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Being Bruce Willis Means being honest. Outspoken. Bigger than life. Old habits die hard, it seems.

By Mary Roach

We're not here to see a movie. We're here because Willis owns this small-town Idaho theater and thought it would be a quiet, private place to talk about his new movie opening this week, *The Whole Nine Yards*. (Willis is big on privacy; he requests that the name of his town not be printed.)



Willis is one of those men whose Hollywood presence -- action hero, superstar, celebrity husband -- was so large and so ubiquitous for so long that it's hard to think of him as anything else. By the time the third *Die Hard* rolled around, people started to forget that Willis could play other types of roles. They forgot that he has played a traumatized Vietnam vet (*In Country*), an unpleasant construction boss (*Nobody's Fool*) and a lowlife boxer (*Pulp Fiction*). They forgot he made his name in comedy on TV's *Moonlighting*. While last year's *The Sixth Sense* went a long way toward re-establishing Willis as a

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diverse talent, people forget. I expected him to pull up in a Hummer, smoking a cigar.

Hardly. Willis is quiet and engaging; his manner puts one immediately at ease. "Big stars can be kind of intimidating and make other actors nervous, but Bruce does the opposite," says Jonathan Lynn, director of *The Whole Nine Yards*. "He tries to make all of them feel relaxed."

These days, Willis portrays himself as a die-hard stay-at-home. He quit drinking in 1987. He no longer throws loud parties or even attends them. It would appear he's becoming the man his father was: a family man in a working-class town.

Willis was reared in Carneys Point, N.J., the son of a shipyard mechanic. After high school and a quick succession of jobs, he enrolled in Montclair (N.J.) State College's drama program. In 1977, after he'd taken all the acting classes they had, he dropped out and moved to New York, where he worked in theater. Seven years later, a part in an off-Broadway production paved the way for a movie audition in Los Angeles. He didn't get that part, but while there, he auditioned for the role of a wise-guy private eye, beating out some 3,000 other hopefuls for the part that would put him on the map, *Moonlighting's* David Addison.

Willis' first foray into film was *Die Hard* (1988), the phenomenal success of which ensured a seamless transition from TV star to movie star. Willis makes no apologies for his frequent turns in mindless, violent action pics. Those movies, he says, afford him the opportunity to "work on [low-budget] films I have a passion for," such as his new movie.

And while he isn't ready to forsake action movies, Willis does believe in taking stock of one's life choices on a daily basis. "I've lost a couple of friends in freak accidents," he explains. "It makes you realize how fragile life is, how quickly it can be taken away. I think about my death at least once a day. I say to myself, 'Am I living my life? Am I enjoying my life today?' Because this is not a rehearsal. This is it."

This is about as personal as Willis is willing to get. He doesn't talk to reporters about his private life, and you really can't blame him. The tabloids dragged his marriage to Demi Moore through the muck for 10 years. Twice, the couple sued. (Though they won the suits, they separated shortly thereafter, in June 1998.) Willis is extraordinarily protective of their daughters, Rumer, 11, Scout, 8, and Tallulah, 6. "His priority

is his daughters," says his former agent and longtime friend and producing partner Arnold Rifkin. "He's never available for films during the summers, because he wants to spend the time with his kids."

"He's generous to a fault," says Willis' younger brother, David, a *Whole Nine Yards* producer. "When we were shooting, Bruce would go to a great French restaurant and buy it out. He'd have them come out 20 miles to where we were shooting and cook all day, whatever we wanted. On his dime."

At 44, Bruce Willis appears to be a man at peace. He claims to have no regrets. "I don't play the regret game. Because how do you know the thing you're regretting isn't the thing that led you to something great?" He fears nothing. He sleeps well. He doesn't worry about aging. "I'm still about 24 at heart. And that's really where your age lives." Willis has even made peace with his retreating hairline. He shrugs. "You just gotta dig yourself."

While middle age has mellowed Willis, the man's no softie. He's outspoken. He's politically incorrect. He says he'd steer kids away from college unless they're "going to be a doctor or a lawyer," and he's never considered finishing his B.A. "It's just a trophy. I have some bowling trophies I think would be worth about the same thing." He owns a gun and holds fast to his constitutional right to do so:

"Everyone has a right to bear arms. If you take guns away from legal gun owners, then the only people who have guns are the bad guys." Even a pacifist, he insists, would get violent if someone were trying to kill her. "You would fight for your life. You'd use a rock or tear one of these chairs out of the floor." I tell him he's seen too many Bruce Willis movies.

That was not the thing to say. Willis disagrees with the notion that onscreen violence influences people's behavior, and he resents remarks to that effect made by government entities after the Columbine High shootings. "It's insulting to movie audiences. Anyone who goes to the movies knows that when you see someone killed on the screen, that actor gets up and dusts himself off after the take is over. In my heart, as a father, I think what causes violence -- violent children and violent young adults and violent adults -- is not having a good childhood, not having a father in the house, learning to become a sociopath instead of a good human being. It's as simple as that."

It's rare that the government says or does something Willis agrees with. He expresses outrage at lobbyists and corruption. "Special-interest groups show up in Washington with lots and lots and lots of money, and when they leave, they don't have the money with them anymore. You can talk about campaign reform, but that's all just the little tiny tip of the bull that goes on down there." When I ask whom he'd like to see as president, he says, "You," then explains: "I'd rather have somebody that didn't know anything about it than someone who's made a career out of lying and cheating and swindling people." He waves the topic away. "Don't get me started on politics."

Willis looks at his watch, a fine watch that tells the time in several parts of the globe, including Idaho, where it's time for this actor to go home. He smiles. "You're cutting into my gift-wrapping time." [It's two days before Christmas.] He shakes my hand and walks down the aisle toward the big silver screen, humming a tune.

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Freelance writer Mary Roach last profiled actor Rob Lowe for the magazine.

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