

Passion in action

From his Modesto upbringing to an Academy Award nomination and roles in two of today's biggest blockbuster franchises, Jeremy Renner has conquered Hollywood with the quiet confidence of a man whose biggest love is film, not fame. He talks to **Harold von Kursk** about stunts, real estate, and selfie-hating squirrels

Jeremy Renner is an unlikely movie star. Having landed in Los Angeles, aged 19, with a dream of gracing the stage as a singer-songwriter, he dabbled in TV as a supporting player to pay the bills. But talent far exceeded ambition and he would go on to achieve a meteoric rise to fame as both a serious dramatic actor and a fixture in Hollywood blockbusters.

His natural athleticism — he attacked the toughest ski runs in Lake Tahoe as a teenager — has propelled him into major action roles in *The Bourne Legacy*, the Avengers franchise (as Hawkeye) and two Mission: Impossible films (*Ghost Protocol* and *Rogue Nation*). "I had an ability as an athlete to perform stunts and do that type of stuff, yet it was important to always have a great character," explains Renner.

"I didn't want to just do an action movie to do action. And then it became a thing because these are big movies — it kind of breeds itself."

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His finest work, however, has come in dark dramas: that of a grim, bomb-disposal expert in *The Hurt Locker* [2009], for which he earned a Best Supporting Actor nomination; and as a melancholy hunter helping the FBI catch those responsible for the brutal rape and murder of a Native American woman in last year's *Wind River*. The latter was shot in the wilderness of Utah, where Renner maintains a country retreat so he can escape Los Angeles.

For a man who builds houses in his spare time and also restores and collects vintage cars, paradise is a "hot cup of coffee breathing in the cold morning air" — away from it all. "It's definitely important to strike a balance between wilderness and city life," he says.

"I have a huge love of nature; the trees, clean air, the stars.

"It's also nice to be anonymous. Bears and squirrels don't give a shit who I am. You know what I mean? They're never looking for a selfie!"

This is the kind of spirit that defines the 47-year-old Renner. He brings a working-class sensibility to the rather elite occupation of a Hollywood leading man whose underlying gifts as a character actor have enabled him to work in multiple genres whether sci-fi (*Arrival*, co-starring Amy

Adams) or crime drama (*American Hustle*, *The Town* etc.).

For a man who grew up "without a cent" in Modesto, California where his parents managed a bowling alley, Renner concedes that, although he has enjoyed the higher visibility and added job security that comes from working on three studio franchises, that was never his primary reason for signing on to those projects.

"It's not really about the franchises even though the good thing about a successful franchise is you might have a job in the future and it's pretty much guaranteed that people are going to see the movie," says Renner, laughing.

"I've done a lot of movies and worked my ass off on smaller movies that nobody ever got to see. And it's a lot of time and work and effort, and even doing something you love, you kind of want people to see it."

"That's the thing that's always uncertain for actors or anyone in the film business. But I wouldn't have said yes to any of them unless I believed in the character I was doing.

"I always need to feel I can contribute something to these things... and of course there are a lot of opportunities involved in

Pictured: Renner (who plays Hawkeye) attends the first Avengers premiere in London in 2012 — *Avengers 4* is out soon

doing those big movies — now people see me as a big action star," he says, laughing again.

While mainstream audiences may flock to the Avengers films where he plays Hawkeye — *Avengers 4* will be released next May — *Wind River*, which he acknowledges as possibly the finest film of his career, is the kind of project that best stirs his creative instincts.

"First I look at the story, but when I wake up it's always a different feeling. I have to find a truth in the project, to feel involved. I do not want to give answers, I want to find them. I want to be tested. For me there would be no fun if it were not so.

"The script [for *Wind River*] has a lot of depth to it. What kind of makes the movie pulse along is the thriller aspect, there's the whole *whodunnit* kind of thing, and the depth and journey that comes from my character's having to deal with loss of his child and how to deal with it and not deal with it.

"Within that story, it all kinds of ties together but the world that you talk about is a fresh, majestic, unapologetic world.

"You know to just be emotionally affected by the movie and to me that is the greatest gift that I can ever get out of a movie. I think that is just a beautiful thing, because then it isn't just entertainment, there is an emotional and spiritual value to it."

This year Renner is starring in *Tag*, an action-comedy about five adult friends who have played the same game of tag ▶





for the past 30 years. Renner’s character Jerry (Jon Hamm and Ed Helms also co-star) is so good at it that he is the only one who has evaded being tagged every year which means the stakes keep getting higher. Unfortunately for Jeremy, his athletic prowess failed to save him from a nasty 20-foot tumble while climbing a stack of chairs during a chase sequence.

Renner, with typical tough guy bravado, dusted himself off, told the director he was ready to go again, and repeated the same stunt.

“It’s a stack of chairs like 20 feet high, and it’s supposed to fall over, and I’m supposed to ride it down like a surfboard and then keep running,” he said.

Above: Renner at the 74th Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton Hotel, Los Angeles in 2017 Right: Renner (second right) with Marvel co-stars Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans Mark Ruffalo and Samuel L. Jackson

“But the stack didn’t fall, I did. Then I realised, ‘I think something was wrong.

“So I went to the hospital, and they said (that both my arms) were

broken, so I got them wrapped up and then I went back to work and did everything I could do to continue [with the film].”

Splints were placed on both his arms and he even refused to take any pain medication so that he would know if certain stunts risked further damage to his arms.

“I couldn’t rotate my hands but I could move my arms up and down kind of like a robot, but I would do anything that didn’t hurt essentially... The first week was a little rough just because of the swelling, and then I would take the splints off as often as I could so I didn’t stay in this sort of like arm bent position.”

Ironically, Renner has managed to get through far riskier and more demanding films with only minor cuts and bruises – “and then I break both arms doing a comedy!”, he laughs.

Along the way, he has become a martial arts master from his intensive training for *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* [2011],

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skills which he would take to an even higher level in preparations for *The Bourne Legacy* the following year.

Tom Cruise is renowned for performing his own death-defying stunts in his *Mission Impossible* movies – including climbing the side of Dubai’s Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, on *Protocol* – and Renner says that “he pushes you to do it, too.”

“There was the opportunity to do so many things physically that I’ve never done. I had to get into really, really great shape and I was doing Filipino Stick Fighting – I didn’t even know what that was – and also Muay Thai. ➤



"I was doing martial arts for five hours a day, fighting, training and then doing a lot of stuff on the top of a skyscraper that's twice as high as the Empire State Building."

Renner is the oldest of six children and was an outstanding high school athlete who first studied criminology while attending junior college in Modesto.

"I grew up with no money. I'm used to having no money. I had no plans of going to Hollywood and I knew I had to go to college and that I should go.

"My father suggested the local community college. He said, 'Pick a class and go take it. Go fail.'"

That, "Go fail son" empowered me to go succeed, or try. So, I did. I went and just tried stuff, you know? And one of them was an acting class. Once I tried that acting class, it stuck."

At age 19 he made his way to L.A. determined to at the very minimum win some recognition: "I gave myself 11 years. I don't know why 11 years. Eleven years, I'll need to be in a movie, a movie big enough that's gonna play in Modesto, and be in a role that I didn't have to tell my parents, 'I'm the guy in the red shirt in the background.' I just wanted to be, like, 'You'll see me in that movie.'"

That movie turned out to be National Lampoon's *Senior Trip* which he fondly recalls as being "not bad" for his first acting gig.



But despite his impressive debut, it would take seven long, hard years before he landed his next major role in *Dahmer* in 2002, playing the notorious real-life serial killer Jeffery Dahmer.

Not knowing whether that role would give him steady income, he decided to put his paycheck to good use by teaming up with his brother, buying a house, and fixing it up.

"And the realtor's like, 'Oh, I can sell this for this number.' I'm like, 'What? Okay!'"

Oddly, Renner suddenly became even more successful in Hollywood as a talented house flipper working together with actor Kristoffer Winters. Renner would often live in each house during construction and remodelling, even if that meant at times living without electricity and indoor plumbing. But it was worth it.

Renovating old houses turned into a full-time vocation: "I can do anything with nails and a hammer – I made \$250,000 on my first house. Not bad for a second job!"

Then, in 2012, while his acting career was soaring with *American Hustle*, Jeremy earned a seven-figure profit on an art deco home that he restored which he reportedly bought for \$7m and sold for three times as much. Altogether, Renner has bought, sold, or otherwise flipped more than 30 houses.

With this kind of hellbent double life, one might wonder how he has managed his personal affairs. In 2012, he married Canadian actress/model Sonni Pacheco who gave birth to their daughter Ava Berlin in March, 2013. Sadly, the couple divorced shortly thereafter, although Renner has remained an active and involved father ever since.

Sharing custody of his child, Renner lives with her at a home which he unsurprisingly remodelled himself – right down to the monster swimming pool he designed with his daughter in mind.

"I wanted it to be like a playground for all the kids in my family, and then a playground for all the adults in my family.

"I think right now my attention is to be a father. She's my number one priority and I think that's my best role to date." ■



Above: Renner and Paul Rudd attend the European film premiere of *Captain America: Civil War* in 2016 **Left:** Renner at Cannes Film Festival in 2017 during the *Wind River* photocall