

Newsline

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2012

U.S. begins program to delay deportation

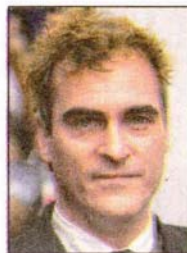
Young illegal immigrants are notified that they can stay and work in the country for up to two more years. 3A

Schools requiring safety class before parking privileges

High schools in South Carolina, Oklahoma, elsewhere are requiring students to take driving-safety course before getting parking permit. 3A.

After two-year break, Phoenix soars again in 'The Master'

Audacious actor's on-screen performance is redefining and helps him save his reputation after an elaborate mock-documentary stunt. 1D.



Getty Images

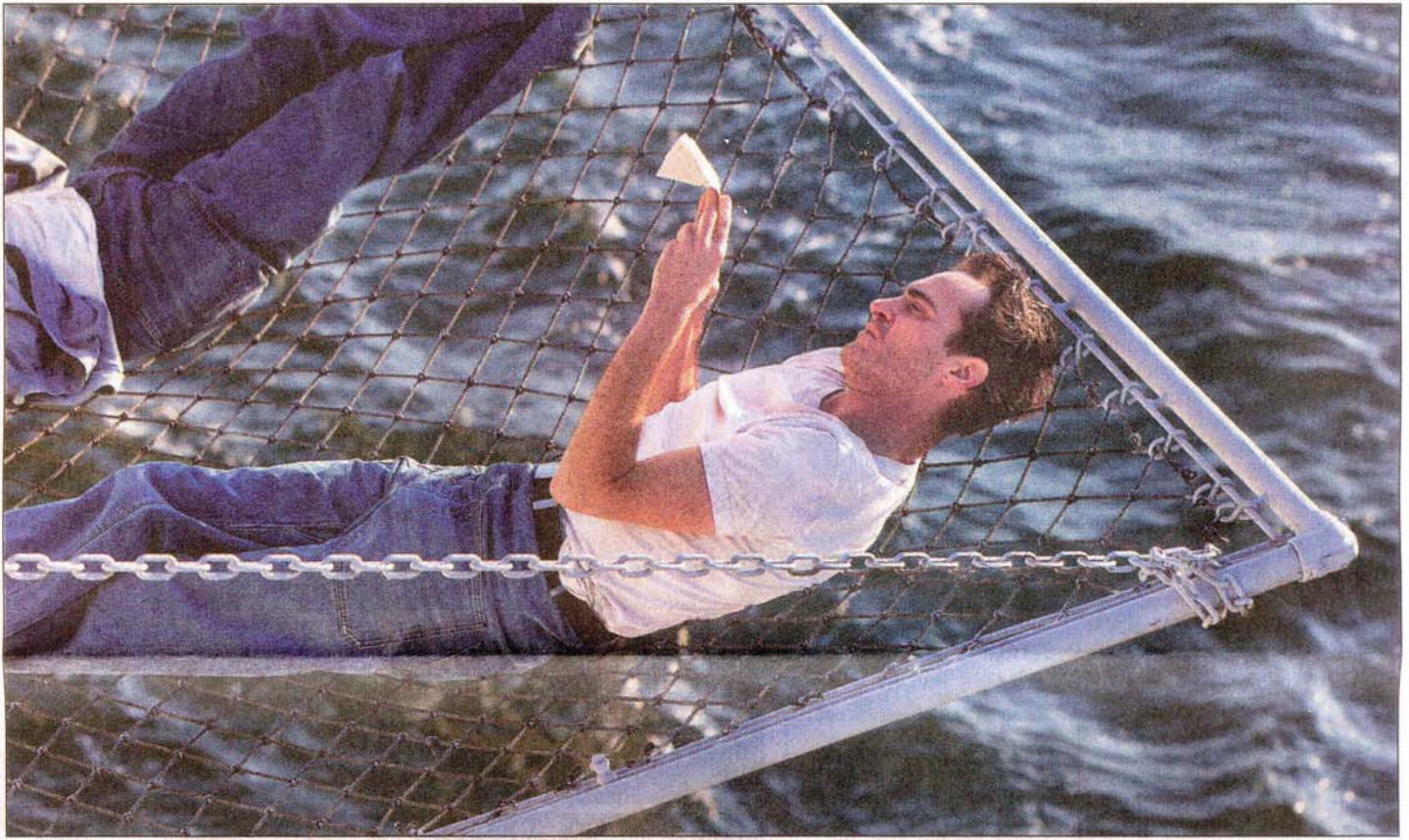
Joaquin Phoenix

Web pioneer hopes to open elections with free voter data

Costs, legal limits, technical obstacles have made it hard for small-party candidates to access voter data. Jim Gilliam hopes to even playing field. 7A.

These tech specialists take new gadgets, rip them apart

iSuppli helps electronic companies figure out how a rival's hot new device works. 3B.



By Phil Bray, RADIUS-TWC

Still waters run deep: Joaquin Phoenix has already earned a boatload of accolades for his performance in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master*.

PHOENIX SOARS AGAIN

The audacious, affecting actor blazes a brilliant return to the screen in 'The Master'



By Jason Merritt, Getty Images

By Susan Wloszczyna
USA TODAY

TORONTO — "Man is not an animal," declares Lancaster Dodd, the charismatic founder of a cult known as The Cause, as he exhorts his flock to rise above their baser instincts in *The Master*, opening Friday.

Standing in defiance of those words is Freddie Quell, a traumatized veteran of World War II embodied by Joaquin Phoenix whose simian posture, mumbled grunts and constant cravings for sex, alcohol and violence suggest a feral creature on the lower rungs of the evolutionary scale.

Director Paul Thomas Anderson's latest probe of the American psyche portrays Quell as a rotting landfill of damaged goods and a fitting sociopathic foil for Dodd, who is imbued with P.T. Barnum showmanship and an avuncular joviality by Philip Seymour Hoffman.

On the set, "Paul would call me Bubbles, which was the name of Michael Jackson's monkey," Phoenix says of his apelike interpretation of Freddie. "He would say, 'Come on, Bubbles, let's go!' It was obvious I was an animal. The master talks about how he's lassoed the dragon and taught him how to sit. And I'm definitely the dragon."

And he is in full roar. As *The Master* begins its journey across the country after eliciting hosannas from journalists attending the To-

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

Phoenix's transformation in 'Master' recalls De Niro

Continued from 1D

rono International Film Festival that ends Sunday, audiences can observe Phoenix's unfettered Freddie firsthand along with Hoffman's Dodd testing his new-age religious theories that echo those of Scientology.

It's not enough that Phoenix, 37, explodes on-screen in a redefining performance that could stand alongside those of the early Brando or De Niro in its physical audacity. In his first acting role after a two-year break, Phoenix rescues his reputation from the ashes of *I'm Still Here*. The elaborate 2010 mock-documentary stunt about his supposed retirement from acting, conceived with brother-in-law Casey Affleck and featuring cocaine snorting and raw sexual acts, easily could have resulted in self-immolation. Instead, it has led to a glorious reinvention.

A career born again

The *Master* is clearly Anderson's baby. It delivers on all the profound promise found in his five previous efforts, including 1997's porn-world exposé *Boogie Nights* and 2007's oil-empire epic *There Will Be Blood*.

But for Phoenix, a former child star known for his uncanny Oscar-nominated transformation into country-music legend Johnny Cash in 2005's *Walk the Line*, it is a revelatory rebirth, one that already has resulted in a best-actor prize from the Venice Film Festival that he shared with co-star Hoffman.

Anderson has been itching to work with Phoenix ever since he considered him for the role of skin-flick ingénue Dirk Diggler in *Boogie Nights*.

"I knew he would be good, but I didn't know he was going to be like that," he says. "But it's great to be with somebody who has just revitalized himself. It was clearly something he needed to dismantle and destroy to get excited again and get scared again about acting."

Phoenix, a slim and roughly handsome figure who recalls the young Montgomery Clift, is pleasant as he greets his visitor. He is a far cry from the debauched and bloated train wreck hiding behind sunglasses who went on the *Late Show With David Letterman* in 2009 (the host was not in on the act, Phoenix insists) and later stumbled incoherently through *I'm Still Here*.

A professional detour

This clean-shaven Phoenix, in a casual ensemble of blue polo shirt and jeans, seems relieved yet slightly skeptical of the outburst of praise that has been heaped upon him. His only transgression today: lighting up in a no-smoking hotel room.

"I wanted to change the way that I thought about acting," he says. "I just felt like I had become stale. I had always experienced adrenaline and anxiety when I work, but it wasn't quite what it was 10, 15 years ago."

With *I'm Still Here*, which was largely improvised, "I put myself into a situation in which I wouldn't really know what to do, and it was good for me. It



Performance art: "I wanted to change the way I thought about acting," Joaquin Phoenix says of the bizarre 2010 mockumentary *I'm Still Here*, directed by Casey Affleck, right.

And as for the beliefs of actor and family ...

Given the religious themes of *The Master*, Joaquin Phoenix has been handling questions about his own family's association with a group formerly known as Children of God and now called The Family International. His parents, who met in 1968 while hitchhiking and would have five children, went on a mission on behalf of the group, whose members were originally hippies. They traveled around South America before becoming disillusioned and returning to the USA in 1978.

"It was weird," he says. "Like with this movie, at what point does a group of people who share ideals morph into a cult, which is the power of one man? My parents ... were drawn by being in a community that promoted peace and love and was about, for them, a belief in Christ."

As for now, he says, "I don't have any particular religious beliefs, and I think my parents would consider themselves more spiritual than involved in one particular kind of religion. What 22-year-old and what 25-year-old doesn't make a stupid decision in their life? My parents did nothing but look out for the kids' best interests. They broke their backs taking care of us."

By Susan Wloszczyna

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The master and the mentor: Philip Seymour Hoffman and Phoenix share most of the screen time in *The Master*.



Eyes wide open all the time: Phoenix was nominated for an Oscar for his performance as Johnny Cash in 2005's *Walk the Line*.

boundaries."

Part of the process of Phoenix's comeback was reintroducing himself to the industry — and to earn back its trust.

"It was difficult," he says. "I was regarded with some trepidation, and in some of the first meetings I went to, I would say the only person who didn't regard me that way was Paul. I understood that. But my agents knew what was happening, my publicist knew what was happening. My agents certainly were talking to executives at studios."

As a result, six months after *I'm Still Here* opened, Phoenix had his pick of six scripts — all of which he passed on.

"It's great to be with somebody who has just revitalized himself."

Director Paul Thomas Anderson

Die For. And many felt for him after he was present when older brother River, 23, died from an overdose outside a Sunset Strip nightclub in 1993. It was Phoenix's imploring voice calling 911 that was heard repeatedly on media broadcasts.

"There is a kind of bemused affection for him in the industry," Lodge notes. "People may be exasperated by some of his behavior, but it also makes him that much more dangerous and exciting of a talent."

Strangely enough, Phoenix actually had to have more discipline than usual to achieve Freddie's necessary gaunt appearance that, by the end, gives his face a scarily cadaverous look. The 5-foot-9 actor went from a normal weight of 150-160 pounds to a skeletal 127. "I think he (Freddie) has a constant hunger," Phoenix says. "That is what I went after. I had a super-restrictive low-calorie diet, about 1,000 to 800 a day. I basically had lettuce with rice vinegar and string beans once a day. And I could have one day when I ate five apples."

Shooting in Vallejo, Calif., also kept Phoenix on his best behavior. "Basically I came back to the Courtyard Marriott at night, and I was so (expletive) hungry that I would just get to bed and immediately force myself to sleep.

I didn't have a girlfriend. I didn't interact with anybody. The only interaction was with people on the set within that world."

Destined to be an actor

Freddie forms a mentor relationship with Dodd. Similarly, Phoenix treats his directors as father figures. "I always describe getting into character as being like when my father taught me how to ride a bike. And I desperately needed him to hold the bike because I'm going to fall. I'm telling him: 'Please don't let go. Stay with me. Stay with me.' Then, at some point, you say, 'Let go. I'm fine. Let go.'"

Anderson believes that it is and always has been Phoenix's destiny to be an actor. And he is not going away again anytime soon. Especially since he already has several films waiting in the wings, including *Nightingale* with filmmaker and frequent collaborator James Gray and *Her* with Spike Jonze.

Says Anderson: "You can smell it. They can't help it. They are an actor, and it is kind of what they do. If he wishes sometimes he wasn't, so be it. It's just that there is a skill level he has. It's like somebody who is amazing at driving cars or amazing at playing tennis. If they take a break, it throws off the universe somehow."

"I just couldn't bring myself to do them. I knew I would be miserable. I don't enjoy being on a set, and I don't enjoy being in my trailer. I don't enjoy makeup. I don't enjoy having people from wardrobe measuring your body. I like working, but I don't like all that. So I am not going to do something which I'm not going to get anything out of."

Momentum on his side

Guy Lodge, a film critic for *In Contention* and *Variety* who witnessed the overwhelming response to Phoenix in *The Master* in Venice, can think of only one direct precedent to the actor's image turnaround: Christian Bale, who put behind his infamously profane chastising of a crewmember on the set of 2009's *Terminator Salvation* that went viral on the Internet. The following year, the Batman actor would take home the supporting-actor Oscar for *The Fighter*.

"The praise for Phoenix's remarkable performance is heartening proof that most true movie lovers don't have a tabloid mentality — we care about the talent more than the man. The consensus in Venice is that it's the defining performance of his career so far. You can practically hear the gears of an Oscar campaign grinding."

Also working in Phoenix's favor: Most moviegoers hold a certain fondness for the unconventional actor who started acting at age 8 and won praise playing lost boys in such films as 1989's *Parenthood* and 1995's *To*