

OVER BREAKFAST

Vince Vaughn takes humor seriously

Despite his work in 'Swingers,' it took many years for the actor to get cast in comedies. Now? That thinking is so old school.

By JOHN COOK
Special to *The Times*

TELL someone that you're scheduled to interview Vince Vaughn at 8:30 on a Saturday morning, and you're likely to get a response along the lines of, "Yeah, good luck." Not our Vince Vaughn — Trent, the prowling Lothario high on nightlife in "Swingers"; Beanie, the married electronics impresario desperately holding domesticity at bay with a beer bong in "Old School." No, at 8:30 on a Saturday morning, Vince Vaughn will be recovering from the exploits of Friday night, if not still living them.

And yet there he was at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Chicago on a recent Saturday, Starbucks cup in hand, without even the benefit of dark sunglasses to shield him from the unforgiving light of day. With his imposing 6-foot-5 frame, slightly puffy eyes and mild case of bed-head, Vaughn, wearing jeans and an untucked shirt, stood out a bit from the crowd of Midwestern early risers already filling the Ritz's 12th-floor restaurant.

"Eight-thirty is a late call for me," said Vaughn, who is in Chicago shooting "The Break Up" with Jennifer Aniston for Universal Pictures. "It's been 5 or 5:30 this whole week. I think I speak for all actors when I say sometimes you get punished for being successful. People see you a certain way. And that's your job — to come off and make that character seem very real. So it's a compliment, sort of."

Vaughn has been getting his fair share of compliments lately. Ever since his pitch-perfect comedic performance two years ago as the fast-talking, ear-muffing arrested adolescent in "Old

School," the 35-year-old has been on a midcareer roll: "DodgeBall," the goofy buddy flick in which he starred opposite Ben Stiller as an, um, arrested adolescent, took in \$114 million at the domestic box office last year, according to Box officemojo.com, beating out "The Aviator" and "Million Dollar Baby." He stole a good deal of the spotlight and some critical praise from Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie — no small feat — with a supporting role in "Mr. & Mrs. Smith" as a professional assassin who still lives with his mother. And there is buzz about his performance with Owen Wilson in "Wedding Crashers," in which he plays a ... well, if divorce mediator Jeremy Gray isn't exactly an arrested adolescent, he's too old to be elbowing his way into strangers' weddings to meet women at their most vulnerable.

The attention helped him shepherd "The Break Up," a romantic comedy that he developed with writers Jeremy Garelick and Jay Lavender on spec and which he is producing, into a reported \$12-million payday at Universal — four times his previous top fee.

The Ben Stiller connection

"FOR a while, before 'Old School' came, I couldn't get any comedies," he said. "People would say 'Vince Vaughn's not funny' because I hadn't done anything since 'Swingers.' Even after 'Old School,' Ben Stiller had to really fight for me to get the part in 'DodgeBall.'"

Stiller, Vaughn said, is the common link in what has come to be known as the comedy Mafia — the rotating cast of performers said to include Vaughn, Stiller, Wilson, Will Ferrell, Jack Black and others, who regularly appear in one another's films and have gained enough box office clout to develop movies on their own. But aside from Stiller's generosity, he said, the comedy Mafia is a myth.

"I have respect for all those guys, but if anything I started with ['Swingers' writer, star and co-producer Jon] Favreau. And I guess Favreau directed Will

BRYAN CHAN *Los Angeles Times*

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— VINCE VAUGHN

in 'Elf,' but somehow he's not a part of whatever this comedy Mafia is. It's very confusing how the lines are drawn." (A studio spokesperson says the producers haven't begun to address the role of a director yet.)

However the comedy Mafia lines are drawn, there seems to be a single line

running through most of Vaughn's characters. Are they just different shades of Trent? Not according to Vaughn.

"To me these characters are really different," he said, making an impassioned if not entirely convincing argument. "The character in 'DodgeBall' is sort of not trying at life; he's very lazy.

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To see scenes from "The Wedding Crashers," visit calendarlive.com/wedding.

Whereas the guy in 'Wedding Crashers' loves life, and he's extremely motivated. Trent is a smoother character than Jeremy. Where Jeremy loves to eat, likes to dance, Trent never dances in 'Swingers.' He's not a big eater. He's more of a card player. The one thing they have in common is they're both trying to pick up girls."

While it may seem that Vaughn is putting too fine a point on his characters' eating and dancing habits, it's because he is at pains to point out that he takes his job seriously. Perhaps it's the Midwestern upbringing — he was raised in the suburbs of Chicago — but he seems genuinely uninterested in discussing the ins and outs of Hollywood power plays or analyzing his ascent in the pecking order. He'd rather talk about the acting classes he's taken over the years, or how to come up with a third act in a romantic comedy that's not trite, or why it's a shame that so few young actors are conversant with films like "Hud." In other words, he is not a comic. He's an actor.

"My journey has always been one of working my hardest, not handicapping how to get over," he said. "If you start trying to get over, and you're doing stuff that you don't love, there's something hollow in it." The role he is playing now, opposite Aniston, places him for the first time squarely in the sights of the celebrity media machinery as paparazzi scour Chicago for shots of the actress post-Brad.

"I haven't dealt with it on the level that [a lot of people] have," Vaughn said of the crush. "But in seeing it and being friends with people who have gone through it, [it's no fun] to be there. But at the same time you have to realize that there's nothing personal about it. [The photographers] are just trying to make a living, you know." (Days after saying that, Vaughn would wind up on the cover of *Us Weekly*, arms wrapped around a bikini-clad Aniston, under the headline "Jen's Revenge.")

The biggest drawback Vaughn sees to the ever-increasing celebrity obsession is the swarm of wannabes flooding Hollywood. "You have a lot of younger people wanting to be famous first and foremost," he said, "and then secondly wanting to be actors. Whereas when I was younger, we really loved acting and worked really hard, and were kind of nerdy and innocent by today's standards. You have a lot of these kids coming up who are very fashion-conscious and wear ski hats in the middle of summer. It's bizarre. They talk in a jargon that's kind of odd. I talk to kids, and their references to movies start with 'Jerry Maguire.'"