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FATE'S HAND

Matt Damon is a little late to the press junket for his new film, *The Adjustment Bureau* but he's got a good reason. Four days a father to his fourth daughter, Stella Zavala, the actor hasn't been sleeping too well. Gracious and engaging despite this, he fulfils every expectation one might have of him as a down-to-earth good guy – a family man who also happens to be one of the top grossing actors of all time. >>

WORDS BY SARAH ILLINGWORTH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM JONES/UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Famous as one half of "Affmon" or "Damleck" – as Ben Affleck's wife, actress, Jennifer Garner has quipped – Damon's first major Hollywood coup was as Will Hunting in 1997's breakout drama, *Good Will Hunting*. He and Affleck won both an Oscar and a Golden Globe for Best Screenplay for the film, and all of a sudden, they found themselves eyeballing the bright lights of fame. Though Damon had starred in *The Rainmaker* that same year, and received positive reviews for earlier, smaller roles in the likes of *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993) and *School Ties* (1992), it was *Good Will Hunting* that made him a household name. In the 13 odd years since the film was released, Damon has steadily built one of the most varied, respected careers of any actor in Hollywood today.

As busy as he is acclaimed, Damon barely seems to take a break from, as he calls it, "the business." In early 2010, he starred in *Green Zone*, a film about the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and plays the lead in the recently released *Hereafter* (directed by Clint Eastwood) and Jeff Bridges' sidekick in *True Grit* (a Coen brothers remake of the 1969 John Wayne original). He has another five films due out this year, one of which is *The Adjustment Bureau* – and he hasn't just been prolific on the big screen either. From the Jimmy Kimmel/Sarah Silverman spoofs to cameos on *30 Rock* and *Entourage*, to the *Team America* piss-take, Maattt Damonnnnn has been popping up everywhere. He was even honoured by American Cinematheque in March this year for his career to date – a highly regarded honour but one not usually bestowed on one so young (Damon was 39 at the time).

As an actor, Damon can play it straight, quirky or downright goofy – although the characters he most often plays are typically self-confident (OK, cocky), quick-witted guys who turn out to be more than they seem, much like Damon himself – minus, perhaps, the cockiness. He has a talent for knocking out quickfire dialogue and has had opportunity to exercise it in almost every one of his roles. From *Good Will Hunting* to *Rounders*, *Courage Under Fire* to *The Informant!*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* to *The Departed*, the *Bourne* movies to *Invictus*, Damon has proven he's an incredibly versatile actor – yes, he's made a hell of a lot of action and combat films but he's got a bit of comedy, sport and crazy in him too.

Not only that, he's also a member of the inner circle of golden boy Hollywood alongside his *Ocean's* trilogy co-stars, Brad Pitt and George Clooney. As with Pitt and Clooney, he uses his name – and status as one of the "sexiest men alive" – to do good. Famously unscandalous when it comes to his private life, the actor is more likely to use his celebrity status to raise funds or awareness on behalf of the various charities he's involved with than create a stir in the tabloids.

In 2006, Damon started the H2O Africa Foundation (now Water.org) in conjunction with the Running the Sahara project, to raise awareness about the water crisis in Africa and to garner support for clean water initiatives. He's also one of the founders of Not On Our Watch – an organisation that aims to focus global attention on stopping and preventing mass atrocities such as those wreaked in Darfur – along with Clooney and Pitt, Don Cheadle, David Pressman and producer, Jerry Weintraub.

There are many other charities Damon also supports, and his philanthropy extends beyond simply writing a hefty cheque. Unafraid to also rally for a better world in the political arena, he famously denounced Sarah Palin in the lead-up to the last US election ("She's gonna have the nuclear codes – I wanna know if she [tried] to ban books!"), and is an ambassador for the Working Families party in New York.

In *The Adjustment Bureau*, a Matrixesque film that explores the idea of free – or not so free – will, Damon indulges his penchant for politics a little further, and plays David Norris, a New York politician running for Senate. Based on the short story, *Adjustment Team* by Philip K. Dick (*Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, *Paycheck*), the tale was adapted for the screen by first time director, George Nolfi, who was also a writer on *The Bourne Ultimatum* and *Ocean's Twelve*. After falling for the lovely Elise (Emily Blunt), Norris inadvertently discovers the course of history is meticulously, and ruthlessly, monitored by an agency called the Adjustment Bureau.

"There are different levels of people [in the Bureau]," explains Damon, "and they have different amounts of control. Their job is to basically implement a plan – they see this plan book, [but] they only see parts of the plan. And their job is just to implement the plan. The chairman, who writes the plan for everybody, knows the master plan but the Bureau is just in place to kind of keep people on the plan. So if they see people slowly going off their plan, it shows up in their book, and they go and they do a little adjustment, and they get you back on your plan."

Run like a bureaucracy, the Bureau's employees don't ask questions – they just get the job done. Basically, they micromanage everyone's lives in an attempt to ensure humans don't destroy humankind. There's a scene in the film where Terence Stamp, who plays one of the Bureau's honchos, breaks it down for Norris: basically, he tells him, every time the Bureau has stepped back and let go

of the reigns, humans have caused complete and total chaos, and the Bureau has had to step back in.

"He talks about the moments that they stepped away, to kind of let us ride the bike on our own, and the destruction that we reaped," tells Damon. "You know, 'so we stepped back in, and we gave you the Renaissance, and we gave you all of these things, then we stepped back again, and within 60 years, you brought us, you know, World War I – and fascism, the Holocaust. And topped it all off by almost blowing the world up at the Bay of Pigs.'"

It makes a lot of sense if you're trying to avoid World War III but not so much when being with the woman you love doesn't feature in your own personal plan book, as is the case for Norris. Determined he still has the power to choose his path, he takes the Bureau on – sparking a chase through the streets of New York as he tries to outrun the forces of his own destiny.

In contrast to his character, it seems things have fallen into place quite nicely for Damon as far as his career and family life is concerned. He has a beautiful wife, Luciana Bozán Barroso whom he met when she was working as a bartender (she doesn't tend bars anymore), and four beautiful daughters, one of whom, Alexia, is Barroso's from her first marriage. Does he believe in destiny? "I like to think that my choices matter," he counters, "but I've certainly had such a good deal of luck in my life that, you know, it leaves me wondering sometimes." >>

“The reality is, it's kind of a false choice. It's like, 'Would you like to have success in the material world? Or would you like to actually be happy?'”





"There's this great Garth Brooks song ['Unanswered Prayers']," he adds, "[about] all those things you really wish for at the time, and then later, you realise, thank God that didn't happen for me because things worked out so much better.

"There were so many jobs that I auditioned for – as an actor, rejection is the norm, and what's rare is getting a job. So you plan to get the job but you're just faced with defeat after defeat, and rejection after rejection, and then looking back now at the age of 40, and looking back at myself at 20, going on these auditions, I'm so lucky that I didn't get those parts.

"I think those years are really valuable for an actor because they prepare you for the inevitable reality of the business moving on without you a little bit. And I think that happens to everybody, and it's a question of, are you equipped to deal with that? And how you're equipped to deal with it."

Does he think we all have a catalyst moment like his character in the film – that we all have to choose between a route of passion and the strict course of "destiny" at some point?

"The reality is, it's kind of a false choice. It's like, 'Would you like to have success in the material world? Or would you like to actually be happy?' I mean, maybe people would have to really think about that but I wouldn't. So, no, I don't think that those choices are mutually exclusive, if that's your question, I don't. In fact, well, I think maybe it depends on what you do but in my line of work, I definitely feel like any great relationships you have, whether it be with your wife, or with your kids or with your friends, only kind of deepen your ability to do your job better. And I would imagine that holds true for other jobs too."

Considering his own passion for politics and philanthropy, would Damon ever consider trading in his acting stripes for a more political role?

"I don't know, I wouldn't want to be a politician, that's for sure," he says. "Look, politicians deal with a lot of criticism but they're politicians, and they should, and they're making policy, and they should be under a lot of scrutiny, I think – certainly more than actors are under. But it's just not a job that's appealing to me. I see why people love it and I've met some of the really great politicians who are clearly very, very good at it, and really connected people but no, I mean, it strikes me as kind of an endless press junket.

"I talked to one strategist [in preparation for this role]," the actor continues, "he was a consultant who'd worked with a lot of major politicians, and he was about 60 years old, and he said that he was getting out of the business, and I asked him why, and he said, 'Because it's just no fun anymore.' I said, 'Well, what do you mean?' And he said, 'We've just proven that all you have to do is sling shit at your opponent.' He said, 'All the nuance of what we used to do 20 or 30 years ago, of trying to identify certain things, and exploit them... the reality is, none of it is as effective as just making up a lie about somebody, and broadcasting it as loud as you can, screaming horrible things about your opponent, and by the time people clear away all that traffic, you've won the election... It's not really a fun business anymore.'"

Shit-slinging and paint-by-number politics are definitely not Damon's style. Asked if he would sneak a glimpse at the future if he could, he concludes that he'd rather focus on the now than know what lies ahead. "I'm working on enjoying the present, you know. Seriously, I mean, that's a hard thing to do. I feel like my whole life I've been looking into the future, and I keep getting hit with the fact that life is so wonderful now, and I want to enjoy it. It goes by so fast, you know?" 

MATT DAMON FACTS

1 He is five feet nine and a half inches.

2 Matthew Paige Damon was born on 8 October 1970 in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, Kent worked as an investment banker and his mother, Nancy Carlsson-Paige was a Professor of Education at Lesley College.

3 Before marrying Luciana Bozán Barroso, he dated Minnie Driver and Winona Ryder.

4 His first big splurge was "his-and-his" Jeep Grand Cherokees for him and pal, Ben Affleck. "I am ashamed to say, that was our dream car. We flipped a coin on the colour. We both wanted Hunter green and I won. I got green; he got black."

5 He studied English Literature at Harvard University but dropped out to pursue acting just 12 credits shy of getting his degree.

6 After winning *People* magazine's Sexiest Man Alive 2007, he said, "You've given an ageing suburban dad the ego-boost of a lifetime."

7 He dropped 18 kilograms in 100 days to play a veteran drug addict in the 1996 film, *Courage Under Fire*. The severe weight-loss affected his health for a long time after.

8 He perfected his Southern accent for *The Rainmaker* by volunteering as a bartender in Knoxville, Tennessee. He even hired one of the customers to serve as his dialect coach.

9 He turned down the role of Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight*.

10 As part of his research for his role in the film, *The Departed*, it was organised for him to ride with police on a drug bust.

11 As a teen, he used to break dance for money in Harvard Square.

12 He has been nominated for three Golden Globe Awards. In 1998, he won the award for Best Screenplay – Motion Picture, and was nominated for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture – Drama for *Good Will Hunting*. In 2000, he was nominated for Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture – Drama for *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.