★★★★

EVERYONE SAYS I LOVE YOU (1996)

Fincher hired Norton for *Fight Club* on the basis of *Flynt*, then saw the actor hoof and croon through Woody Allen’s uneven musical and decided he was “fearless”. Norton avoids a Woody impersonation and while the film is fluff, it established his versatility early. ★★ ★

day of shooting romantic mystery *The Illusionist* (out later this year) and caught up in the chaos of the Cannes Film Festival to discuss mesmerising quasi-Western *Down In The Valley*. This weekend, we’re in New York – a few blocks from the 36-year-old actor’s apartment, scoffing omelettes and discussing everything from cheap cynicism to the War on Terror. As often as profiles claim Norton is bright, they also invariably use the word “intense”. Or maybe “difficult”. Or some other euphemism for “pain in the arse”. But passion should not be confused with aggression. Just because Norton knows his own mind doesn’t mean he’s not interested in yours. He just cares. This is evidenced even in our photo shoot, as *Total Film*’s suggestions are discussed and taken on, huddled conversations are had with photographer Glen Wilson – an old college friend – and suddenly you have a sense of Edward Norton: storyteller. The Narrator in *Fight Club*, the charismatic ideologue of *American History X*, is directing this shoot...

It’s his preference for collaboration above cashing cheques that leads to films like *Down In The Valley*, one of the year’s best; full of “left turns” and a performance that draws further comparisons with De Niro in his prime. On this clear but bitter day, Norton isn’t so much God’s lonely man as his bloody freezing one (“Exactly”) and if he is – to use a reductive label he’ll probably despise – his generation’s De Niro, he’s De Niro with a tongue... He can talk. And talk. And talk. On the page, edited down, he may seem an Angry Young Man; earnest and, yes, “intense”. In person, his chatter is more ambivalent, thoughtful, punctured with smiles and a sense of humour. Back in the restaurant, after hours of talking politics, generational despair, career crises and the odd movie, he examines the bill. “They gave us all our tea and coffee for free!” He grins. “That’s hope for the world right there...”

So was it fun to play a cowboy?

Yeah, it was fun. I don’t do them if I don’t think they’re going to be fun. And by fun I mean challenging. I’ve gotten to the point where if I feel I only dimly understand the whole thing I’m going after, or if it scares me a little bit, then generally that’s a good thing to work on.

There’s quite a difference between this and your last movie, Kingdom Of Heaven, though...

Oh that’s *Lawrence Of Arabia*, cast of thousands. It’s like, hang out in the Spanish hotel with all the British actors and wait for your working day... Oh my God, it was so fun! I always wanted to do a movie like that. You know, I found out the costume budget on *Kingdom Of Heaven* was bigger than the entire budget on *Down In The Valley*. That really deflated me at one point. We were begging our financiers for, like, \$240,000 for three extra days’ shooting. They must have spent \$240,000 on Evian in Morocco, you know what I mean? I was like, maybe if the Moroccan Army won’t drink for a day...

Certain actors, like Robert De Niro or Sean Penn, have a very contemporary screen image, which is how we’ve always thought of you. But in Down... you’ve got this whole Montgomery Clift thing going on from Red River...

I love that film. And there are some echoes of *Lonely Are The Brave*. There’s something in the impulse that’s the same – creating a Western that’s contemporary to its time, which is rare. *Hud* is a good one. You gotta see *Hud*. It’s a terrific film. When we were doing *Down In The Valley* I went back over it and I couldn’t believe how dark it was. It’s so dark. Newman is just so uncompromising in it. He’s such a shit. And he does not back off it. He doesn’t sort of grin his way around it, you know? *Hud* is like the anti-cowboy. His values suck. He’s a lazy, spoilt

Texas rancher. He’s a proto George Bush! It’s a subversive vision of the modern West.

Do you think Down... is particularly relevant given Bush styles himself as a sheriff?

Yeah, I do, I do! David [Jacobson, writer/director] and I were laughing about it, because we started working on this a couple of years ago and somewhere along the line Bush was really getting into the whole cowboy thing. We thought, “Isn’t that funny? This is beyond our self-perception; this is how the whole world perceives us...” But I think *Down In The Valley* is not so much political as it is spiritual. It’s more of an examination of the spiritual cost of modern choices: spiritual alienation, spiritual rootlessness...

So, in a way, it’s similar to Fight Club?

Yeah, definitely. It’s about the dark undercurrent that starts rolling around in people’s psyches when the modern world leaves them feeling lost and empty. When we started out I told David, “You’re doing for the West what Scorsese did for the post-Vietnam urban world in *Taxi Driver*. You’re showing how these spiritually bent characters have been cut adrift in an environment that used to live in the American imagination as this place of freedom and individuality. We’re still identifying ourselves through the cowboy myth. But fuck John Ford’s West and fuck Clint Eastwood’s West, what’s our West?” If a guy tried to ride across the Valley today, he’d run

into a highway every 500 metres. He would feel trapped by totally formless, community-less housing developments that are drowning the lands in this concrete nothingness... The film is really about the children [Evan Rachel Wood and Rory Culkin] and their loneliness. It doesn’t matter if you haven’t seen the San Fernando Valley, to me someone in Newcastle should get this film, because those kids exist in every blighted suburban place in the world...

You wanted to make a film with some universal truth...

In terms of people that have framed my thinking, there’s Joseph Campbell, who wrote *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* and *The Power Of Myth*. The things Campbell has to say about how stories function, it’s like the Bible to an actor or director. Lucas talks about it a lot; he developed *Star Wars* specifically along the archetypal forms Campbell talks about. He talks about this phenomenon of transparency – if a person can see through a story and see how it’s actually about them, then you’re entering the realm of the mythic, you’re entering into the deep levels of consciousness and of meditative contemplation about the meaning of life and existence. But you have to have that transparency. Sometimes I think I’m good at helping the people I’m working with connect to that second level.



TOTAL FILM CHOICE WORDS: NEVPIERCE, ALL STAR



And that's something you specifically search for?

You know, sometimes I say to people, "Fuck all this bullshit romanticisation of the intuitive artist..." If you look at Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Robert De Niro – anyone you want to romanticise as an intuitive genius – I guarantee that before you get to the talent, what you have is very conscientious craft. Always. Part of craft is understanding the way stories function. You've got to be literate. People say to me, "Oh, you're very intellectual – you're very cerebral about your approach to acting." And I say, "All good actors are." I may be verbose about it or I may articulate it in a certain way – someone like Robert De Niro doesn't, because he doesn't really talk about it – but I guarantee you, he does it too. I read an interview with David Bowie while I was in China working [on *The Painted Veil*, an adaptation of the Somerset Maugham novel which Norton is starring in and producing]. He was so relentlessly unpretentious. Even when the reporter was wanting him to acknowledge the uniqueness of his work, he was saying, "people have this fantasy about protean genius", acknowledging his influences and being honest about the fact that, even today, he looks outwards for inspiration. That doesn't deflate my image of a guy like that, it actually elevates it. It makes you appreciate what they're doing even more.

'Most movies are just ether. They come, they go, and it's like they were never there..'

Bono is quite upfront about his influences. He's someone who seems to be walking a hard path at the moment, between being a rock star and a campaigner...

I've been pretty impressed with him. It's very enlightened to choose to seek as much positive connection as he does, even with people who are the instruments of these terrible, terrible policies. It's a very disciplined and enlightened expression of all the best things most of the spiritual traditions, from Christ to Buddhism, talk about. In essence it's "turn the other cheek", "hate the sin and love the sinner", which is a lot more forgiving – more Christian, more Buddhist – than a lot of these things more radical people talk about. It's saying, "You're still my brother, I still want you in on this with me, even if I disagree with you. I'm going to find some common ground." It's humbling to realise the degree to which we all indulge in anger, in response to these things. It's humbling to realise that the people who have affected real change, it's not like they didn't have righteous indignation, but they embraced their adversaries. You realise what courage that takes, because it's easier to be angry.

Like anger can become an excuse, a kind of justified impotence?

Yeah. To relate it to a film for a minute, have you seen *Syriana*? The people who were negative about that >>

<< **ROUNDERS** (1998)

Having edged out Matt Damon for *Primal Fear*, who in turn beat him to *The Rainmaker*, Norton co-starred with the actor whose '90s/'00s rise mirrors his own. He's Johnny Boy to Damon's Charlie in the picture's dark sharp *Mean Streets* dynamic and his celluloid-singeing charisma means the film badly misses its bad boy when he disappears with an act to go. ★★★



AMERICAN HISTORY X (1998)

The De Niro comparisons really begin here. Released from a stint inside, Norton tries to piece together his family in one hazy day – flashbacks revealing his past as a neo-Nazi thug whose hate-centred beliefs lead to a horrendous act (see The 50 Most Shocking Moments feature, page 98). With a devilish glint and lucid rage, Derek is a terrifying creation and while *X*'s life-in-a-day structure risks preachiness, Norton should have beaten Roberto Benigni to the Best Actor Oscar. ★★★★★



FIGHT CLUB (1999)

You know. ★★★★★

KEEPING THE FAITH (2000)

How to wrongfoot your audience. Just as punters began to peg Norton, he made his directorial debut – not with an angsty, Gen X diatribe, but a charming *Philadelphia Story* transposed to a sunny New York. He nails potentially flyaway material, giving the love triangle between a priest (himself), a Rabbi (Ben Stiller) and a go-getting career girl (Jenna Elfman) not just charm and lightness but a touching sense of the bonds of friendship and, yes, faith and love. ★★★

THE SCORE (2001)

Norton admitted he "did this one for the poster" and the pre-release hype was all about three generations of >>

film always seemed to complain about the same thing: "The film is too hard to understand." Comprehension is not the point! The point is to leave you feeling terrified and overwhelmed at the totality of how fucked we are at some levels. That's when I get aggravated by critics... For people our age – not just for artists, but critics, everybody – your mandate is to say, "What's the most I can do with my platform?" You guys at your magazine, people in our generation, filmmakers like Stephen Gaghan or us making *Fight Club* or me and David with *Down In The Valley*, with anybody, you have an opportunity through your work. You can take on the generational battle. You know, take other critics to task, literally going, "What are you thinking?"

We need to engage and ask questions... But at the same time we're also rather keen on Star Wars...

It is *Total Film*, so yeah it's, like, *Attack Of The Clones* alongside *Syriana*. You know, I'm the last person to knock the idea of entertainment. I don't think entertainment is an opiate. I don't think entertainment encourages apathy. I think entertainment is one of the joys of life. I think *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is an absolutely fucking hilarious movie. I mean, I laughed so hard, I woke people up on the plane I was on. I went home to watch it again – it's fucking hysterical.

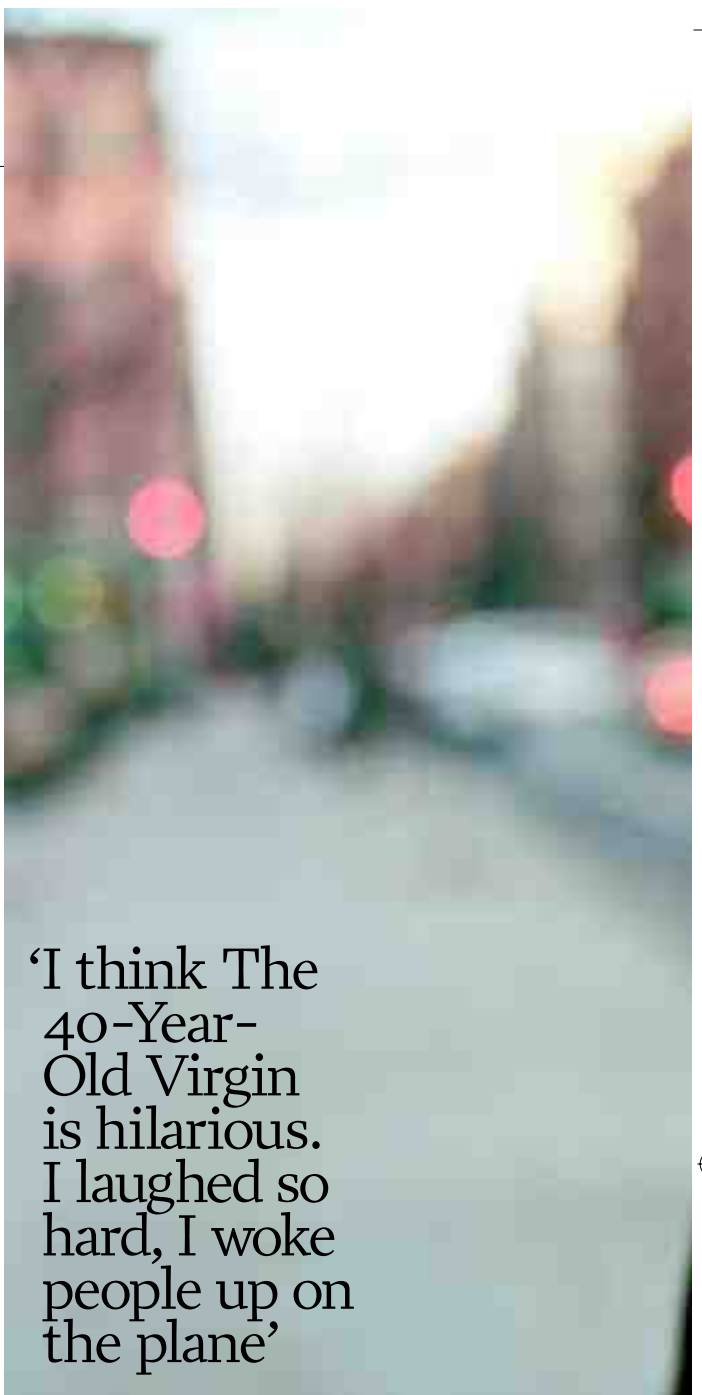
But believe me [*with acting*], I go through cycles of thinking, "This is just fucking ridiculous. Why am I spending my time doing this? I should be trying to engage in a much, much more direct way with the world." I'll definitely go through moments when I think, "Movies are such fucking bullshit – they're so tangential, such a glancing way of getting at stuff, so self-indulgent..." Partly I think I think that because the peripheral reality of celebrity culture comes in on me.

The gossip rags, the award shows...

Oh my God! The award shows just fucking rude me out. I get really, really down on the whole thing. I mean, I'm glad *Capote*, *Syriana* and *Good Night, And Good Luck* are being celebrated, but on the whole the thing that goes on between November and March is like an orgy. It's out of control. It doesn't speak well about the excesses that surround the business. It's disgusting. It's that totally disproportionate elevation of the artist and it's gross. I don't like the self-congratulatory, self-important behaviour I see. I start to go, "I should do something else." But when you strip that away and look at the potential of something like *Syriana* or *Do The Right Thing*, you go "All right, fuck all that. Fuck the magazines, fuck the award shows, fuck the selling of lifestyle." Somewhere, these pieces have a very direct conversation with people, they have this capacity to make you think about what's dysfunctional about reality. That's a good thing. It's something that reinvigorates my sense of it being worth doing.

There's a split in your films, between those that get strong reactions and then what Fincher calls "Saturday night movies":

Primal Fear, *The Score*, *Red Dragon* – which is not terrible, but... For me, there's not even a middle ground. *The People Vs Larry Flynt*, *American History X*, *Fight Club*, *25th Hour* and *Down In The Valley*, even *Frida*, to a degree (I was involved in that as a writer) – none of those movies have been financially successful. None of them. But on my own internal meter, I've been very artistically satisfied by those films and they are the ones that, almost incontestably, have hit with audiences in a much more significant and lasting way. Whereas *Primal Fear*, *The Score*, *Red Dragon* – almost all were big hits and I think they are what I would call... graciously they're Saturday night movies. Those are good genre films, but they're like



'I think *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is hilarious. I laughed so hard, I woke people up on the plane'

ether, you know? I mean, *Red Dragon*'s got a terrific cast, it's reasonably well-made, but it just... disappears. Movies like that come and go and it's as if they weren't there. They just don't lodge. I feel pretty confident that *Fight Club*, *American History X* and *25th Hour* will stick around a lot longer than *Primal Fear*, *Red Dragon* or *The Score*. I would love to see *Down In The Valley* do well, because it helps affirm that making those kinds of movies doesn't have to hurt the people who put up the money for them. And it helps us make the next one.

Have you learned over the years about who you want to work with? There was that conflict between you and Tony Kaye [director of American History X]...

Sure, yeah. It's like anything; getting older and looking at relationships of any kind, you refine your radar for people you're going to fall into a bad pattern with and people who you kind of have that simpatico with. Sometimes you still end up wrestling with people in a creative sense, but I don't believe creative struggle is a bad thing. I think it's essential. Filmmaking is a highly, highly collaborative process, there's no way around that, and when you're pushing each other you generally end up pushing it higher. I've seen Russell Crowe say certain things, about how it's an actor's responsibility to defend his own work and his own sense of his role in the piece against even the incursions of a director. And sometimes you do have to stand up for what you know about your character...

ALL STAR



But it can get you a reputation...

There's a fine line between contentiousness for its own sake and a very valid defence of your work. When people say Russell's a prick or he's difficult or whatever, it's like, "Fuck off! If you can do it, do it yourself." You know, it drops my jaw when people come over and say, "I don't know, do you think it has enough intensity?" I'm always like, "I can't act the word 'intensity'. Give me a verb, you know what I mean? Tell me to criticise her harder or whatever..." I saw someone actually go over to Robert De Niro and say, "I think maybe a little more intense..." You just feel like going, "Are you even listening to what you're saying?" You know, if being 'difficult' in the service of the film means that you perpetually – as I think Russell Crowe definitely does – lay down good performance after good performance, then if the occasional producer or director says, "He's a pain in the ass", or, "He's tough", then, well, c'est la vie. I don't have to walk away friends with everybody. But all the best directors I've worked with have been people who seek out debate, because if there's a diamond somewhere, that's what polishes it. It's like Fincher said in *Total Film's Fight Club* piece, actors are not puppets. I think the truest sign of a great director is when they put their script and storyboards away and watch what actually happens in front of them. They look for those moments where an actor helps discover more in it than was on the page and they seize those moments, you know? Even a very controlling director like Fincher

on a movie like *Fight Club*, a movie that's very studied and very precise, he's not the kind of guy who goes and closes down something inspired happening...

Fincher talks about directing as "collecting moments"...

I thought you caught a very true thing about Fincher. Some people are very quick to pounce on me being a pain in the ass or challenging directors, or to pounce on Fincher as someone who's really autocratic and combative with studios. You know, it's like, yeah, but... Fincher and I don't get in a room together and assess those aspects of ourselves as a negative. I challenge Fincher, he gets aggravated or whatever, but that's part of what he knows gets the result. And the truth of Fincher – I think you caught that vibe – is he's very humble about process... He knows that *Fight Club* was the gift of all time to him – he knows that it was his to fuck up or make right. It was the right piece for him at the right time. He's incredibly irreverent about it all.

You were talking about craft. There's that Sam Goldwyn quote, "The harder I work, the luckier I get"...

I love that! The harder I work, the luckier I get... It's like the more you do your homework, the more you're free to be intuitive... But you've got to put the work in. **TF**

***Down In The Valley* opens on 26 May and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Total Film*.**

<< acting greats, with Brando the fence to De Niro's ageing thief and Norton the young gun prepared to shoot them all down. It's an efficient, workaday thriller, enlivened by a thieving/acting metaphor between De Niro and Norton as Old Pro and Pretender. ★★★



RED DRAGON (2002)

A moneyspinning prequel/adaptation/remake, *Red Dragon* was an odd choice for an actor apparently committed to original work. Perhaps it was because the wholly original (but only intermittently funny) black comedy *Death To Smoochy* had proved a critical and commercial disaster, while his cameo as Nelson Rockefeller wasn't the whole story of his commitment to evocative biopic *Frida*; he rewrote the script. If *Red Dragon* was a bank-balancing payday, at least it wasn't an insult, even if Norton never appears entirely comfortable as FBI agent Will Graham – lumbered with an exposition-heavy role where character is secondary to driving the procedural-thriller beats. ★★★



25TH HOUR (2002)

Norton's last substantive piece of work pre-*Down In The Valley*, though he impressed as a masked ruler in *Kingdom Of Heaven* (done "for a lark") and is surprisingly enjoyable as the 'tache-twirling villain in *The Italian Job* (a film he was forced to do due to a disputed contractual obligation with Paramount). He's superb as Monty Brogan, a drug dealer with 24 hours to put his house in order before being banged up, and many critics have it that his character is America, weighing its options post-9/11. Whatever its allegorical significance, *25th Hour* feels cloaked in grief and opportunity lost; about friendship, choice, moral relativism and consequences. Spike Lee's best picture in years, and a great New York movie. ★★★