



THE NATIONAL  
CONVERSATION

# R O B E R T

IN HIS MOST AMBITIOUS ROLE IN DECADES,  
THE TWO-TIME OSCAR WINNER IS REUNITED WITH  
MARTIN SCORSESE IN AN EPIC CRIME DRAMA  
THAT OFFERS AN ANSWER TO ONE OF  
THE 20TH CENTURY'S GREAT MYSTERIES:

WHO KILLED JIMMY HOFFA?

# D E N I R O

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL HAINEY

**B**orn mere months apart and reared blocks from each other in New York City, Robert De Niro and Martin Scorsese created a body of work that spans more than 40 years and forms a tapestry of late 20th-century machismo, including *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *Goodfellas*, and *Casino*. Then they didn't work together for 24 years. A decade in the making, their ninth collaboration, *The Irishman*, promises a return to the kind of swaggering mob epic that defined their careers. For De Niro, whose recent work had skewed lighthearted, it also offers a legitimate shot at a third Academy Award for Best Actor—a feat only Daniel Day Lewis has accomplished.

The movie tells the story of Frank Sheeran, a complex, conflicted World War II veteran who becomes a hit man for the Philadelphia mob in the 1960s—and the bodyguard for Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino), the Teamsters union leader whose 1975 disappearance remains unsolved. Also starring Joe Pesci, Harvey Keitel, and Ray Romano, the movie, which will have a limited theatrical release on November 1st before it becomes available for streaming on Netflix on November 27th, has become one of the most expensive ever made, with an estimated budget of \$159 million.

De Niro, who recently turned 76, has a reputation for being gruff and at times even terse in interviews. But when reached by phone, he was reflective and forthcoming, so much so that he felt compelled to explain the difference between his reputation and reality. “Yeah, well, maybe I’m mellowing,” he said as his dog Henry yapped beside him. Then he laughed that De Niro laugh—that short, compact laugh where he looks down and shakes his head in an expression that always seems to say, “Well, would you look at that ...”

**This movie has its roots in Frank Sheeran’s memoir, *I Hear You Paint Houses*, which you read and brought to Martin Scorsese’s attention. What about Sheeran’s story attracted you?**

It was Frank’s honesty and truth in his story. It’s so vivid. I liked the predicament he was put in, where he is befriended by these [union] people who change his life, but then is asked

to betray them. His loyalty is tested. In some ways, he’s the good soldier. Everyone trusts him and likes him. Relies on him. Feels protected by him. Then he’s asked to do something he thought he’d never have to do. It’s sad. It’s basically a long confession, and knowing Marty and the things that we have done together, it just felt like the right thing for us. It had such vivid details of his life. I also thought it was something we all could relate to. I said, “Marty, you gotta read this. I think it is a movie we should do.”

**Was it, as you say, the “confessional” part of Sheeran that you were attracted to?**

I thought that was an interesting and intense part of his Irish Catholic upbringing. I was also interested in who he was as a person. Certainly his time in World War II and all those months of combat affected him and helped shape who he was and what he was capable of doing. Four hundred and sixty something days of combat. I also thought about Marty, with his religious upbringing, his Catholicism that he explored, especially in his earlier films. I thought this would be a character and a world that he would relate to.

**Is it true that your grandparents surreptitiously baptized you?**

This could be true—I don’t know. My mother told me that I was baptized a Catholic, so they might have done that when I was visiting them upstate. I never verified that. I think about what my mother would say to me. She’d say, “Yes, you were baptized a Catholic, but that’s it.” Kind of saying she wouldn’t disparage that decision, though she might not have agreed with it.

**How would you describe your faith now?**

I’m not religious. When I was with my grandmother and grandfather they used to make me go to church with them, say my prayers, and do all that till I was about 15 or 16. After that I said I can’t do it anymore.

**Do you believe in an afterlife?**

If there is a god, he’s got a lot of explaining to do.

**When you mention Frank and the war, you’re referring to what he says**

**about how combat made him able to kill. He saw some intense things, including liberating a Nazi death camp.**

All of that time over there had to have had some affect on him. I mean he was a pretty tough guy to begin with, but then he goes to war and is put in this position of “kill or be killed.” So when he came back, it was probably easier for him.

**One of the claims Sheeran makes in the book is that he killed Jimmy Hoffa. Hoffa’s disappearance is one of the great mysteries of the last 50 years. Do you believe Sheeran killed him?**

Yeah, I do believe it. It’s a very simple way it happened, according to the book. There are other theories, but I believe his version. And until somebody proves otherwise, that’s how I feel. Am I saying that’s exactly the way it happened? Who knows. But whether it’s true or not, it’s the story, and it’s a good one.

**It’s curious—you’re known for playing tough, often violent guys on screen, yet your first role was the Cowardly Lion, in a school play.**

I was 10. All I was trying to do was remember my lines.

**Is there a film role you wish you could have played?**

I had some with Marty I wish I could have done. Like *Gangs of New York*. He offered me the part that Daniel Day Lewis did, and Daniel was great in it. Nobody could’ve done it like he did. And the other was *The Departed*. But I was preparing another movie and couldn’t do it.

**You and Scorsese have another project in the works co-starring Meryl Streep. Can you take me back to first working with her on *The Deer Hunter*?**

Meryl was great. Always. Michael Cimino [the director] and I saw her in a play at Lincoln Center and, you know, that was it. We had to have her. She has great refinement and elegance. Just being around her is special.

**And *Raging Bull*, the story of the boxer Jake LaMotta, will be 40 years old next year. How did that film come about?**

I enjoy telling this story. These guys had sent me the book *Raging Bull* while I was

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doing *1900* with Bernardo Bertolucci in Italy. After I finished it, I said, “Marty, read this book. It’s got a lot of heart.” At one point I had a thought about doing it as a play and a movie. Naively thinking I could do the play at night then shoot the movie in the day, doing it like a one-man show or something.

### The energy of youth, right?

Yeah, right. I even proposed it to the studio and they thought they could pay for that, but then we realized it would be unrealistic. So we stayed with the script and concentrated on that.

### You’re going to be in Scorsese’s adaptation of *Killers of the Flower Moon* alongside Leonardo DiCaprio, who you actually co-starred with in *This Boy’s Life*, back in 1992. How did you see him then?

Well, he was a little teenager—he was a kid, Leo. And he always kids me about that time, because I got annoyed at him once about something on the set and I said something to him ...

### Say something to him like a parent kind of thing? Or say something sternly?

No, no, he was a little smart alec when he was that age. We joke about it now. But when we auditioned, I said to Art Linson, the producer, I said, “Art, that kid Leo is really good.” There was no commitment to the other actors who had come to read. I don’t know whether that made the difference, but Leo, they decided to use him for the starring role. He was something special.

### If you could give your kids any advice, what would it be?

I’d just want them to be happy. To do what they really want to do and to follow through on the things they think they want to do, and follow through enough to see that you don’t want to do it. But not dream about it or be on the fence about it. Do it, and then at least make a decision and then move on to something you might actually want to do for a good part of your life. That’s my advice.

### Your mother had once said that the secret to your success was that you possessed “a force of will.” Do you agree with that?

Oh maybe, I don’t know, that could be.



Somebody said to me that a professional is somebody who does things when they don’t want to. They said it better than the way I’m saying it, but basically I would tell the kids if something came along, you might not want to do something, but that’s the time if you have a commitment or a job, you have to do it.

**“HE’S THE GOOD SOLDIER. EVERYONE TRUSTS HIM. THEN HE’S ASKED TO DO SOMETHING HE THOUGHT HE’D NEVER HAVE TO DO.”**

### If you’re in trouble and you get one phone call, who would it be?

My lawyer. [Laughs.] The reality is, there are friends who I would talk to about certain things because I know they understand the circumstances, so I don’t have to spend time explaining. But sometimes you have to watch out. People give an answer you want to hear. And you have to say, Wait a minute, I really have to get an honest answer. Give me the real 411, because I have to make the right decision, even if it’s an uncomfortable one.

### Jumping back to *The Irishman*, what was it like working with Al Pacino

### and Joe Pesci—who you lured out of retirement—again?

Well, Al and I have worked together over the years, we’ve known each other a long time, and Joe, we’ve known each other a long time too and worked together, so I told them it would be a great thing—me, Marty directing, Joe playing the part he plays, and Al playing Hoffa ... How many more times will we be able to do this? So I thought it was the perfect thing for all of us.

### Is there a scene in this film that you’re especially fond of?

I like the stuff when he’s older and he senses life is ending. He’s lived his life, done what he’s done, and

there he is, in that place. That’s it. When you get old and you’re my age, our age, Joe, Marty, Al ... that’s inevitable.

### When he’s in the hospital at the end?

Yeah, he’s reflecting, looking back, telling his story.

### Speaking of endings, I’m thinking of the last scene in *The Deer Hunter*—everyone at the wake singing “God Bless America.” What song do you want played as you’re being rolled out of the church at the end?

You know, I think of a scene I did of a guy on his deathbed. In full voice, he’s singing “I Did It My Way.” 🎵