

# THE CURIOUS CASE OF DAVID FINCHER

He is a director with a reputation for darkness. *Seven* spawned imitators who saw a market in degradation. *Fight Club* made him a reviled figure and a legend. Now comes the story of the Zodiac killer. Just who is David Fincher? And how did he get that way? **By Brian Mockenhaupt** Photograph by Chris Buck

**D**AVID FINCHER sometimes slips into theaters for early screenings of his movies and listens for the gasps and laughs. He sometimes stands outside on opening night and watches the expressions of those coming out. And sometimes the critiques come to him. "I don't have the Tom Hanks fans," he says. "When you make the kind of movies I make, you get weird letters from people." They say, *Seven* was my idea. That sort of thing. And all the noncrazy types have comments, too, when talk at a cocktail party turns to work, to his movies, and a Beverly

Hills wife wants to tell him what she really thinks. You have *no right*. It's not good to show Gwyneth Paltrow's head in a box, she'll say. It's unnecessary.

I didn't do that.

No, *I saw it*.

Uh, no. You're wrong.

Those conversations heat up because Fincher, known for directing dark, hyperstylized movies, has little patience for the ignorant. But such comments also tell him he's getting through, making his audience work for him and fill in the gaps, imagining what isn't there. Watch *Seven* again, look for the violence, and you won't see as much as you remember.



Maybe he's a bit misunderstood because of it, this guy who makes movies about a killer carving up people for a Bible lesson on the deadly sins or frustrated men beating the crap out of one another for fun. But while he doesn't mind filming a good, blood-spattering punch to the face, the question for Fincher is not one of quantity, but of intent. "You can do something that walks a line, and invariably, whatever that line is, it will be crossed by people who don't know any better and want to ape the success," he says. "People say, 'Wow, *Seven*'s about degradation, and it made some money.' I don't mean this as high-minded or artistic, but it does, I think, walk a fairly tasteful line."

He's still walking that line, this time with the story of the Zodiac killer, who shot and stabbed several people around the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1960s. Like *Seven*, the movie downplays the killer's "wet work," as Fincher calls it. "I want to make a movie that has enough impact that it's going to do what it needs to do," he says. "But I don't want to make a film that serial killers masturbate to."

Slashing and screams can be scary. But far more disturbing for Fincher is the aftermath, seeing a killer take stock of his work,

wash his hands, mop the floor, plan the rest of his day. And more disturbing still is the unknown. Think of Jeffrey Dahmer eating people in his apartment, with his neighbors none the wiser. "For me, the scariest thing about a serial killer is that there's somebody who lives next door to you," Fincher says, "running power tools late into the night, and you don't know he has a refrigerator full of penises."

Okay, but still, it must be said: David Fincher's are vastly entertaining.

**H**E IS A RELUCTANT standard-bearer for the darkness of our inner lives, but he has become a standard-bearer nonetheless. This is notable because he has made but six movies, including two about serial killers (*Seven*, *Zodiac*), two portraits of abject paranoia (*The Game*, *Panic Room*), and one genuine work of art, *Fight Club*, for which he was called a sadist. His reputation, then, is much larger than his résumé.

And for making the kinds of movies that he makes, he seems like a very happy man. Untortured, unbothered, unguarded, socially adept. Friendly. Kind. Nice guy. Doesn't seem to have an inflated sense of his own importance. Of course, the very fact of David Fincher's own normalcy tends to support his basic theory of life and alienation and art: "As much as people pretend 'I fit in, I understand, I get the rules,' there are always times spent away from that where you go, 'I thought I knew. It seemed so

clear to me, and then... ' That sense of loneliness, or the sense of not fitting in or being out of depth, is probably the most common denominator," he says.

Behind his desk in his Hollywood office hangs a seventies-style oil painting of waves crashing on a beach with the words PITILESS PURITY DUDE superimposed across the scene in huge white letters that shrink toward the horizon. It seems like a declaration of principles. And you might expect Fincher to be cyn-

**IN AN EARLY CUT OF FIGHT CLUB, PITT ROLLS OFF HELENA BONHAM CARTER, WHO SAYS, "I WANT TO HAVE YOUR ABORTION." THE TEST AUDIENCE LAUGHED, BUT THE STUDIO HEAD WAS AGHAST. "YOU'VE GOT TO CHANGE IT," SHE SAID.**

ical, brooding. He laughs at this, then responds rather seriously that he's not cynical; he's just realistic. "Entertainment has to come hand in hand with a little bit of medicine," he says. "Some people go to the movies to be reminded that everything's okay. I don't make those kinds of movies. That, to me, is a lie. Everything's not okay."

He says this with a smile on his face, not wry or ironic but sweet. He pauses, closes his eyes, and tilts his head back. Fincher is deliberate and specific in speech. He measures his words. He works his fingers into his temples, then presses his thumbs over his eyes, building thoughts the way he constructs his mental scenes, laying out his plans. He opens his eyes.

"You have a responsibility for the way you make the audience feel," he says, "and I want them to feel uncomfortable."

It's not easy to reconcile the guy who says that with this dude who makes movies, wearing a T-shirt and corduroys, feet kicked up on a table, letting the unreturned calls pile up, answering an e-mail an hour, pecking the letters with index fingers, easy-going, unpretentious, happy. Well, not totally happy. He didn't sleep last night. He's still finishing *Zodiac*, tweaking and trimming, and next week he'll be in New Orleans shooting his next movie, but right now he's just chilling. He seems too laid-back for the Teutonic minimalist chic of his office, with its cement floors and bare walls and skylight twenty feet above casting pale light through the room. His massive wooden slab of a desk, three feet wide and ten feet long, is clutter free, save for a pile of scripts and binders marked CONFIDENTIAL. Of course, he has stacks of coffee-table film books—Hitchcock, Kubrick, European cinema. On the back wall hang several small photographs of his teenage daughter. Parked next to the *Zodiac* poster is his Segway scooter, and parked under the TV are his Xbox and PlayStation. He has several games, some driving, some shooting, but he plays just one: *Madden NFL 07: The Official Guide*. "I like the idea of football as chess," he says. "I love the strategery." But playing *Madden* is fun, and directing movies isn't. He says his job is like four-dimensional chess, and he finds it painful and frustrating and too wrought with compromise. "I do films because I love films, because otherwise it would just be too damn hard, too painful. It's just too awful," he says.

At forty-four, he is a middle-aged dad with a longtime girlfriend who is also his line producer. He watches football on weekends, a little indulgence, and doesn't exercise as much as he'd like. Gray is spreading through his goatee. His hair's thinner and his body thicker. But his eyes counter those benchmarks of age. They are the eyes of the young, the curious, and the questioning. His creative interests run wide, same as when he was a boy, making fake blood, building models and blowing them up. Now he wants to make video games and an opera, turn *Fight Club* into a musical, and make an adult cartoon. Not that kind. A computer-generated animated movie for grown-ups. This town is the place for that, with all its quirkiness and artistic energy. "Hollywood is great. I also think it's stupid and small-minded and shortsighted," he says. "I'm sure there are people who get into movies so they can get nice tables at restaurants."

Do you get nice tables?

No.

Do you ask for nice tables?

No.



**\*Top, at age twenty-seven, directing Sigourney Weaver in *Alien 3*, his baptism by fire. *Seven* and *Fight Club* cemented his reputation.**

He looks back now on some of his work and winces, embarrassed, and maybe he'll feel the same about this movie. "Who knows?" he says. "*Zodiac* might be a Dubious Achievement next year. It might be better to call it in advance. Does it hurt less if you predict it?"

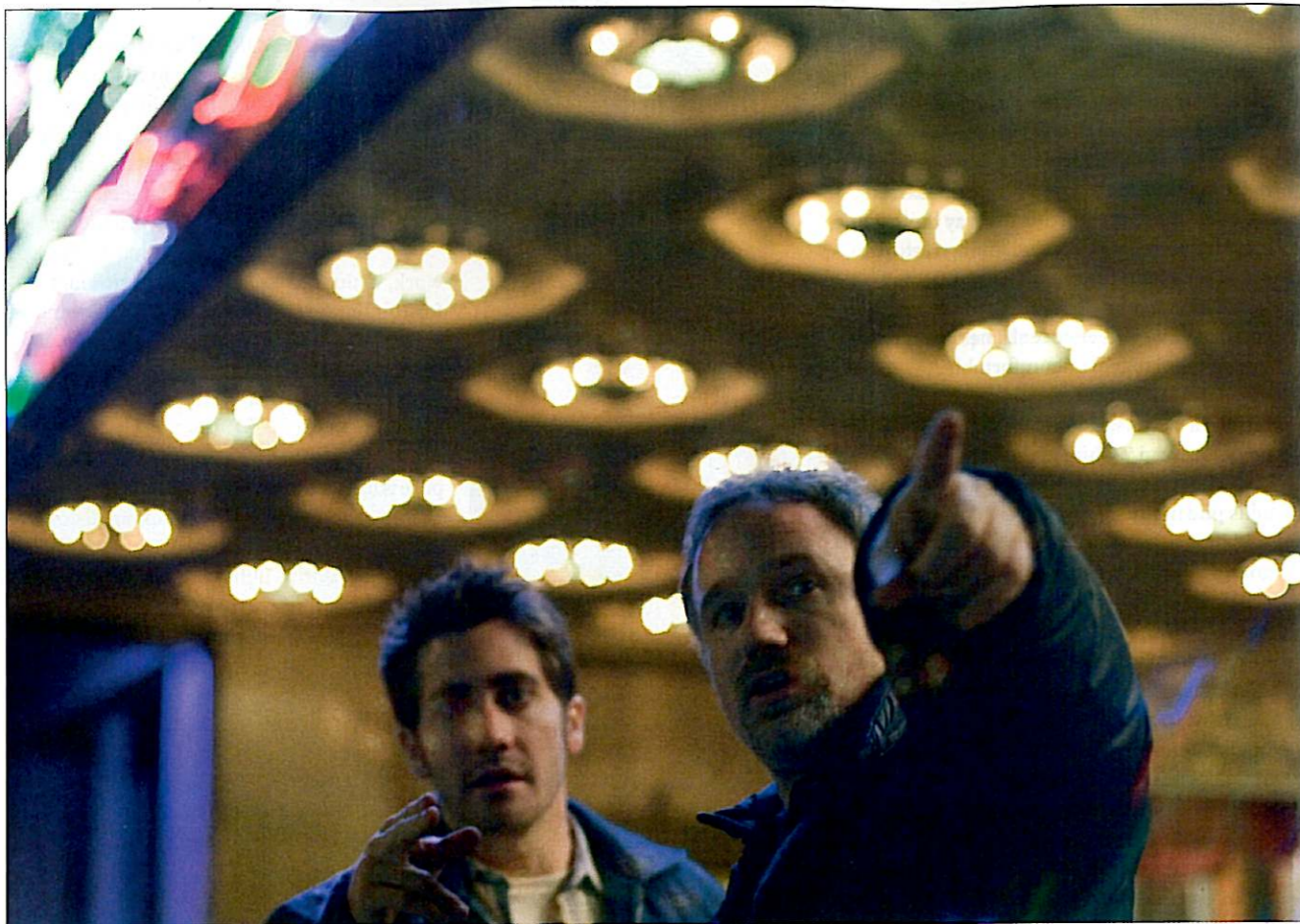
Of course, this is the self-deprecation of the successful. He knows what he can do, he says, and doesn't much care about critics. And besides, in the end, his explanations, interpretations, and justifications matter little. "The movie will speak for me whether I want it to or not," he says. And with a movie like *Seven* to his credit, another serial-killer film brings certain expectations.

As a killer, Fincher calls the *Zodiac* an underachiever. He's credited with at least five victims, though he may have had many more. But what made him special was his marketing campaign: He named himself, announced his crimes, and taunted police and the public with notes masked by complex cryptograms. Several local newspapers printed the letters, and the people fell into fits of paranoia, waiting for the *Zodiac* to kill again.

Fincher dispatches the victims quickly and without melodrama, the violence stark but brief, which clears the way to explore the *Zodiac*'s other victims, the people who wrecked their lives trying to catch him, which they never do. Absent is Fincher's hallmark darkness, the constant rain or dripping water, the impossible roller-coaster camera movements with shots that move through floors or keyholes. He puts away the tricks and makes way for the actors, building a world that supports their work. This, a talking movie, is new territory for a man who says he doesn't much care what people have to say. "If you want to see what someone is about, you look at what

**F**OR HIS EIGHTH birthday he told his parents he'd like a BB gun or an 8mm camera, knowing he'd never get the gun. So he got the camera, which led to backyard movies, which led to movie grunt work, which led to dozens of music videos for the biggest names, back when people still watched music videos and talked about them as something special, which led here, where he wanted to be all along, making his movies his way.

And while Fincher says he wants to expose truths, he's not overly concerned with deeper messages. He readily acknowledges the absence of the profound in movies like *The Game*, with Michael Douglas running for his life in what turns out to be an elaborate birthday present, or Jodie Foster spending a night holed up in a room in a house under assault by a gang of thieves in *Panic Room*. "You can either look at your career as the things that you're going to leave behind, and they have to be extremely precious and they have to be executed flawlessly and you have to know exactly what it is that you're doing," he says. "Or you can be realistic about the fact that you're going to learn as you practice what you do."



\* Fincher and Jake Gyllenhaal, on the set of *Zodiac*.

people do," he says. "What they say is how they want to be seen."

Fincher wants truth, or as near as he can get. "There is no truth after thirty-five years. There are only varying degrees of falsehoods," he says. "So how do we make it true to an experience?" Many scenes were shot around San Francisco, at the original locations. Four actors play the Zodiac in various attacks, based on widely varying descriptions from witnesses. Fincher and his crew met with many of the people involved in the case, including the two surviving victims and many of the cops who investigated the crimes. "This is a real story. Real people really got hurt," he says. "There are terrible fallouts from these murders, and it didn't seem right to turn it into a video game and put the audience in the stalker's head. We're responsible to the people."

Fincher was a kid then, in the Bay Area. He and the other first graders talked about the Zodiac on the playground. The stories grew and grew. "It was really scary," he says. "He was the ultimate bogeyman." Fincher saw sheriff's cars tailing his school bus. Some parents started driving their kids to school. You know, police cars are following our buses, Fincher told his father. Well, his father said, you should know that a man who has murdered a handful of people has sent a letter to the *Chronicle* saying he plans next to take a high-power rifle and shoot out the tires of a school bus and kill the children. Uh-huh. Fincher stared at his father. "And I kept thinking, You know, you have a car, you could give us a ride to school. You're a freelance magazine writer. There's really nothing to stop you," he says. "I remember being kind of appalled. My parents didn't seem that concerned about my well-being."

**S** O HE'S BEEN AT THIS for thirty-six years, since he asked for the camera, which came after watching a behind-the-scenes of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. "Prior to seeing that, I just assumed that movies took place in real time," he says. But they were filming train robberies and shoot-outs and blowing up balsa-wood trains at locations across the West. "It never occurred to me that you could infer this whole world, putting together the pieces. It was just revelatory," he says. "And that's pretty much when I made up my mind. If you want to be happy, you've got to direct movies."

In Fincher's version of the early-seventies San Francisco Bay Area, movies are king. Coppola's making *The Godfather*, with Michael Corleone standing there talking to his girlfriend. Fincher can't get enough. He and his friends hang out on Fourth Street in San Rafael and watch Lucas shoot *American Graffiti*, and they make movies based on shows like *The Six Million Dollar Man*. Kids are always working in movies as extras and reading *Super 8 Filmmaker* magazine. "In my neighborhood, none of my friends ever looked at the film industry as this thing you couldn't do, couldn't dream of, because that was Hollywood, and you had to have all these different skill sets. It was like, There's this guy with a beard who comes down in his bathrobe every morning to pick up his *Independent Journal*. So why not?" The bearded man was George Lucas, two doors down.

By eighteen, Fincher was doing visual effects on an animated movie called *Twice Upon a Time*. During lunch he'd find a way to eat with the producers, pitching them ideas. "He'd use his

hands and tell a story, and everyone at the table would be completely silent listening to him describe this movie idea he had floating around in his head," says Ren Klyce, who met Fincher on the movie and has done frequent sound work for him since, including for *Zodiac*. "He had this knack at eighteen to hold court in a very creative manner and suck people in."

Fincher worked for Lucas at Industrial Light & Magic on special effects for *Return of the Jedi* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. In the early eighties he directed his first commercial, an American Cancer Society ad warning about the dangers of smoking during pregnancy. Fincher showed a fetus smoking in the womb. The commercial created huge buzz for its shock value, and that led to music videos, more elaborate versions of the short movies he'd set to songs in junior high. "Then all the sudden there's this thing called MTV, and I'm going, Fuck, I know how to do that," Fincher says. "That's actually all I know how to do."

Through the eighties and nineties he directed dozens of videos for Rick Springfield, the Outfield, Loverboy, Paula Abdul, Sting, and Michael Jackson. He's best known for his videos for

**"ENTERTAINMENT HAS TO COME HAND IN HAND WITH A LITTLE MEDICINE," FINCHER SAYS. "SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE MOVIES TO BE REMINDED THAT EVERYTHING'S OKAY. I DON'T MAKE THOSE KINDS OF MOVIES. EVERYTHING'S NOT OKAY."**

Madonna's "Vogue" and "Express Yourself" and the Rolling Stones' "Love Is Strong," which won him a Grammy in 1994. But Fincher loves film, and he directed commercials and videos because no one said come make a movie for us. He learned technique and style and how to manage a crew. When the movie bigwigs did call, Fincher thought he was ready. What followed was utter misery.



**W** HEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT Fincher's movies, they usually start with *Seven* and skip right over *Alien 3*. Following Ridley Scott's *Alien* and James Cameron's *Aliens*, the studio expected big returns, and, as Fincher says, money makes people fucking crazy. Long before he showed up, the project was in trouble. Directors and writers had come and gone. No one could agree on a story line. Space? Earth? A planet made of wood inhabited by monks? (Seriously.) They settled on a maximum-security prison on a desolate planet. Sigourney Weaver's Lieutenant Ellen Ripley crash-lands there with an alien baby in her belly. Fincher was a twenty-seven-year-old music-video director, taking over a \$60 million movie with a crew of hundreds and no script. It was the biggest budget ever given to a first-time director. "They probably hired me because they wanted someone to push around," he says. "That was a bad situation. I don't respond well to that."

He shot the movie, arguments were had, and feelings were hurt. Fifteen years later, the debate continues. Internet message boards overflow with praise and vitriol: those who say he

turned a disaster into a decent movie and those who say he single-handedly ruined the *Alien* franchise. Fincher calls it a clusterfuck. But he learned from it. Why does he micromanage, why is he combative? *Alien 3*.

"I have many, many friends who are vice-presidents and presidents of production at movie studios, and they never understand this very simple thing: My name's going to be on it. Your name's not on it," he says. "Your point of view is as valid as any member of the audience. But it's a different thing when your name's on it, when you have to wear it for the rest of your life, when it's on a DVD and it's hung around your fucking neck. It's your albatross."

Fincher gets along well enough with the studios. They give him handsome budgets—\$70 million for *Zodiac* and \$150 million for the film he's shooting now—and he's widely respected. "He's just scary smart, sort of smarter than everyone else in the room," says producer Laura Ziskin. "There's just a handful of those people who know absolutely everything about the process. They could do everyone's job brilliantly. Every aspect is under their control."

He can be a brutish ascetic, denying himself the extravagance of letting stories unfold, approaching them as intricate mathematical problems: one method, one answer. "Editing David's film is like putting together a Swiss watch," says Angus Wall, the editor on *Zodiac*. "All the pieces are so beautifully machined. He's incredibly specific. He never set-

gles. And there's a purity that shows in his work."

"There's what he thinks is right, and there's little else," Ziskin says. "If you have a difference of opinion, he'll listen politely, then tell you in no uncertain terms how completely wrong you are."

Ziskin first worked with Fincher on *Fight Club*, where they sometimes sparred over the budget. Then came the abortion argument. In an early cut of the film screened for test audiences, Brad Pitt's Tyler Durden rolls off Helena Bonham Carter's Marla, who says, postcoital, "I want to have your abortion." The audience laughed, but Ziskin, hard to offend, was aghast. The studio was already nervous about spending more than \$60 million on such an unconventional movie. You have to change the line, she told Fincher. That's too much. He agreed, so long as the new line stayed. He wouldn't shoot a third time. Fine, she said. Anything else. Now Marla flops off Tyler and says, "I haven't been fucked like that since grade school."

He has learned which fights are worthwhile and which ones are wasted breath, like arguing with the movie marketers. Invited to a test screening of *Seven*, guests were told the movie starred Brad Pitt—*Legends of the Fall*—and Morgan Freeman—*Driving Miss Daisy*. Recounting this on *Seven*'s director's commentary, Fincher giggles. "They couldn't have been more offended," he says. "You couldn't molest the audience more than to promise *Legends of the Fall* and *Driving Miss Daisy* then to unleash this on them. They'd just been gang-raped."

"There's this fear of being punished for selling something in any way other than how things are sold," he says. "The problem with that is you're saying to the audience, 'Don't worry, this is one of those. It's not something other than what you've experienced before. It's a Quarter Pounder [continued on page 210]

## Robert Downey Jr.

[continued from page 157] me fart, Iron Man takes it as a personal challenge.

"Go for it, dude," he roars. "Dude, I'll fuckin' match you thunderclap for thunderclap. I'm chambering one up myself."

On the way home, as the Mercedes' windows glide up and down, Buddha weeps.

**Downey House** sits at the end of a cul-de-sac in a staid, plush, peaceable west Los Angeles neighborhood called Brentwood. It's strange in the same wealthy way that nearby Bel Air and Beverly Hills are strange—no human being who is not a maid, gardener, nanny, or garbage collector is ever manifest—but Brentwood is almost completely devoid of hip, chic, fizz, or glitz.

"I swear to God," Downey says, sitting in his kitchen, "I've been quoted as saying if I ever wind up as a forty-somethin', remarried, marketable, big-action-movie dad of a teenager in a cul-de-sac in Brentwood, please run up behind me and pop two in my head—do me a favor." There's a hand-lettered sign taped high above the sink—THE RULES ARE THE TOOLS—and, close by, a photo of Mr. and Mrs. Junior with Laura and George W. Bush at the White House. A countertop holds an espresso maker the size of Mount Vesuvius. The missus is still at work, and Downey's thirteen-year-old son, Indio, is at his mom's—that's Downey's ex-wife, actress-singer-model Deborah Falconer.

## David Fincher

[continued from page 163] with cheese, medium fries, and a vanilla shake. That's what it is. And then when it isn't that, people come out of the theater and say, Screw that, they told me it was going to be x." Movie trailers really piss him off, with every trailer urgently pitching the same movie, just switching the scenes and actors. "When you make trailers, you constantly have to do this to the audience," Fincher says, and starts jabbing a finger into my shoulder. "You watching? You still watching?"

"Have you seen the *Shining* trailer?" he asks.

No.

"Dude, you gotta see this."

He pulls up a video on his computer screen, a farcical trailer for *The Shining*. Instead of pitching a psychological thriller, the trailer twists it into a popcorn flick, anchored by a feel-good-movie voice-over: "Meet Jack Torrance. He's a writer looking for inspiration. Meet Danny. He's a kid looking for a dad." So they come together, the new family. Peter Gabriel's "Solsbury Hill" starts in, and the once ominous drive up the mountain to the hotel becomes the beginning of a happy life together.

They should have made a trailer like that for *Fight Club*, Fincher says, should have used "Solsbury Hill." At least that would have captured more of what he saw as the point of the movie, summed up by Edward Norton's character in

Jimmy Butch is here, and Christine, the "titular head of this whole fuckin' Team Clown we got goin' here."

"Should we have one of our business-therapy sessions so Scott can see how fuckin' sick we all are?" Downey asks. "I just wanna break the ice here."

And he farts once, short and sharp. "That's fuckin' nothin'," he says. "I can clear out this whole floor."

Not bad for an overture, I say, unrolling a bassoon note of my own.

"Dude, that was literally like an orchestral blip. That wasn't even the warm-up. That was like the fuckin' oboist's double reed hit the floor."

But truth is elsewhere. Downey's colon is ready to conduct.

"For reference," he shouts as he bolts the kitchen, "you may photograph whatever you like, except this three-coil steamer I'm about to fuckin' drop in Christine's office."

"Don't!" she screams. "There's a whole house—go in the yoga room."

Too late.

"Ohhhh," Christine moans. Then she gathers herself and yells, "Leave the fan on."

Back from toileting, Downey fires up the espresso maker and hands me two chapters of his memoir-in-progress. Good stuff—wiseass, trippy, dwelling mainly on the misadventures of Jailhouse Jim—and he's reading a second copy along with me on the marble kitchen island, orally annotating as the pages unfold.

the film's last line: "You met me at a very strange time in my life." Instead, the trailer pushes the idea of expressing yourself through the catharsis of violence. "We don't have confidence in people understanding what this is, and we certainly don't have confidence in our ability to lay it out there in three words or less. So here's what we're going to sell. We're going to take *Fight Club* and we're going to turn it into: 'It's a movie about people who hit people.'"

"Well, it's a movie about people who hit themselves. They're looking for ways to feel again," he says. "There was a malaise and frustration and sadness that that movie had at its core. And they say, Oh, no, no, no, whoa, whoa, whoa. People. People who hit people. That's what this is. And I can't help you there. I don't think like that. Do people like ambiguity? I guess not anymore. Do I like ambiguity? Yeah, I guess I do. Is that going to come into conflict? Probably."

To minimize these annoyances, Fincher still makes commercials, earning money that brings freedom to be extra picky in his movie choices. The commercials also serve as his sandbox time to work out new techniques. After *Panic Room* in 2002, he did four commercials digitally, including a Hewlett-Packard ad shot against green screens in which the scene changes every seven frames as a man walks through an office. By *Zodiac*, he was ready to shoot without film, which streamlines the process and trims fixed costs. Most directors shoot about seven hundred thou-

"There was this one guy in county jail, all he did was abuse everyone who came by—male, female, CO, doctor. 'Goddamn mind-midget,' 'Hey, *Cunt*-suela.' I'm next door to this guy and I'm hearin' him. It got to where they did a cell extraction—they pop him in the cell, they come out, and this fucker, I love him to this day, he was an amputee. He had one leg. He was so hell-bent, he was standin' on one foot sixteen hours a day just to tell everyone what a piece of shit they were. *That* fucking guy had *moxie*."

This all fits perfectly in tone with the Wall of Shame, which is Downey'speak for a family bulletin board hung on another kitchen wall, thumbtacked with layers of self-mocking photos, mainly of Downey—kung-fu Downey with a shiner, sad sack in stir, devy Brat Pack bouffant-coiffed Bob with old-old flame Sarah Jessica Parker—but Downey's writing, to be blunt, feels *unfelt*.

If you're gonna write a book, dude, you maybe oughta get more real with it.

"I don't know if I can," he says. "And that's probably part of the reason I stopped and got a little scared."

Exactamundo. Gimme some scorch, Little Bobby. Less soft-shoe, more fear. Some grim, tortured-spirit-behind-the-light-'n'-lively-veneer—

"Could I also have a chapter where I talk about the seventh ray of the ninth configuration and start using, like, 'magnificent'—kind of an Eckhart thing—that, too? I'd love to have the cover actually be me in a long, flowing

sand feet for a movie. Fincher shot the equivalent of 1.3 million for *Zodiac*, all of it stored in a six-foot Apple tower—a virtual warehouse accessible to the picture and sound editors and the visual-effects crew.

His new movie draws heavily on his new techniques. People have talked for years about making *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, an adaptation of the F. Scott Fitzgerald story about a man who's born as a seventy-year-old baby and ages backward. But technology lagged behind the demands of the story line. Fincher thinks he's got it now. Instead of using different actors for Benjamin Button and asking the audience to make the mental leap, he will be played at almost every age by Brad Pitt, with his head put onto other actors' bodies. Fincher plays a demo scene, and it's a little freaky and utterly believable. A man sits at a table tapping a spoon, and then the head changes. Same scene, same body, but a new head, flawlessly switched. When Benjamin is aged and decrepit—or young and decrepit, in this case—the role will be played by a smaller actor. The same scene will be re-shot with Pitt playing Benjamin. The movements of both actors' faces will be tracked, with Pitt's replacing the original. That's the plan at least. "I sure hope we're right," he says. "Or it's going to be terrible."

After a morning spent laying out the geometry of every shot for *Benjamin Button*, Fincher's picking minor rolls and body doubles, watch-

robe—a jeweled robe—where I'm writing as an ascended master."

How can you *not* love this silly, laughing, wheezing, buzzing, tap-dancing motherfuck?

"You know what'd be the *best*, dude? I'm standing there, and there's literally sunlight comin' out of my ass."

You're on no meds?

"No meds. Look, Ma—no meds. Dude, that's a great chapter. That's *genius*. I gotta hit this whole thing about the bipolar. They called me up and said, 'Hi, we're from the Bipolar Association and you—' 'But I'm *not*.' 'Well, you've said—' 'No! I haven't said shit. Dr. *Malibusian* said,' and they go, 'Well, it's been written, so we're going to quote it.'"

"Is it all right if I weigh in here? Because although I *can* say sometimes I wanna shop a lot and sometimes I just wanna watch ESPN and jerk off and eat ice cream, I'm *not* fuckin' depressed or manic. I've been told I was an *axis 2.94 disorder*, but the guy I was seeing didn't know I was smokin' crack in his bathroom. You can't make a diagnosis until somebody's fuckin' sober."

Never used needles?

"No."

Black-tar heroin? *And* crack?

"Well, first of all, it was eleven years ago, right around this time of year, and someone said, 'We're smokin' some, ah, some, ah—whadya call it?—opium.' And I was like, 'Oh, that sounds really fuckin' *boheme*.' But, of course,

ing audition tapes, and flipping through a pile of head shots, checking résumés on the backs. "This girl played Giggling Coed?" he says. "I can't believe this is Giggling Coed."

"I know," Laray Mayfield says. "Amazing, right?" She's worked for Fincher for twenty years, since starting as his assistant.

"Is he too handsome?" Fincher says, holding up another glossy photo. "I'm just worried that he's a little modelly. We'll just scruff him up and make him look as bad as he's ever looked."

The last one was too cute, this one too well fed.

"He needs to be gaunt," Fincher says. "He's gotta get gaunt."

"I told him that, and he's lost thirty pounds," Mayfield says. "But I told him to keep going."

In the hallway, Fincher eyes a wall of head shots, many of them elderly actors for the nursing-home scenes. "Are these people robust and healthy?" he says. "I just don't want to get into any tragic continuity issues."

"Well, it's a possibility. God is certainly going to be on our side if we make it without that happening," Mayfield says. "We're dealing with these people at the most vulnerable time of their lives. But this guy's a firecracker. And he drives. All these people still drive and travel."

He nods, satisfied that his actors won't be dying on set. On the way back to his office, Bob Wagner, his assistant director, intercepts him with pictures of blind people circa 1900, answering an earlier query about when the blind

that first time it was opium. The second time, it *looked* like opium. Looked the same, smelled the same, a little dirtier, not quite as pristine a buzz, and by the time three weeks later, when I woke up, thought I had a flu, and took one hit on it, I looked up and said, 'Great. So now we're *junkies*. This is fuckin' great.' Six months later, I catch my first case ever of getting pulled over—and that was after unabashedly partying to my fuckin' heart's content for the first ten-plus years I was out here.

"I was always the guy who was like, No heroin, no crack. But it doesn't matter if ya go ten years without doin' it. Because on that 3,651st day, it's yer fuckin' turn, joker. First time someone took the powder outta the house and accidentally left a rock there—that's the problem. Hang around the barbershop, yer gonna get a haircut.

"At that point it was like, *Uhhhh*, will someone just tie my shoelaces together, 'cuz I'm *fucked* now, and I knew it and proved it rapidly. Because once yer doin' those things together, it's time to get arrested."

Then, if you're an honest-to-Buddha addict, it's time to get clean, fuck up, and get arrested again. And again. And again. And again. And again. And again. Time to tell everybody who ever believed in you, loved you, and gave you another chance—including the judge—to get fucked. Time to lose the wife, lose the kid, lose the gig. Time to go from personage to punch line.

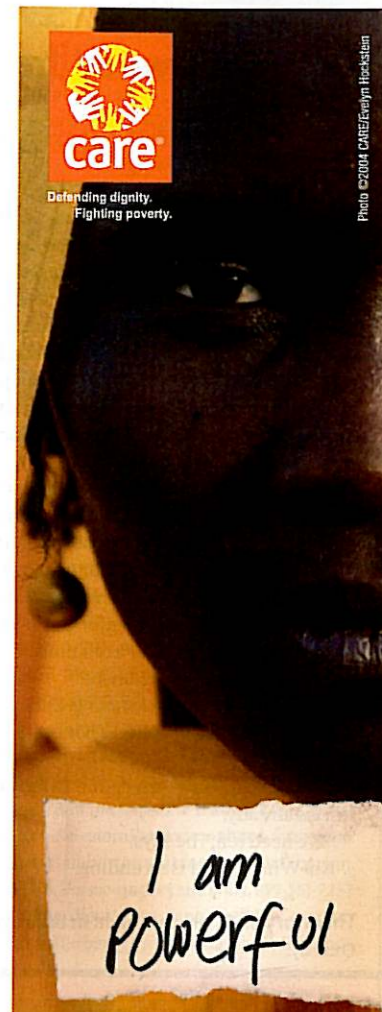
"I'm Retread Fred, serial relapser. That's

started wearing dark glasses. "It doesn't matter how much you do your homework," says Max Daly, the researcher who fields these requests. "He's really good at finding the one detail that was missed. He knows more than anybody."

Fincher knows people call him a perfectionist. They're just wrong, that's all. "What I'm really always trying to do is get rid of the things that are taking me out of feeling a certain way or causing me to think in another direction," he says. "So it's more about limiting distractions. My gig is, You're going to play this part, and it's my job to make sure that everything around you and everything you're going to come in contact with and every person you're going to be speaking with supports what you're doing."

Some actors appreciate this and say so. Others no doubt feel confined but stay quiet because they need to keep working. And then there's R. Lee Ermey, who played the police captain in *Seven* and the drill instructor in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, where he helped create much of the role. He calls Fincher a chickenshit. "He's afraid to take chances. He's afraid to let anybody change one word in the script," he told UnderGround-Online. "He wants puppets. He doesn't want actors that are creative. If you're not worth a shit at acting and you're not creative, then I would recommend that you go work with David Fincher, because he won't let you act, even if you are a fucking good actor."

Fincher smiles at that. "You cast them for this certain thing that they bring to it and may-



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## Robert Downey Jr.

the story."

Yep, that's the story. But that story isn't him; hell, it's not even *this* story.

In *this* story, the most flutulent actor of his generation swings by the next noon, and it's off to the races again. We hit a deli in Beverly Hills for a long nosh with an old pal of his, and on the way back to the car, Downey ducks into a soap shop to drop a quick \$700 on gifts. He's hobbling like a man with a large pole up his butt, stiff from this morning's kung-fu sparring, stuck in a phase his *sifu* calls "tasting the cup of bitters."

"In essence," he explains, "every single thing you do is wrong, even though you're doing everything right—because you're not really there with the other person. It's just amazing. It's so hard to show up for a process that's so simple in its complexity—and this goes for gettin' clean, this goes for showin' up for a relationship, this goes for chasing your dreams—"

Oy. Me, I'm sore from *listening*. Exhausted. Shitfaced, whirling drunk on a bottomless cup of Downey.

Look, I say, you've given me three cover stories already.

"We need ten," he says.

No. What I need is an ending.

**This story ends** late that night in Brentwood. Quietly.

This story ends with Mrs. Junior—her long-fingered hands are lovely indeed, and so's the rest of her—and dark-eyed Indio and Little Bobby wolfing some Thai, a little Saturday-night-in-the-cul-de-sac curry, delivered piping hot.

This story ends with two fat albums of wedding photos of the beaming summer day that Jailhouse Jim, Retread Fred, Tiptoe Terry, Half-Measures Hal, Steady Eddie, and Susie Q, a savvy Jewish girl from Chicagoland by way of the USC film program and obviously in no need of any hand-lettered reminder about rules and tools, all tied the knot.

This story ends with Iron Man, still sore from his cup of bitters, curling up on the couch under some kind of new-age Zen healing wrap to watch Helen Mirren in *The Queen* with the missus.

This story ends with Shaman Boy and the Young Master—with Robert Downey Jr. and Indio, with a forty-one-year-old man and his thirteen-year-old boy—facing each other in silhouette down a shadowed hallway.

They stand clasped, each one's head on the other's shoulder, without words or distance between them. Only their hands move, trading rhythm in turn, drumming love in call and answer upon each other's back. The beat flows and ebbs, crackling in the dark, numinous. I don't know how long it goes, don't know what it may mean, don't know if Downey is wet-eyed or grinning. I know that he is finally silent, finally beyond words. ■

## Brian Murphy

[continued from page 197] the telephone," he said.

The former Black Panther said he wanted to give money for weapons to attack "the big Satan."

Al-Moayad barely hesitated. "I will work, God willing, God willing, in these fields, as they are my fields, with God's permission."

Murphy got it on tape.

At night, al-Moayad and his assistant plotted secret codes in their room. "A person must be clever," al-Moayad said. "For example, if you wish to buy ammunition: 'By God, Sheik Mohammed, we wish to buy corn. The corn is running low.'"

Two days later, al-Moayad ended it all with a prayer. "Dear God, defeat the Jews. Defeat the infidel Americans. Dear God, strike them with earthquakes. Put them in their coffins."

That's when the German cops burst into the room in tactical gear.

**The arrest got big headlines.** John Ashcroft told the nation that al-Moayad had "personally handed Osama bin Laden \$20 million" (which was probably stretching it a bit). Murphy went back to his *hawala* cases until the extradition rigmorale was done, then he went to Germany to personally escort al-Moayad to a New York jail.

But then his story takes a startling turn. After getting a letter from the Marines saying that he might get a call-up for the reserves, Murphy suddenly decided to reenlist. "I still don't understand it," his sister says.

"I could not talk him out of it, nor could the bureau talk him out of it," said his FBI supervisor, John Liguori.

"We argued for weeks before we came to a resolution," says his wife, Amy. "And by resolution, I mean that he decided."

He asked to be sent to Iraq.

The Marines made him a captain and sent him to the Triangle of Death. About twenty miles south of Baghdad, the neighborhood earned its nickname because of constant kidnappings and mortar attacks. Murphy arrived in August 2004 and joined patrols in full armor and 100 degree heat, putting his FBI experience to the crucial job of trying to ID every single person in the area by residence and employment and quickly proving himself such a "force multiplier," his commander put him in charge of one point of the triangle, a town called Latifiyah.

Murphy won't say much about what happened to him there, but Amy shared some of his letters:

"The last three or four days have been pretty bad here. We have had six Marines killed in several attacks... We were under constant attack for a while... I was worried that one of the Marines was going to die right in front of me. I slapped him in the face to prevent him from going out. It was like a bad war movie."

Another time:

"We did CPR on the badly injured Marine for about five to ten minutes while we waited for the ambulance. He began to vomit and as he did so we continued mouth-to-mouth and kept clearing his airway. We finally got moved out. He died about two to three minutes later of massive internal injuries."

And then the most unexpected and astounding thing happened—Mohamed Alanssi set himself on fire in front of the White House, telling reporters that the FBI hadn't paid him enough or didn't appreciate him enough, his precise grievance unclear. From the Justice Department, Kelly Moore sent an official request to the Marines:

Send Murphy! Fast!

On a laptop in the desert, Murphy hammered out his answer:

"To date my unit has had eight Marines killed in action and over forty wounded. Most of the Marines are under the age of twenty-two and are nothing more than kids. I am begging you to withdraw your request. My job is here!!!"

Moore shot back:

"I just went through the 302's for the time-period in Germany—there are sixty-six with only one name on them: Brian Murphy. You chose to go to Iraq. I know that. And you did so knowing that this case (repeatedly referred to in the press as the most significant terrorism case in the country since 9/11) was scheduled for trial in January. You started this case and it's your job to see it to the end. My request is for you to come back and help with this trial and testify. I will not withdraw that request. Doing so would be equivalent to not fighting for this case."

The battle stretched out for weeks, even making *Agence France Presse*. At one point, Kelly got Murphy on a satellite phone and heard gunfire. "He was getting shot at while he was talking to me."

In the end, they had to order him to come back.

**The Sheik al-Moayad trial** began in January 2005 and lasted five weeks. The lead defense attorney mocked the case as a "TV reality show," and *The New York Review of Books* summed up the most potent reason for skepticism: "Of the eighty thousand Arabs and Muslim foreign nationals who were required to register after September 11, the eight thousand called in for FBI interviews, and more than five thousand locked up in preventative detention, not one stands convicted of a terrorist crime today. In what has surely been the most aggressive national campaign of ethnic profiling since World War II, the government's record is 0 for 93,000."

But the government had Murphy, and Murphy had a code. "We want people to come to the trial," he says. "We want the world to know what we did."

Al-Moayad got seventy-five years. Murphy got promoted to the FBI's elite counterterrorism unit in Washington. ■

## Charles Swift

[continued from page 199] the grandmother called all the little girls living in the house together. There had to have been at least ten of them. They all had on blue jeans and tennis shoes and little T-shirts with Care Bears. It's not a rich family, but they're clean and they're dressed well and they look like little girls the world over. Their faces are shining and their eyes are bright and so full of promise. The grandmother pointed at my colleague and said, "She went to school and studied very, very hard and she got very good grades, and now she's a lawyer." And then she looked at them and said, "If you go to school and study very, very hard, you can be anything."

The toaster in my mother's kitchen was tangible evidence to the Soviet scientists that democracy and capitalism created a better life. Ultimately, the people of the Soviet Union saw what we had and rejected communism. The grandmother in Yemen wants her granddaughters to be treated not as rightless, faceless women but as people. If we are about equal rights, then the grandmother is with us.

President Ronald Reagan was right: In our best moments we are the shining city on the hill. The world is angry with us because they think we've failed in that promise. But if we are committed to the rule of law and remain faithful to our principles, then America will be a beacon to that grandmother, and her promise will have a chance of coming true. ■

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## David Fincher

be not for another thing that they would like to bring to it. And I think it's difficult for actors," he says. "My rule is simple: Come having memorized the text. I don't mind having discussions about what the intent of something is or what the dramatic structure of a scene is with somebody who's done their homework. But I won't have this discussion with somebody who's just hung-over. Because that's just disrespectful to everybody else." He pauses to say he's not referring to anybody specific. "You earn the right to help write or reorder a scene when you prove that you understand why everything is there and not when you decide on a whim that something doesn't work for you personally."

**He'll take the bad reviews** and the snide comments. *Fight Club* is a cult hit now, but it opened in 1999 to \$11 million and tepid reviews. Roger Ebert said it was macho porn, and *The Hollywood Reporter* called it morally repulsive and socially irresponsible. And that brought out the smugness in Hollywood. Look at Fincher. Look at Fincher fail. Serves him right for coloring outside the lines. "It was amazing how many people, unsolicited, went out of their way to say, I'm really sorry about your movie," he says. "And it wasn't a 'Good on you, fuck them' kind of thing. It was like a 'Welcome back. Now you'll understand what we're in for—we keep trying to tell you.'"

Fincher has no time for that. He'll stumble and struggle, so long as he's not complacent.

"Do your best work," he says. "Work as hard as you can on any given day and try to live it down."

Which brings Fincher, at the end of this very long week, after stopping to see his daughter's volleyball game, to a darkened screening room in Burbank to make color corrections on *Zodiac*. He plops into a plush black leather chair. He yawns and rubs his face and looks as if he's about to fall asleep. He settles his chin onto his palm and looks at his newest work, in freeze-frame before him, through heavy eyes. "That's a little pink. Take it down a couple points," he says. The audience would never notice, but Fincher does, so he keeps on like this, making tiny adjustments. "And a little more warmth," he says. "Add some yellow."

Next.

"Just give me a little fog back in here."

Next.

"Tone down the neon sign."

"Good."

Next.

He slumps further into his chair, flops his arm across the table, and lays his head across his bicep. He looks at the screen sideways, with his laser pointer dancing across the images, and ponders the minutiae. The images change, ever so slightly, finally matching the story he has told in his head, again and again all these months, and the corners of David Fincher's eyes crinkle into a smile. ■

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