

Johnny Depp is an enduring force in the movie business – just like the tale of Charlie and his chocolate factory.

IN TOO DEPP

Johnny Depp is explaining how his interpretation of eccentric candy king Willy Wonka – for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – differs from that of Gene Wilder's legendary turn in the original 1971 classic version.

"The trick was just to do the obvious by being as unobvious as possible," he says. "It was like a making a very radical series of left-turns, you know?"

Ironically, his words could well serve as an analogy for his own life and career. But while most stars would spout a hefty dose of Hollywood self-analysis at the blink of their publicist's eye, it's a pretty safe bet that Depp doesn't realise the irony in his words.

After bursting onto TV screens in *21 Jump Street* 18 years ago, he was instantly propelled to teen-idol status. But it soon became clear that this wasn't the former high-school dropout's bag.

Clinching roles that enabled him to break free from the shackles of the short-lived shelf life of a pin-up, he went on to masterfully morph into

artistic integrity intact is no easy feat in La La Land, but with Depp, his trademark is that the thrill is in the surprise. The beauty is that you never quite know what he's going to pull off next. Despite thinking you know enough to think you have him sussed, it's like he's holding something back, which has seen him retain that illusive air of mystery so scarce in today's age of celeb tell-all culture.

When long-time friend and collaborator, director Tim Burton approached him about portraying Willy Wonka, it was a snap decision. "I don't think he even finished his sentence before I said: 'If you want me, I'm in,'" he explains. "It's like coming home, you know, to this place where you're totally comfortable. That said, there's an underlying fear. I think 'Christ, I don't want to let him down. But I got through it,' he surmises before stating the obvious, "he seems happy."

And so are filmgoers. The spectacular set of Roald Dahl's cherished 1964 novel is a feast for the eyes. Depp also re-teams with

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one of the undisputed most talented character actors of his generation.

Time after time he's confounded potential critics by pulling off a string of innovative and versatile performances in challenging and offbeat projects which went against the Hollywood grain.

Retaining credibility with your

young Freddie Highmore who starred with him in *Finding Neverland*. "He's a good friend," he says, "he's teaching me chess and has given me some good tips on playing Play Station".

These are certainly words of a mellowed man, who was once so troubled in the intense Hollywood glare that he publicly slated his former



Johnny: still a mystery

Photo: AAP

homeland, proclaiming that "there are no proper values in America, it's gonna explode, it should explode. I will never raise any child I have there, never."

Strong words but refreshingly, he stuck to them. Once famous for wearing his heart on his sleeve (literally) with the 'Winona Forever' tattoo emblazoned across his bicep, when he hooked up with doll-faced French singer/actress Vanessa Paradis seven years ago, things went quiet on the home front. Meeting Paradis provided the catalyst for Depp to finally shun Tinseltown and the couple decamped to the South of France for a life of bohemian bliss in their very own sleepy hollow, with children Lily, five, and Jack, three.

Once describing how he "went

through 35 years in a very strange and dark fog", he credits Paradis and the birth of their daughter with finding peace of mind. Nowadays, the former brooding star waxes lyrical of the joys of taking his daughter to the local village where no-one pays him any notice. "I'm just another dad with his daughter," he smiles.

So, with *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* in the can and Willy Wonka a hit, the former muso, who admits he never thought he'd last so long in showbiz and always expected to go back to playing guitar or pumping gas, has finally found that the key to happiness is to keep it simple. "As long as you have the ability to breathe and live for your kids and your girl," he says, "you just keep moving forward."

Story: Madeleine Collins ●