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De Niro delightful

Surprise, surprise! Stone star talkin' to us

For Robert De Niro, this was being chatty. At a news conference Friday to promote his psychological drama *Stone*, the Hollywood icon revealed he will direct no more than three more films — after 1993's *A Bronx Tale* and 2006's *The Good Shepherd* — mused about destiny versus free will, laughed frequently and acknowledged the paralyzing effect he can have on impressionable, easily intimidated actors.

"When you're with people and you're working with them, that goes away pretty fast," he said. "It has to. Part of my job is to help people, if they are really nervous, get past that to do the scene or maybe we use it for the scene."

And he can relate, citing actors such as Robert Mitchum and Marlon Brando as legends that once cast a similar spell on him. Brando, however, quickly put him at ease. "He was so smart and clever that it was a joy to talk to him; and he talked a lot."

Even at his most verbose, it's unlikely anyone will accuse De Niro of that. Still he was clearly relaxed at Friday's media event, flanked by his *Stone* co-stars Edward Norton and Milla Jovovich.

In the movie, which opens in October following its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, De Niro stars as a religious parole officer — he listens to Christian radio every day on his way to work — drawn into a war of wills with a cornrow-coifed convict nicknamed "Stone," played by Norton. So badly does Stone want out of prison that he even prompts his wife (Milla Jovovich) to seduce the man who can decide his freedom. Norton and De Niro have known each other for years — they worked with Brando on the heist thriller *The Score* in 2001 — so their re-teaming isn't a surprise. Far unlikelier, however, is the involvement of Resident



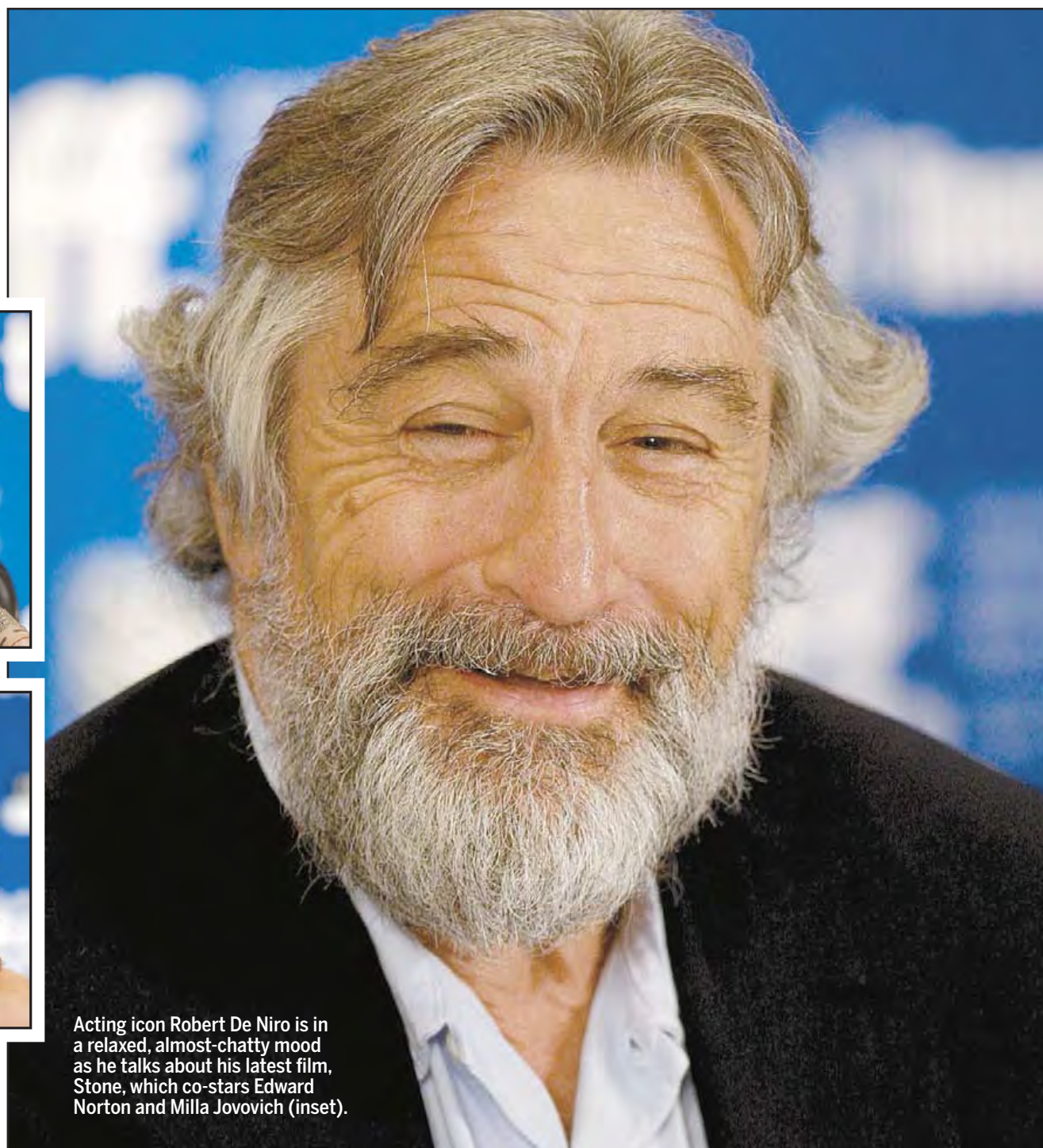
KEVIN WILLIAMSON
at TIFF



Evil babe Jovovich, who auditioned, then met with director John Curran. "We talked about the character together ... and he had me fly in to meet our boys here," she recalled, referring to Norton and De Niro. "And we had a great meeting. Edward is so kind to remind me that I was shaking like a leaf."

And beam ing, she recounted her introduction to De Niro. "Robert asked me to call him 'Bob,' which I thought was awesome."

For Norton, the project,



Acting icon Robert De Niro is in a relaxed, almost-chatty mood as he talks about his latest film, *Stone*, which co-stars Edward Norton and Milla Jovovich (inset).

which was shot in a prison located north of Detroit, offered another opportunity to vanish into a character. Stone is at once genuine and menacing, sincere and calculating.

"A lot of people ask, 'What do you pull on in your own life (for a role)?' But it's not something that works that way for me. I

tend to look at these things as an imaginative process, a challenge of imagination and empathy, to some degree. I get much more out of meeting people who have really lived these lives than I do digging around in my own limited experiences."

And the cornrows don't hurt. "The cornrows were real.

They're difficult to fake. We looked for a Hollywood hair stylist who did rows, but there weren't any, so I went to downtown Detroit and found a lady named Crystal, who did me up."

The resulting film is strange and spiritual, which prompted De Niro, 67, to reflect on issues

of faith and fate. "I sometimes think as I get older that things have been pre-determined for me, whether I liked it, wanted it, wished for it, whatever. Others, you do have choice. But even that choice you make is part of this grand scheme."

MARK O'NEILL/TORONTO SUN PHOTOS

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