

The Most Happening Fella

Hollywood loves Brett Ratner. At 37 he's directed seven movies (*Rush Hour*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*), which collectively have grossed more than a billion dollars, and he's made fans of everyone from Robert Evans to Brian Grazer to Russell Simmons. Now he wants respect

By Nancy Jo Sales

There's a party at Brett Ratner's house. Not downstairs, in the disco, where producer Allan Carr (*Grease*) built a gold lamé playpen for 70s Hollywood, and Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan have lately been known to play, but upstairs, in the living room, where Ingrid Bergman once cast her loveliness at a visiting director, Roberto Rossellini, before he stole her away from her husband, Petter Lindström, a brain surgeon. Wait a minute. There's Dino De Laurentiis. Dino De Laurentiis? Who made *La Strada*? What's *he* doing here?

The elegant Italian producer smiles when asked what made him hire Brett Ratner to direct his Hannibal Lecter prequel, *Red Drag-*

on (2002). "Nobody wants to win more than Brett Ratner," he says.

Ratner, robust and shaggy, *shvitzing* slightly in crisp, blue Armani, still seems excited by this proximity to one of his idols. "When they hired me for *Red Dragon*," he says, "Stacey Snider, the chairman of Universal, says, 'You have to meet Dino De Laurentiis.' I said, 'Oh shit! This guy made Fellini movies! He's been making movies longer than I been alive!' I went to see him, first thing he says is"—heavy accent—"Who *are* you? Why do they like you? You tell me now!"

De Laurentiis gives a shrug. "About a half an hour later, I said he could do it—I *like* the guy. He's a son of a bitch, but you know, a director must be a son of a bitch, too.

"In my opinion," he says, after Ratner hurries off to greet his other illustrious guests, "in another two, three years, he'll do an important movie."

In Hollywood, Brett Ratner is known for many things; first and foremost, for being one of the most bankable directors in the industry. His feature films—only seven of them, including *Rush Hour* and *Rush Hour 2*, the wildly popular buddy action comedies with Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan—have grossed well over a billion dollars. Yes, a billion dollars, which has earned Ratner a \$7.5-million-per-picture payday. And he's only 37.

His last movie, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), the operatic third installment in the

STYLED BY JESSICA PASTER; SUIT BY DIOR HOMME; SHIRT BY GUCCI; GROOMING BY DIANA SCHMIDTKE; FOR DETAILS, SEE CREDITS PAGE

Marvel Comics series, had the biggest Memorial Day weekend opening ever (\$122 million), and went on to make close to half a billion dollars worldwide. And that's just box office. "I feel sort of guilty," Ratner said at the time, "because I look up to guys like Spielberg, and I beat every record of his." (Steven Spielberg had previously held the record with 1997's *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, which did \$92.7 million.)

Ratner's known for being competitive. And determined. And "enthusiastic," "charming," "generous," even "lovable"—words that come up a lot when you ask his friends about him—as well as very, very successful with women. (A short list of his loves: Rebecca Gayheart, Naomi Campbell, Serena Williams, and, most recently, Romanian bombshell Alina Puscau.)

But what Brett Ratner isn't known for, generally, is being a filmmaker on the order of Martin Scorsese. "I love making movies that reach the largest possible audience.

"I lived in his house for two years," from 2002 to 2004, while this house was being renovated, Ratner says. "Every morning his butler brought me *the best eggs I ever ate in my life!*"

"When I screen a movie," he says, "before I show it to anybody, I show it to one of three people: Warren [Beatty], Bob Evans, or Bob Towne, because they're the smartest guys in the business. They tell me the truth, they're not kissing my ass."

There's Danny Elfman—the prolific composer; he scored *Red Dragon*—and Penélope Cruz, glistening with Spanish beauty. There's the legendary Quincy Jones—composer, conductor, producer—sitting at Ratner's dining-room table with a fetching young Brazilian woman on his lap.

"That's my baby," Jones says. She goes by Tulsí.

Ratner stands up and starts telling everyone a story—it's his favorite kind: a gen-

and got one letter back: from Spielberg.

"So I sit down, and Spielberg sits right next to me, and he goes, 'So, did you go to film school?' And I go, 'It's funny you should ask!' I go, 'You gave me money for my student film!' He goes, 'No way!' Four hours later, we're still talking. Quincy's looking at me like—*Are you bothering him? Stop bothering him!*"

Laughter. It's a classic Rat tale: the player comes off a player while giving props to the master.

"And now when I finish *Rush Hour 3*," says Ratner, "Quincy and I are flying to Brazil. We're going to shoot Brazil Carnival in H.D."

"High definition," says Jones.

"It's going to be like the Brazilian version of *Buena Vista Social Club*," Ratner says.

"But bigger," says Jones.

"There's a whole new wave of Brazilian music," says Jeff Berg, chairman of ICM, the power agency, who's just come in.

"I'M NOT WHAT PEOPLE THINK I AM," SAYS RATNER. "I'M A FILMMAKER!"

And not many people can do that," he explains. "You can't teach somebody how to make a film that millions of people are going to see and laugh at and enjoy."

"They're so mean to me on the Internet!" he complains. He's been called many things, but probably not "the second coming of Orson Welles." And this seems to bother him. A lot.

"I eat, sleep, breathe the movies," he told me one night at the top of the Eiffel Tower, where he was shooting a scene from the upcoming *Rush Hour 3*. "I've been dreaming about this every day since I was eight years old! I'm not what people think I am—I'm a filmmaker!"

But nobody at his party, on this December night in Beverly Hills, really seems to care; everyone's having such a good time.

His grand old Tudor mansion—built in 1923 and dubbed Hilhaven Lodge, it was designed by Gordon Kaufman, the same architect who designed Hoover Dam—is fragrant with gardenias. Candles flicker everywhere. There's a fire in the fireplace. The food, served buffet-style, is delicious. And the company is rather astounding.

There's Bob Towne, who wrote *Chinatown*. "He's considered the greatest—writer—of all time," Ratner whispers hotly in my ear. There's Robert Evans, the former head of Paramount, who made *Chinatown* and a string of other classic films (*The Godfather*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Marathon Man*). He's sitting on the couch, looking like a glamorous owl.

esis story, about his meeting with a famous older man who becomes his "best friend" and then changes his life. Which is the constant theme in his life.

"I start directing music videos," he says, "because I became best friends with Russell Simmons"—the founder and former head of Def Jam Recordings was Ratner's mentor in New York in the early 90s and while he was a student at N.Y.U. film school—"and I was, like, the hottest video director at the time. And Quincy's like, 'I want you to direct videos for my company, we gotta work together, come see me in the Hamptons, come to this party.'"

"He wanted me to do videos for him," Ratner says. "He had an eye. I'm like 20 years old. I walk into the party, I think there's going to be a hundred people there, and Quincy's standing there with three people, at the late Steve Ross's house. And he says, 'Everybody, this is Brett Ratner, a talented young director.' He says, 'Brett, this is Penny Marshall, Robert De Niro, and Steven Spielberg.' And I'm like—"

He pauses for the requisite gasp, which he gets. He's also known for being "good in a room."

"Right?," Ratner continues, with a smile. "And I'm like, 'Nice to meet you guys.' And I go and sit down with Spielberg. He sent me money for my student film"—called *Whatever Happened to Mason Reese*, it starred the Cabbage-Patch-doll-faced 70s child actor, whom Ratner met walking down the street in New York. He sent letters out to 40 directors asking for funding,

Ratner interjects, "When Quincy does a project he believes in it 200 percent. And no one is better at raising money for this type of thing than *Jeff*—"

He glides off, pleased, as the two moguls keep talking at his dining-room table.

In Ratner's guest bathroom, there's a David LaChapelle photograph of Naomi Campbell lying naked on a kitchen floor (nipples very prominent), pouring milk all over herself. "Happy Valentine's Day, Brett," says the inscription. "Love, Naomi, February 14, 2003."

"I think people player-hate on Brett because they're jealous," says Mike De Luca, balancing a plate of steak on his lap.

De Luca, former president of production at DreamWorks, gave Ratner his first shot at directing—with the surprise hit *Money Talks* (1997), another buddy action comedy, starring Chris Tucker and Charlie Sheen—when he was at New Line.

"This kid literally invented his career out of nothing," he says. "Talking his way into N.Y.U. film school"—at 16, Ratner says he was the youngest student ever accepted. "He talked his way into Russell Simmons's life. And it's not just the cinematic success—in his spare time he becomes a photographer for French *Vogue*."

Last May, Ratner had his own photography show, "Portraits by Brett Ratner," at the Altair Lofts, in New York. Hugh Jackman was at the opening. So were Barry Diller and Oluchi (she's a model).

When you walk into his house, the first

thing you see are the black-and-white photographs he shot of his friends Ed Norton and Al Pacino, another one of his idols. He says he used to ditch school to go hang out on the set of *Scarface* (1983), in Miami, where he's from. "That was like eye candy," he told me. "When I saw the way they were filming it, I knew from that moment I was going to be a director. I said, 'I want to do this for the rest of my life!'"

"I think critics have always been snooty about populist entertainment," says De Luca, "and Brett has always worked on that side of that line. He's got a big, glossy style. It's very mainstream."

Ratner also has his own production company, Rat Entertainment, which is behind *Prison Break*, the popular drama on Fox, as well as *Code Name: The Cleaner*, with Cedric the Entertainer, and *Rush Hour 3* (along with New Line).

"But I'm a fan of Brett's," De Luca says, "mostly because he's got unending enthusiasm for whatever he takes on—and in our business, which can get so cynical, he's retained this joy of doing it that's very, very hard to maintain."

Plus, he says, "it's always a good time at Hilhaven Lodge," where the parties apparently aren't always as sedate as this one. Jessica Simpson and Nicole Richie have been frequent guests and D.J. LL (Lindsay Lohan) has been known to spin. But Ratner has told me he doesn't want to talk about all that. "That's not really about me. Paris and Lindsay and all those people—that's not *me*," he said.

Shaye said he met Ratner on a plane from New York to L.A. in 1996. "He said to the guy sitting next to me, 'I have to sit next to this guy'"—persuading the guy to switch seats. "He regaled me about his life for five hours. He's got some real talent."

Now Ratner sits on the big mahogany coffee table in front of Evans and De Laurentiis and starts telling them a story. It's another kind of Rat tale: one that involves tremendous serendipity, which seems to put Ratner in the middle of a great, cosmic plan. He tells me I'm not allowed to

came to New York he would call and ask me to come and see the movies he was producing and say, 'Hey, what do you think?' Because I was a film student. Then when I graduated from N.Y.U., he said, 'Come to L.A., I'm going to hire you.' I thought, Oh, this is my opportunity!

"So I go to see him," Ratner says, "and he said, 'You're going to be my assistant, I'm going to train you to be the biggest producer in Hollywood—'"

Grazer smiles. "I did."

"And I'm going to pay you \$23,000 a

"IN ANOTHER TWO, THREE YEARS, HE'LL DO AN IMPORTANT MOVIE," SAYS DINO DE LAURENTIIS.

Redheaded Danny Elfman, who's sitting nearby, says, "Brett once took me and this new girlfriend that I had"—Elfman's now married to Bridget Fonda—"he said, 'Come on, we're going to Miami, we're dropping [director] John Woo off in Boston, we're going to stay at my mom's house, come with us.' It was the craziest weekend of my life. With this running here"—meaning my tape recorder—"I'm not going to say too much more, but it was, man, um . . ."

"He throws a good party," says De Luca. Ratner's taking pictures of Robert Evans and Dino De Laurentiis sitting side by side on his couch. "I have a picture of Dino and Bob Evans sitting on my couch!" he exclaims. The Hollywood legends look up at him indulgently, as if at an excited child.

"He is a little boy, a little tiny boy," Bob Shaye, the normally tough-talking co-chairman of New Line, told me earlier.

repeat the story here because it involves a young lady, but let's just say it's sufficiently amazing in content, and even more so in its telling, to get Robert Evans and Dino De Laurentiis, who've heard lots of expert storytellers spinning their stories, saying "No!" (De Laurentiis) and "Wow!" (Evans). Ratner squeezes De Laurentiis's arm, Evans's ankle, for emphasis.

"How crazy is *that*!?" he asks, finishing it.

"Your life is full of serendipity," says Imagine Entertainment head Brian Grazer.

Naturally, Ratner has a story about himself and Grazer, arguably one of the biggest producers in Hollywood (from *A Beautiful Mind* to *Inside Man*).

"Russell [Simmons] introduced me to him," Ratner says, standing with Grazer by his giant mantel. "They were doing this movie called *Boomerang*"—an Eddie Murphy comedy from 1992. "Every time I

year,'" Ratner says. "And I said, 'No, no, I'm a *director*, like your partner, Ron Howard!' And he says, 'I'm going to pay you \$25,000 a year—'"

"He kept turning me down," Grazer says. "And I said, 'No, no, you don't understand—I'm a director,'" says Ratner. "And he said, 'O.K., well, good luck in the future, nice seeing you.' He offered me my first job!"

"Well, there you go," says Grazer.

And now they're doing a movie together, and Ratner *is* the director. It's an action comedy with Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock called *Trump Heist*, the story of an inside job at Trump Tower.

"He's very winning is what he is," says Grazer after Ratner has zoomed away. "I was trying to get the best understanding of the music culture"—because he says he knew, even back in '92, that he wanted to do a hip-hop movie like *8 Mile*, which he finally made 10 years later—"and he was very good at being a

navigational tool into that world. "He's kind of like a wishing stick," says Grazer. "He knows what exactly is present in our culture. He knows what's corny and what's not corny, and that I think is the most important editorial tool."

"And to be around him," he says, "it's a lot of fun. I mean, he can kind of get you to do almost anything. It was very hard for me to get here tonight—but yet, he threw me a bunch of e-mails: 'You've got to come up! No matter how late!'"

"Bob!" Ratner's now calling to Bob Shaye. "This girl is a 10th-degree black belt! She's in *Rush Hour 3*! She can put her leg straight up in the air! Her leg is a karate *weapon*!"

Chinese stuntwoman Michelle Lee obediently raises leg to cheek.

"He made me do that a million times in my tight-ass jeans," she says, laughing.

Penélope! Penélope!" Now Ratner's calling for Penélope Cruz to come down the stairs of his house, which is perched on a hill, to the lane outside, where his famous photo booth stands.

a school trip, and I went to the courthouse and you're supposed to look up a case. And I typed in the name 'Ratner.' And I saw 'Presman vs. Ratner—Paternity.' I gave the case number to the clerk, and the first thing I read was 'the bastard child

Brett' and I was like, 'Aaahhhhh!'" He gives a long, comic gasp.

He did later meet his dad, when he was 16. Worrying that his "bastard" status bothered him, his parents got married just before his high-school graduation. "I'm like, 'I didn't want

you to marry my mom!'" Ratner says. "And [my dad's] like, 'But you're not a bastard anymore!'"

They weren't unfriendly, but were never close either, which Ratner says is "the reason I love old men. I'm obsessed with older men. I mean, Bob Evans, Roman Polanski"—the *Rosemary's Baby* director has a role in *Rush Hour 3* as an officious French policeman—"Dino De Laurentiis, and all these guys that I gravitate to and end up working with..."

When we finish lunch, he meets up with Polanski outside, and they go tramping down the street together.

"HE BURNED DOWN MY SCREENING ROOM AND I STILL LOVE HIM," SAYS ROBERT EVANS.

Famous because he has made it so. His book *Hilhaven Lodge: The Photo Booth Pictures* (Powerhouse, 2003) is a delightfully quirky album of the many famous people who have visited his home: Britney Spears, Leonardo DiCaprio, Colin Farrell, Nicolas Cage—who starred in Ratner's 2000 drama, *The Family Man*—Naomi Watts, Liv Tyler, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs...

"Penélope and Bob Towne in the photo booth!," Ratner the director yells.

Bob Towne—white-haired, tall, and lanky—is already cramped inside it. I ask him if he thinks Ratner is a good director.

"Yes, I do," he says after a moment. "I do think he's a good director. Very lively."

He doesn't look like the kind of guy who'd say something he didn't really mean.

"I'll never have it better than this," Towne says as Ratner leads Penélope Cruz into the photo booth and onto his lap.

The machine starts to whirl. "This one we'll smile," Ratner says, directing the shoot from just outside the photo booth. "This one

we'll be pissed off... This one nose to nose... This one we kiss—"

The writer and leading lady kiss—flash! "Bob, I love you," says Ratner.

"He's such a character," Cruz says charmingly (pronouncing it "*karracter*").

Brett Ratner is a bastard. Not really, but he was born out of wedlock, in 1969, to a 16-year-old Miami girl of Cuban-Jewish descent, Marsha Presman.

His father, Ronny Ratner, then 25, "was the son of a wealthy guy," who sold rat poison, incidentally. "He was just kind of the rich kid," Ratner tells me one day at a café near the Plaza Athénée in Paris. "And he was on drugs because it was the 60s... And he never really stopped." Ratner grew up in Miami Beach with his mother and maternal grandparents. (His father passed away last year.)

"I'll tell you a really great story," Ratner says. "When I was 10 years old, I went on

Ratner's many surrogate fathers present a remarkable array of characters: first there was Al Malnik, a Miami attorney who once represented Mob boss Meyer Lansky and owned the Miami restaurant the Forge.

"He's like my true father figure, my true role model," Ratner told me. "When he sends me a note he signs it 'Dad.'"

Malnik was never involved with Ratner's mother; apparently, he just *liked* the kid. He was a friend of his paternal grandfather. Ratner would spend weekends at his house. When Michael Jackson hit some financial woes in 2004, Malnik helped him out. "Michael Jackson is my best friend!," Ratner said. "You didn't know that?" (He said he always believed Jackson was "totally innocent," and, actually, it isn't hard to imagine Ratner, kid *macher*, at Neverland, where Jackson also enjoyed the role of surrogate dad.)

Ratner's next adopted father was Russell Simmons, although he insists Simmons is just his "best friend." "Russell isn't my dad

actor Eric Dane from *Grey's Anatomy*, and she and Ratner are still good friends.)

I put the same question to Ratner that cold night we spent together at the top of the Eiffel Tower, where he was filming *Rush Hour 3*. The mood was giddy, and so I asked him—because he allows you to feel he's open to being asked such things—“Why do the women love you? Do you have a big dick?”

“No,” he said frankly. “It's not *big*, but it works well. I know how to use it. You can put that in.” And catching his double entendre, “I mean—!”

“No!” he said, rethinking it. “Say it's big. It's huge!”

So,” Simmons says, “Brett knowing where the models' apartments were was a tremendous plus. You know, he's always . . . *around*. He's always around. He'll stick with you all night, right?” He laughs.

Their revelry took them to all the hot joints in New York at the time—downtown to Area, uptown to China Club, “where I would see Rick James and Eddie Murphy and all those guys,” Ratner says.

“Let's get a big car, let's all go to Café Tabac.’ That was all Brett's stuff,” says Simmons.

Ratner claims that, throughout all this, and to this day, he has never done drugs, drunk alcohol, or smoked a cigarette. Simmons concurs: “Brett has never had a glass of water. He's naturally high as hell. If he took a drug, we'd all be in trouble.”

Their companionship began to seep from the nights into the days. “We'd listen

“MICHAEL JACKSON IS MY BEST FRIEND!” SAYS RATNER. “YOU DIDN'T KNOW THAT?”

even though Russell tells everyone he's my dad,” Ratner complained, sounding like a rebellious teenager. “Russell's rap is ‘That's my Jewish son.’”

“He's my son, all right,” Simmons says, sounding amused, on the phone from St. Barth's, where he's simultaneously running on a treadmill. “He's still my son.”

They met in 1986 in Washington Square Park. Ratner was 17 and a student at N.Y.U. film school. Simmons was 28 and already known as the man who was bringing hip-hop music to the world with Def Jam.

In the middle of a video shoot for Run-DMC's superhit “My Adidas,” Ratner went up to Simmons and gave him a Harvard sweatshirt, the kind of “college hoodie I used to wear,” Simmons says. “It was his ‘chance meeting with me.’”

Ratner admits that he'd actually found out Simmons would be there that day from a mutual friend, Glen Friedman, the celebrat-

ed subculture photographer—whom Ratner had recently contacted because he wanted him to shoot an album cover for a white-boy rap group that Ratner was managing.

The group never went anywhere, but his friendship with Simmons flourished. “What was exciting about him,” says Simmons, “was he knew where all the models' apartments were. I was an old man, and not privy to such information.”

“How did he always do so well with women?,” I ask.

“Oh, I don't know,” says Simmons. “I can't answer that question.”

Even back then, Ratner was dating beautiful Rebecca Gayheart, 15 to his 17. She was already a working model and, Ratner says, helped support him financially for years before he made it as a video director. “She said, ‘Don't worry, I believe in you, I'll take care of whatever you need.’ She was like my wife.” (Gayheart is now married to

to music, we watched videos,” Ratner says. “I was the only person seeing the first 20 Def Jam videos. It was me, Russell, and Lyor”—Cohen, Simmons's former partner and now the chairman and C.E.O. of Warner Music Group—“sitting in Russell's living room, and Russell would say, ‘That's wack,’ or ‘That's hot.’ And I would say, ‘Russell, I don't think this is good . . .’”

“What he got from me,” says Ratner, “was the perspective of a white boy who loved hip-hop. But it wasn't like, O.K., what's the white boy have to say?”

“This generation of hip-hop didn't carry the same burden,” Simmons says. “They don't have the same kind of judgment”—something which could be ascribed, in part, to Simmons's own vision.

“He would play me the new Public Enemy record,” says Ratner, “and I would sit there and watch his entire process while he decided what the first single was going to

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

be. And he allowed me to throw in my two cents. He would have an argument with [former Sony chairman] Tommy Mottola and he wouldn't ask me to go out of the room. I would sit there. And I just absorbed—I was a sponge.”

“He’s always been a good student,” says Simmons. “His enthusiasm wears you out!”

Meanwhile, Ratner was trying to bust into the world of directing by showing rappers his short film and lobbying them to let him direct their videos. He says that when rapper Chuck D asked Simmons if “Brett” could direct Public Enemy’s video for “Louder than a Bomb,” Simmons said, “Brett who?” “And I was standing right there!” says Ratner.

“I’ll put a foot in his butt—that’s not true,” says Simmons.

“He directed those videos for me,” Simmons says, “because he was the only one who’d do it for a certain price. He wanted to do creative, smart budget videos.”

And he did. Ratner wound up doing more than 100 of them for artists including Mariah Carey, Diddy, Mary J. Blige, Dru Hill, Lionel Richie, the Wu-Tang Clan. In 1999 he received an MTV Video Music Award for the video to Madonna’s “Beautiful Stranger.”

“HE’S KIND OF LIKE A WISHING STICK,” SAYS IMAGINE ENTERTAINMENT HEAD BRIAN GRAZER.

“This is the reason for his success,” says Simmons. “His imagination, his faith, his hard work, and his dedication. That’s it.

“Do you know Brett Ratner gave me a birthday party every single year, with his own money, when he was broke?” he asks. “He’d fly the Delfonics in.” Simmons’s favorite band. They wore capes.

“So if they say he’s a player,” says Simmons, “he’s not a calculating player—he’s playing. He’s a child. He’s child-like, he’s playing.”

“Excuse me for lying in bed,” says Robert Evans, stretched out across a fur comforter in his bathrobe. “But I have nowhere to sit since Brett burned my screening room down.”

He’s joking, sort of; he’s known for reclining. And Ratner didn’t really burn his screening room down. A faulty television Ratner had given Evans for his wedding to former model Leslie Ann Woodward (from whom he’s now divorced) blew up one morning

in July of 2003, causing a devastating fire.

Lost was not only the screening room itself—which for 30 years had been one of the most exclusive spots in Hollywood—but also much of Evans’s personal memorabilia, his many awards, as well as a Hockney, a Picasso, and a Toulouse-Lautrec.

“He burned down my screening room and I still love him,” says Evans in his deep, purring voice. “What does that say?”

His English butler, Alan, comes in with a snack of smoked salmon.

“Do we miss having Brett around, Alan?” Evans asks.

“Ye-e-es,” Alan says carefully. “He was very lively.”

“Would you say he was on this bed every night?” Evans asks, as if making a point.

“Yes, he spent a lot of time in this room,” says Alan.

“He got a Ph.D. here,” Evans says.

Ratner came for the weekend one day in 2002. And then stayed for two years. “He was the man who came to dinner—Monty

Woolley,” says Evans. “It was fun. Invigorating. We had some laughs. I enjoyed having him here, much to the chagrin of many people I knew. Why? ‘How can you let Brett Ratner stay in your house?’ ...

“I haven’t had a wife stay here that long.”

They had met at a restaurant in L.A. “He just walked over and introduced himself. He knew all my pictures and what I had done and he said, ‘I want to know you.’ Just like that. That’s who he is.”

Earlier, Ratner had told me, “I was the kid, if we went on a plane, I would literally walk up and down the aisles and ask, ‘What do you do? Where are you from?’ I was that annoying kid.”

Every night of Ratner’s stay, they watched movies together, says Evans. Every night, he talked to him about how to make films and how to get them made. “He is fascinated to a point of obsession with the craft of making a film,” Evans says. Ratner showed him the rough cut of *After the Sunset* (2004), the diamond-heist caper he was shooting at the time with Pierce Brosnan and Salma Hayek.

“He didn’t pick my brain—he ate it,” says Evans. “And I admire him for that. What he is is a big player, and not in a bad way, either. He has an ob-

session to succeed. Not succeed Sammy Glick-style, but as an artist. He wants to be taken seriously.

“And he is a serious artist,” he says. “I’m a big believer in his talent. And I think other people would be if he weren’t as available as he is. He loves going out all the time. Because of his child-like openness, people don’t regard him with the same awe as people who are one-tenth as successful.

“Let us not forget,” Evans says, “this is an industry where 95 percent of the people are unemployed, and from the moment Brett came on the scene he hasn’t stopped working. He’s a Monday-morning hit man. His pictures are almost uniformly, hugely successful.

“I think his career has just started. I know the things he wants to make, and he’s daring in the things he wants to do. And he strives for excellence, he really does.” Ratner’s been talking with Evans about doing a biopic of his

life; he's thinking Johnny Depp.

"I was his Hollywood father," Evans says. "I don't know whether I should be proud of that or not." He lets out a big, knowing laugh.

"But I think I hatched a contributor to the art. He will become, in his time, a very remembered filmmaker—despite himself."

He walks me around to the room off the main house where Ratner spent his Sentimental Hollywood Education, telling me about some of the others who once stayed there: "Alain Delon, Henry Kissinger, Ted

olates from a nearby craft-services table.

Next up there's a scene where Jackie Chan has to utter possibly the most primal line in all of buddy-moviedom: "You see? I always got your back." But Ratner isn't satisfied with his delivery, and makes Chan say it over and over again. "Jackie,"

admittedly mediocre script that had been floating around Hollywood, and cast "a black guy"—Tucker—and Chan, who had both a ready-made Chinese-American audience and fans in the hip-hop community as well. Before it, Chan says during a break from filming, "I'm big, but I have my own audience. Not like American family audience know me. After *Rush Hour*, not big—huge.

"Brett Ratner he's like a children growing up and graduated," he says. "The first 10 years when I see him until now, totally different person. He learn so quick. He ask me something"—about how to make action look good, look real—"How can I do this?" I tell him once, he know."

"The closer I get to yoo-

ooou..."

Ratner is crooning with Chris Tucker over someone's iPod playing the Roberta Flack song. They get really into it, and everyone's laughing; someone's filming. Ratner pulls Tucker to him, to kiss him, but Tucker pushes him away.

"HE'S A LITTLE BOY, A LITTLE TINY BOY," SAYS BOB SHAYE, CO-CHAIRMAN OF NEW LINE.

Kennedy, Laurence Olivier, Evelyn de Rothschild, Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, Prince Rainier...

"And Brett Ratner." He grins.

In December, *Rush Hour 3* is shooting in L.A., and, one day, at an empty hospital in Pasadena.

Chris Tucker is being filmed rolling over a gurney blasting a 9-mm. handgun.

"Yeah! Yeeeeeaaaaah!" Ratner shouts when the take is over. "You a bad mother-fucker!"

He's wearing a red Gap T-shirt that says INSPI(RED)—part of Bono's (Product) Red initiative to eliminate AIDS in Africa—a parka that says "Brett," and Converse sneakers. He's popping choc-

Ratner says, "I always got your back!"

Chan, who's acted in 60 movies and directed over 10 of his own, is patient throughout, but perhaps the repetition is getting to him. The kung fu master stumbles and falls over a stool.

"Cut!" yells the assistant director.

Ratner scrambles out from behind his monitor. "Don't say 'Cut!' Why'd you say 'Cut?'" he screams. "Don't say it again!"

There's a small silence across the set.

"That could have been in the outtakes!," Ratner says, and, after a moment, "Do it again, Jackie."

Everyone laughs.

The collaboration of Ratner and Chan has proved highly fruitful for both of them. It was Ratner's idea to take *Rush Hour*, an

"That's a gay outtake!" Tucker says in his high, comic voice. "Gimme that tape. That was strange, man!"

It was thanks to Tucker that Ratner got the chance to direct his first film, *Money Talks*. When the original director wanted to have Tucker fired for being too improvisational, Mike De Luca instead fired the director and asked Tucker who he would suggest.

Tucker said, "Brett Ratner." "We met," Tucker says, "on a shoot for a Heavy D video," for the song "Nuttin' but Love," in 1994. "What really impressed me about Brett was, I said, 'Brett, I need some extra money, man, I need to pay my rent.' I think they paid me \$500 or \$1,500. So what he did was he sent me some extra money. I said that was cool

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

of him! So then *Money Talks* came up...

"Money talks," Tucker says.

After the success of the first *Rush Hour*, Tucker held out for \$20 million for *Rush Hour 2* (Chan made \$15 million). He's making \$25 million for *Rush Hour 3*, putting him in the same pay category as Will Smith, Tom Cruise, and Brad Pitt.

Why Dino De Laurentiis?" Ratner asks impatiently.

"His kids," says his mother, Marsha Pratts (she's remarried).

Ratner is in his kitchen, checking over his mother's list of invitees to his Hanukkah party, which is supposed to be for kids.

"His kids are 18 years old in college, what are you talking about?" he snaps.

"All right, so relax," his mother says. She somehow sounds as New York as Judy Holiday in *Born Yesterday*. (She lives in New York now; she's visiting.) She has long dark hair and the same trim figure as the party girl who "got knocked up," as she says, with baby Brett back in '68.

"Why are you socializing with these people?," Ratner shouts. "My friends *you don't invite!*"

"O.K., I'm just trying to be polite," says Pratts.

She gives me a look: "Kids!"

Ratner told me earlier his mother calls him "20 times a day. I went to high school in Israel, she followed me. She lived in a kibbutz in the town next to me. I went to N.Y.U., she got an apartment down the street. Now she wants to move to L.A.!"

As a young mother, she was more like a big sister or a friend, he said. "I never had one day of discipline—ever. I never had to do my homework. She was like, 'Look, if you want to be a loser and not study, it's your fault.'"

"I remember being a little kid and staying up all night long with her listening to records, singing to Motown records. That's why Russell's fascinated by me, because my favorite records were the Delfonics, the Chi-Lites, the Stylistics. He never met a white kid who knew every word to every black soul record."

Ratner's mother's best friend in those days was Nile Rodgers, the renowned music producer and front man for Chic (of "Le Freak" disco fame). When Brett was seven, Rodgers bought him a guitar, but he found he couldn't play. "So the next year," Ratner said, "he bought me a movie camera and I started making these home movies."

"All his life he loved movies," his mother tells me now. "He would write his own stories, like superhero stories. Once he made a 30-page book. What was the name of it? *Conan the Barbarian!* Remember, Brett?"

"I don't remember, Mom," Ratner moans.

"What I did, because I was such a young mother," she says, "is I didn't try to dim his lights. Like he would say, 'Let's go to the set of *Miami Vice*,' and I'd go, 'O.K.!'"

Iwanted Brett to be a lawyer," says his grandmother Fanita Presman, 82. Now we're out in Ratner's guesthouse, where his grandmother and grandfather Mario, 86, have lived since 2002.

He brought them out to L.A. from Miami in a tour bus, for the premiere of *Red Dragon*. And they never left.

"He says, 'That's too complicated,'" says Fanita, a striking woman with a Cuban accent. "His whole life was to become a director!"

Now Fanita is filming her own reality show for VH1, *My Grandson the Director*. It was her grandson the director's idea.

"It's *Golden Girls* meets *Entourage*," says Ratner. "Fanita has, like, an entourage of all these young girls. Paris is obsessed with her. Lindsay—all these girls hang out with her. Paris came here the other day, the cameras were here, and Paris was like, 'Fanita, let's go shopping,' so she takes her to Robertson [Boulevard]. The paparazzi were going crazy!"

Fanita starts fussing with a piece of paper.

"What are you looking"—at, Ratner demands.

"I wrote something down," she says—it's something about her grandson the director, which she wants the reporter to hear.

"Nobody cares!," Ratner shouts. "It's talking! You don't have to read!"

"She's old, she doesn't understand," jokes Mario (also known as "Pipa"). He's a retired radiologist.

Ratner takes his grandfather's hand. "When I was little, we used to go to the movies, Pipa and I, every Sunday in Miami Beach," he says. "We'd go to see action movies because his English isn't perfect. *Beverly Hills Cop*, 48 Hrs.—"

"He used to hold my hand all the time, Brett," says Pipa. "When he was bigger, I said, 'Brett, don't hold my hand, the people passing by think that we are in love.'"

"We are, we are in love," says Ratner.

Fanita's still rustling the paper.

"What is *wrong* with you?!" Ratner screams, taking it and tossing it on the coffee table.

"I'm very proud of Brett my grandson, you know," Fanita tells me.

"That's why you have your own reality show," says Ratner.

"He's marvelous," Fanita says, beaming. □

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