

The great escape

From down-and-out to adventure hero, Robert Downey Jr., has turned his career around to become one of Hollywood’s leading male actors. But, as **Harold von Kursk** reports, it is his wife, Susan Downey, who has inspired the most remarkable of biopic stories

Robert Downey Jr. is one of the most extraordinary men in Hollywood.

In the first act, our 27 year-old New-Yorker emerged as one of Tinseltown’s most talented young actors, winning Best Actor Oscar and Golden Globe nominations – and a first BAFTA – for his brilliant embodiment of *Charlie Chaplin*.

Act II is not such a happy passage, as drug addiction took Downey Jr. to the edge of self-destruction.

His latest act has witnessed the greatest comeback in the history of the film business.

Twelve years ago, he fell in love with Susan Levin, the film producer who would later become his wife, and has since rebooted his life and career to become one of the most successful actors in the game.

Downey Jr.’s films have earned more than \$9b at the box-office while his annual earnings frequently exceed \$60m which, depending on the year, make him the highest-paid actor in the business. As the face of billion-dollar *Iron Man* film franchise, and its multiple *Avengers* spin-offs, this charismatic action hero is now

driven by the power of Zen. It is a positive mentality at the core of Downey Jr.’s indomitable spirit.

The staggering script even has the 51-year-old rubbing his eyes in disbelief. “Oh, it’s mind-blowing,” Downey Jr. says.

“It’s always great to be able to achieve so much more than you or anyone else could have imagined. Even when you’re mired in the depths of your own misguided making, you still have hope. I always wanted to do something extraordinary with my life and leave my mark on the world. I’m still ruthlessly ambitious!”

In *Iron Man* hero, Tony Stark, Downey Jr. found the perfect meta-role for a man whose self-awareness has reached extreme proportions. So much so that, at times, he appears to be running a commentary on his moment-to-moment conscious life.

Just as Stark lives in a hyper-reality that takes him beyond the ordinary limits of the superhero construct, Downey Jr. has mastered a heightened awareness between his Hollywood self and the one that lies beneath.

Perhaps it is because his mind works so fast, and his natural impatience is so great, that he constantly needs to fill his day with activity to prevent himself from wandering into the darker territory and temptations that once led him astray. “Work is the best therapy for me,” he observes.

“I need to keep myself occupied and not let my mind wander too much when I’m not planning or involved in a project.

“I know from past experience that I need that discipline and

Below: Co-produced by Susan Downey, *Sherlock Holmes* cast Jude Law and Downey Jr.

I also enjoy it as much as I ever have. I never spend much time away from Susan or the children, and nothing is going to change that.

“I know when I’m not doing enough and I also know when I’m stressing myself out trying to do more than I’m really capable of doing. When Susan sees I’m in that kind of state, she just kind of looks at me and says, ‘why don’t you go to the gym or something?’”

It is a partnership that has enabled Downey Jr. to make the most of his abundant talent. In the course of their 11-year marriage, Susan Downey (who worked alongside legendary Hollywood producer Joel Silver as a noted film executive in her own right), has helped assemble a personal staff that includes martial arts trainers, spiritual consultants and a private chef.

The Downey Jr.’s are also parents to two young children; five year-old son, Exton, and two year-old daughter, Avri. (Downey Jr. has another son, 23 year-old Indio, from his previous marriage to musician, actress and model Deborah Falconer.)

“Susan has given me a structure for living and we love each other as much as any couple can be in love. We’ve always ➤

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Peculiarly, he first earned recognition in the film industry as a noted character actor (and off-screen reputation as a rebel) whose Oscar nomination for his *Chaplin* had Hollywood insiders predicting a Pacino-like career. That was until various addictions derailed his life. Few expected him to be able to salvage either. So how did Downey Jr. manage to make the transition from ultimate Hollywood bad boy, and down-and-out actor, to the studio system's top-earning 'company man'?

"I originally pursued [*Iron Man*] because I had seen Keanu Reeves and Johnny Depp succeed with their own film franchises [*The Matrix* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* respectively]. I wanted India to see his dad in that kind of a movie. I wanted it to be the kind of movie you can take your kid to and explore the comic-book hero

genre with a mix of escapism and intelligence. I'm also proud of the fact that I'm a leading man who can do major blockbusters and be that Harrison Ford kind of guy. It's not a bad place to be... and there's no denying that *Iron Man* has put me in a position to many other things."

Much of the public devotion to Tony Stark can be interpreted as irresistible fascination with the actor himself. Stark's arrogance, brilliance, and wise-cracking, ironic sensibility owes much to Downey's extravagant, larger-than-life personality and mischievous way of looking at the world. He regards Stark as a 'braver extension' of himself: "When I first began getting into Tony Stark I imagined him as having a Howard Hughes kind of boldness and arrogance. I also saw it as an opportunity to come up with a screen persona that would be a more dashing and bolder variation on my own nature. There's a lot of me in him, but he's way cooler than I am." ➤

had this feeling that this is the big relationship and marriage for the rest of our lives. We take that responsibility seriously and I've become a better man because of my commitment to taking this journey together with her."

"I've surrounded myself with good people to help me remain healthy and forward-looking. My wife is the foundation of that process... and this is a beautiful chapter in my life."

Apart from his remarkable run as Tony Stark/*Iron Man*, Downey Jr. has also been the driving force behind the *Sherlock Holmes* franchise where he plays the title character opposite Jude Law's Dr. Watson and Rachel McAdams as Irene. The two films have grossed over \$1b and provided Downey Jr. with yet another outlandish, oversize screen alter-ego to embrace.

He is one of the few actors who has been the face of more than one gigantic film franchise – Harrison Ford (*Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Jack Ryan*) and Chris Pratt (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Jurassic Park*, *Indiana Jones*).

Left: Downey Jr. with Gwyneth Paltrow at the World Premiere of *Iron Man 2* Below: Downey Jr. was inspired by his wife, Susan, to turn his life around





"If I need to pick myself up and be a little more dashing, I can channel Tony Stark. I saw him as a man with a lot of élan!

"I've always believed that you need to be ambitious – in terms of your own expectations of who your best self can be.

"You can will yourself into becoming the kind of person you've always wanted to be. You can soar higher than you imagine!"

Aside from his Iron Man/ Sherlock Holmes incarnations, Downey Jr. has also distinguished himself in several other ambitious films over the past decade – notably *Zodiac*, *Tropic Thunder*, and *The Judge* (co-produced with Susan and their independent production company), which operates – impishly, as one might

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expect – under the moniker 'Team Downey'.

They are currently working on the third instalment of the *Sherlock Holmes* franchise – an action movie about the 1945 sinking of the USS Indianapolis – as well as a reported HBO crime series with True Detective creator Nic Pizzolatto.

One other recently announced project is tipped to become yet another Oscar-worthy milestone in this rescued career. Together with director Richard Linklater (*Boyhood*, the *Before Sunrise* trilogy), Downey Jr. is planning on playing John Brinkley.

The medical charlatan (who claimed to have the cure for impotence) blustered his way to the creation of a radio empire before running for Governor of Kansas – and almost winning – while expressing a fondness for Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler.

Industry observers are smacking their lips at the prospect of Downey Jr. playing a proto-Donald Trump figure whose parallels to the US President are all too obvious.

Above: Downey Jr. in action as Tony Stark A.K.A. Iron Man
Below: Friends Mel Gibson and Downey Jr. at the American Cinematheque Gala in 2011

Meanwhile, Downey Jr. is back to his day job as Tony Stark/Iron Man and is currently shooting Marvel Studio's *Avengers: Infinity War* in Atlanta, Georgia. This year will also see *Iron Man* making an appearance in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* prior to two more Avengers movies slated for release in 2018 and 2019.

Despite this flurry of activity, Downey Jr. claims to be increasingly reluctant to spend several months at a time away from his family. His two young children have reawakened his own 'childlike' sensibilities and he is determined to try to create a relationship with his children where "he can be very real, present and genuine" and ensure that the experience is "as close as possible."

"Family is the basis for so much of our lives... I don't think anyone is the father that they set

out to be... All I know is it's rare that a father can get it as right as the mom. And so I just kind of take my cues from Susan.

"It's pure joy to be able to spend hours at a time with your children and having no other thought in your brain except to fully engage and share in that experience...

"My work helps keep my focus and I pour as much of my energy into my life as I can and it all reflects back on me." ■

