

Willem Dafoe on Tommaso

letterboxd.com/nicknewman/film/tommaso-2019/

1

7 settembre 2026

Nota. Nick Newman, redattore di The Film Stage, ha pubblicato questo testo come commento al film Tommaso (2019) di Abel Ferrara sulla propria pagina Letterboxd. L'intervista a Willem Dafoe era stata raccolta nel 2019 per il press kit di Cannes, insieme a una conversazione parallela con Ferrara; le due erano state fuse in un unico pezzo mai utilizzato per l'uscita americana curata da Kino Lorber. Newman ne ha recuperato la propria parte e l'ha resa pubblica fuori dai canali editoriali. Tommaso è girato a Roma, fotografato da Peter Zeitlinger, con Cristina Chiriac e Anna Ferrara nei ruoli della compagna e della figlia del protagonista.

Weird experience: last year I spoke to Ferrara for the Cannes press kit, then through some series of events ended up visiting Willem Dafoe's apartment and interviewing him for nearly an hour. (When we were done he offered a ride to Metrograph, where he was doing a Pasolini Q & A, and even though it was pretty out-of-the-way I decided a private car ride with Willem Dafoe is infrequent enough an opportunity that it should be taken, hence my lying and saying the subway there "leads right to my apartment" or whatever.) Both interviews were condensed into a single piece by Ferrara & Dafoe; sadly I can't find it in my email archives, and nothing was used for Kino's eventual release.

At the risk of going rogue, I'm sharing herein my conversation with Dafoe. Some questions are, by nature of assignment, a little too press-kit-like for my taste, but I think it evolved into something more natural.

How much of this character is on the page? How dense a script did Abel write?

There was very little script. Very little. It's mostly built on scenario: there are fragments of dialogue, but, more importantly, for a long time he had certain scenes that he imagined, certain scenes that were reflections of things that he lived, and these were the dots that we had to connect. But much of it is really set in a situation and, then, basically improvising. People think of improvisation as actors creating dialogue. It's not even that sometimes. Sometimes we don't know where we're going with the scene, but he sets the scene and we see what happens. We overshoot it, we don't cover things; it's a very fluid camera, a very guerrilla-style run-and-shoot way of shooting. So, really, you're kind of in freefall. But you have this structure that's been set up ahead, that's basically a play structure. Not "play" like theater. We know who the characters are because we know enough about them, because they're abstracted from lives we know. So it's actually a thrilling way to work. What it all means is: Abel's standing outside, watching. I don't worry about what it means; I worry about playing the scenes and being with the people and

imagining what goes on. So I have nothing to accomplish except for dealing with what's around me.

How much are you and Abel discussing character?

We don't discuss character ever. We just knew his name was Tommaso, and we knew this character because he has certain similarities with people we know and people we are. That's not being coy. This isn't a confession of Abel. This isn't an expose of Abel, but he's using some material that is around his life to make a movie. It depends scene-by-scene. For example: when I go to those meetings, those are people, basically, living their life, and then we're folding in a story that Abel tells me. He tells it to me, then I tell it the way I remember it to make it my own. So that's kind of a good example: it's not really written, it's kind of imagined, and then I try to put it on its feet. He watches me. It's not like we go back and rework the scene, it is that coming together, and that's what gives it its dynamic, in the sense of event. Because it's happening, and we don't work stuff for effect. Even in the more dramatic scenes, what could be perceived as the more dramatic scenes, where there's a family drama or something like that, basically it's shot in a take, and you either chose that take or the other take.

One of the most famous sayings about the craft is "acting is reacting."

Not really; not always. Sometimes I have to drive, because if I sit there, there will be nothing to react to. So sometimes Abel gives me some idea of what direction he wants something to go. And it's not a tonal thing, not an emotional thing, it's really about actions. I know that I've got to get from A to Z, or A to F, and I've got to figure out how I can get there. To do that, it can't just be about reacting because you'll never get there! And in this movie, I have to drive most of the time. Sometimes the camera drives it.

Do you find yourself switching into another gear when around non-professionals?

That's acting: seeing what the world is and living in it. A good example of that is something like *The Florida Project*, where I want to get away from being an actor. I want to melt into the fabric of that world that's there, that's a really good example of that. This isn't unlike that. The scene where I'm teaching a class, for example, that's not written. I have taught before; it's not my thing. But that's a case where I have to drive. I'm not reacting. Then there's different poetic moments where we just bring an element together and we deal with it. People have got to get over the idea... there's all kinds of movies, and each movie should have its own criteria for people to appreciate it. Not because the

filmmakers deserve this kind of understanding, but for their own pleasure. These are not traditional industry movies because they don't have traditional roles in the division of the work. It's much more fluid: it's like a team working with something that's very loose, and we don't know what it is until we're making it. Which sounds wildly irresponsible, but can be very satisfying because you don't point at things. The movie is a record of something that happened. That can be terribly boring, but if you have some authentic events and have real things going on, if you frame that right and structure that right, you can share that with people in a way that I think is meaningful. Without necessarily knowing what kind of story you're telling. You're putting beads on a string and you've got to believe in each little bead. Once you string all those beads, that necklace is what you have; that's the movie.

When Peter Zeitlinger is shooting what Abel calls "absurdly long takes," what's the benefit?

You lose yourself in the action. I'm a theater guy, so I'm used to controlling my own rhythms and I'm used to performing for two hours straight. When you're still gunning and it's not so fragmented, you can go places that you can't if you're constantly interrupted. Sometimes the camera will keep on going and I'll have this sense, no matter how absorbed you are, that performing is so much about living between the poles of control and chaos. So you've always got kind of an outside eye on things. Sometimes the camera would still be rolling and I'm like, "Scene's finished, as far as I'm concerned." This is what I'm thinking. But if the camera's rolling, then you think about what the next step is! Sometimes it's going up and writing the screenplay or going and cooking the pasta. There were those moments where we didn't know they were going to happen, but the camera's still rolling so I'm going to do something else. But occasionally, I'd be like, "The scene's done. It feels finished." And I didn't want to be in that anymore, so I would never cut it, but you'd feel that I wasn't playing. So sometimes Abel or Peter or I would cut it.

I like that you bring up cooking, because there's a line I kind of fixated on there. When he's with Christina in the apartment, after he's come from the Italian lesson, she speaks in English and Tommaso says it isn't helping, he needs to learn Italian. That felt taken from real life.

Well, this is my life. But that's the nature of improvisation, too: you deal with what you think about, with your experience. There's a lot of opportunities for that. Plus, I'm the

frontman for Abel, so I'm doing both of those guys. They're very different but they also have some common things, and they've talked about them so I'm aware of those things.

This doesn't seem like a movie you'd make with someone unless you trust them very much.

You know, we're always working on projects, and this one was in his head for a long time. He would just send me fragments: he'd say, "I'm thinking about this" or, "What do you think of this?" Little fragments of things. Then a time was allotted and we got to work. I've known Abel for a long time, and even before we did *New Rose Hotel*, because Abel, he deals with what's around him, he was talking about other projects to me for years. We didn't know each other very well. It never happened, and then *New Rose Hotel* was kind of a rough period, I think, in his life. Then we didn't see each other, and then we met again in Rome. Even though we did do *4:44* in New York, and it's a very New York movie, I feel like when we met in Rome, around *Go Go Tales*, that was where we really started to know each other. That's where we really started to work in a way that was fun, that gave me opportunities to collaborate in a way that, often, I don't get to collaborate. It's all in the handling. We collect information, then we give it to Abel and Fabio, the editor, and the sound people. I check in with them but, at some point, I let them do their thing.

As you're in production, how do you get a sense of this film, with its unusual methods, coming together?

It's putting out fires. It's exhilarating because a lot is demanded of you. It's not just that it's guerrilla filmmaking, there's no trailers, no beauty lights, no waiting, none of that. You're running, literally running sometimes, to get shots. I feel responsible for the whole movie. I always do, to some degree, as an actor. But sometimes I'm not allowed to have that responsibility, and that's okay sometimes, but with this, I take a lot of responsibility to help Abel. That's what the movie is, and that's a lot because we shoot in a very loose way. You're not worrying; you're always just managing to find out how to keep working. Working with younger people, working with people that are really turned on to making movies. Our neighborhood is very supportive of us. People really cooperate; they love it. There's aspiring performers that just throw in without reservation. Those kids in that classroom I'm teaching, they're the real deal. They're hungry young kids that want to make something.

And they get a great deal having you as their teacher.

We hope! We try!

I would imagine that engagement is its own bedrock of confidence in making *Tommaso*.

You have worries and, yes, you hope it's coming together, but you're so overwhelmed by what you're doing and so engaged with what you're doing that you trust that. But I feel like that, generally, is true. The level of engagement is the reward in performing, the purity of engagement. You're dealing with an art form that can be so sliced and diced in so many hands. Even *Tommaso*, cut the wrong way, can be terrible. Cut the right way, it can be great. So you can't be a worrier. You've just got to be solid in what you do and make sure that what you're doing is pure in right or wrong. That's not a judgement in whether it's good or bad. Pure in its engagement, so no matter how you slice or dice it, there's still going to be that DNA, that germ of why you jump into this parallel universe, this invented universe, to have an experience that kind of expresses your experience of living. That, for me, is performing, and it's a good game. So you might as well get people to play it with you that are serious, that are inspired, and have the same kind of burning desire that you do.

This movie struck me as a dare to the audience to make assumptions. It could, with little effort, be seen as a very naked depiction of the artists, which makes it hard to talk about, in a way.

It is. Our relationship is unspeakable. There's a level of trust that's very, I'm using the word again, pure because he's trusting me to do things with his wife and his kid. It's a huge responsibility, but he knows that I think he's got great instincts as a filmmaker and as a person. He's a very sweet, generous guy, so it gives me a gift of trying to go to bat for someone that you believe in.

Is there dread in having to talk about this whole process?

Let's see after people see it! If they like it, I'm happy to talk about it. If they don't, I don't want to be defensive and have to get in the head of trying to explain what we're doing.

There seems to be such a capacity for misunderstanding of this film.

There always is. One of the hardest things about being an actor is: nobody knows how stuff is made. And even then, it's specific to them. I've been doing this long enough

where I get some degree of practice talking about what I do. On some level, I like it because it gives me the opportunity to put in words what I imagine. As long as I don't cling to them and make them a method, then I'm okay. And I'm kind of incapable of that because I'm too restless, somehow. But it's tough because you get seduced into wanting to frame it right and connect the work with people, give them a good way to connect with it. But you don't want to lead them in the work and you don't want to misrepresent by some sort of justification. So part of me says it's ridiculous for actors, who are notoriously inarticulate, because they're doers; they're not reflectors, necessarily, to talk about what we do at all. It can prejudice people on how to see it, in the negative and the positive. I'm so used to making small movies that if you don't do fucking press, they won't get seen. So you've got to get some free ink; you've got to get some people talking about it so they can engage.